World and Its Bi-Polar Dimensions

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The Commens Encyclopedia

The Digital Encyclopedia of Peirce Studies

New Edition

Edited by Mats Bergman and João Queiroz

URL	http://www.commens.org/encyclopedia/article/rosenthal-sandra-world-and-its-bi-polar-dimensions
Retrieved	22.01.2026
ISSN	2342-4257

Abstract:

Peirce never explicitly clarifies his understanding of “the real world,” though he refers to it frequently throughout his writings. This lack can well go unremarked, for it is a common sense term which slides easily into a common sense identification with “what is the case” or “what there is”, which then may receive various philosophic labels, depending upon whether one interprets Peirce as a realist, an idealist, or a phenomenalist. When such an identification is questioned, however, “the real world” fits inadequately within the confines of any of the above labels, for it is a distinctively pragmatic world. Peirce, in radically rejecting the role of humans as spectators, in understanding experience as a unity of interaction between humans and that facticity which gives itself within experience, holds at once that the real world is the perceived world, that the real world has an independence from mind, and yet that the perceived world is partially dependent upon the noetic act and is thus relative in its nature to the mind. The supposed incompatibility of these three characteristics of the relation of thought to the real world stems from a failure to radically and once and for all reject the presuppositions of a spectator theory of knowledge.

Keywords: Possibility, Coherence, Correspondence, Pragmatism, Idealism, Realism

Peirce never explicitly clarifies his understanding of “the real world,” though he refers to it frequently throughout his writings. Such a lack of explicit clarification can well go unremarked, for it is a common sense term which slides easily – indeed too easily – into a common sense identification with “what is the case” or “what there is.” The ultimate nature of “what there is” may receive various philosophic labels, depending upon whether one interprets Peirce as a realist, an idealist, or a phenomenalist, but the unquestioned common sense identification of “what there is” with Peirce’s statements concerning the real world is the unquestioned basis for the application of these labels in many instances. When such an identification is questioned, however, and Peirce’s various statements concerning the real world are interrelated for a development of their systematic import, it will be seen that “the real world” fits inadequately within the confines of any of the above labels, for it is a distinctively pragmatic world.

The following discussion proposes to show that Peirce, in rejecting the role of humans as spectators, in understanding experience as a unity of interaction between humans and that facticity which gives itself within experience, can hold at once that the real world is the perceived world, thus rejecting ontological phenomenalism; that the real world has an independence from mind, thereby implying a rejection of idealism; and yet

that the perceived world is partially dependent upon the noetic act and is thus relative in its nature to the mind, in this way rejecting traditional realism is. The supposed incompatibility of these three characteristics of the relation of thought to the real world stems from failure to radically and once and for all reject the presuppositions of a spectator theory of knowledge.[1] Peirce's absolute and radical rejection of the spectator theory of knowledge gives rise to, and is in turn brought into clearer light by, an understanding of his pragmatic concept of world.

That the real world is the perceived world is clearly indicated by Peirce in several succinct passages. He states that "The real world is the world of sensible experience" (CP 3.527) or, in other terms, the real world is the world of "insistent generalized percepts," (CP 8.148) which are not representative of any underlying reality other than themselves (CP 2.143). Of course there is a sense in which other "worlds" are real. For example, the ideal world is a real ideal world. The real world can be characterized, also, as the world of perceptual facts, for "what I carry with me" of the percept "is the perceptual facts" (CP 2.141). Such a world is a consistent system of facts rigorously obeying the laws of non-contradiction and excluded middle, for, "Dichotomy rules the ideal world" (CP 3.529), and "it is part of the process of sensible experience to locate its facts in the world of ideas" (CP 3.527). Such a grasping of the sensible world in terms of a system of ideas is of the very essence of the sensible world. As Peirce stresses, "This is what I mean by saying that the sensible world is but a fragment of the ideal world" (CP 3.527).

Further, the system of ideas or meanings in some sense limits the facts which may occur "in the world," for "We know in advance of experience that certain things are not true, because we see they are impossible … . I know it is not true, because I satisfy myself that there is no room for it even in that ideal world of which the real world is but a fragment" (CP 3.527). Thus, what can occur "in the world" must conform to the possibilities allowed for by the world of ideas or the system of meanings in terms of which we approach it. To better understand what can possibly occur in the world, it will be helpful at this point to turn to a closer examination of the various senses of "possible" in Peirce's philosophy as they relate to the issue of world.

When Peirce speaks of "possible experience" he at times means possible in the sense of "consistently thinkable," and at times in the nonepistemically related sense of metaphysically possible. However, "possible" in the sense of consistently thinkable is open to some misunderstanding if not further clarified. In addition to the distinction between the consistently thinkable and the metaphysically possible, Peirce distinguishes

between what he calls the essentially or logically possible and the substantially possible (CP 4.67; 3.527) This latter distinction cannot be equated with the former, but rather can best be understood as a distinction within the consistently thinkable. Essential possibility means, for Peirce, logical conceivability or the absence of self-contradiction. Substantial possibility, however, refers to the relation which something considered has to information of the present in the present. In this sense possible means consistent with everything known about the real world. Possible in this second sense seems to indicate a type of "physical possibility." And, while substantial possibility must imply essential possibility, essential possibility need not imply substantial possibility, for of those possible combinations which "occur in the ideal world, some do and some do not occur in the real world; but all that occur in the real world occur also in the ideal world." (CP 3.527)

Here, however, it must be noted that if a proposition which is essentially possible but not substantially possible is combined with the body of given information, a logically or essentially impossible set results, for "Two propositions contradictory of one another may both be severally possible, although their combination is not possible" (CP 3.527). As Peirce further observes, "It is an anacoluthon to say that a proposition is impossible because it is self-contradictory. It rather is thought so as to appear self-contradictory because the ideal induction has shown it to be impossible" (CP 3.531). Thus, at any time, a range of what is substantially possible may be determined ideally or logically, though what specific possibility will in fact be actualized in the future cannot be determined in this manner, for there are, indeed, "future contingents" (CP 4.67).

This point, however, leads directly away from the above issue of the human way of knowing to the related issue of reality's way of being, for to conclude from the above discussion "that there is nothing analogous to possibility" in reality, but that this mode appertains "only to the particular limited information we possess, would be even less defensible than to draw precisely the opposite conclusion from the same premises. It is a style of reasoning most absurd" (CP 4.68). Though substantive possibility, which in its broadest sense determines what may occur "in the world," cannot be understood apart from the knowledge structure which grasps, this does not lead to a conventionalism, for the real world is a special "part of the ideal world. Namely, that part which sufficient experience would tend ultimately (and therefore definitively) to compel Reason to acknowledge as having a being independent of what he may arbitrarily, or willfully, create" (CP 3.527). This leads to the issue of the independently real and the metaphysical sense of the possibilities within the real world.

It has been seen that dichotomy rules the real world, because it rules the ideal world of which the real world is a part. Yet, Peirce's view of the nature of the real as independent of the human mode of grasping it indicates that such hard discrete exactitudes do not exist, for reality, according to Peirce, is a continuum which "swims in indeterminacy" (CP 1.171-72). For this reason, the principle of continuity, which pervades the independently real, is "fallibilism objectified" (CP 1.171). Peirce argues here that all things swim, like fallibilistic knowledge, in continua of indeterminacy. Further, the independently real as a continuum of events is precisely that to which neither the law of non-contradiction nor the law of excluded middle is perfectly applicable. Peirce asserts that the general is that to which the law of the excluded middle does not apply, while the vague is that to which the principle of noncontradiction does not apply (CP 5.448). He then explicitly identifies continuity with generality (MS 137: 7-12). And, for Peirce, whatever is general or continuous is to some degree vague. Thus, neither the law of non-contradiction nor the law of excluded middle is perfectly applicable to the continuous. Thus, it would seem that though the hereness and nowness of events and the continuities which pervade them is independent of our conceptualizations and the possibilities which they allow, what the hereness and nowness can consistently be held to be is partially determined by the range of conceptual or ideal possibilities within which discrete facts can consistently emerge. As Peirce observes, what is demanded "above all is the fact and the admission that the world is reasonable – reasonably susceptible to becoming reasonable, for that is what it is, and all that it is, to be reasonable[2] From this perspective, it can perhaps be said that what occurs must be metaphysically possible, while what occurs must be epistemically or conceptually possible as well. Here it must be stressed that what is ontologically possible cannot be defined as that which obeys the law of non-contradiction, for as indicated above, the law of non-contradiction applies to our conceptual structures and that which is grasped by them, not to the continuous processes of nature which are given for conceptual interpretation.

The relation between the continuum of qualitative events which constitutes the character of the metaphysically real independently of the human mode of grasping, and the system of facts which constitutes the real world, is brought into focus by Peirce's discussion of the relation between events or occurrences and facts:

> I must first point out the distinction between a Fact and what in other connexions, is often called an Event but which, owing to that word being used in the Doctrines of Chances in its stricter sense … must be here called an Occurrence. An Occurrence, which Thought analyzes into Things and Happenings, is necessarily Real; but it can never be known or even imagined in all its infinite detail.

> A Fact, on the other hand is so much of the real Universe as can be represented in a Proposition, and instead of being, like an Occurrence, a slice of the Universe, it is rather to be compared to a chemical principle extracted therefrom by the power of Thought; and though it is, or may be Real, yet, in its Real existence it is inseparably combined with an infinite swarm of circumstances, which make no part of the Fact itself. It is impossible to thread our way through the Logical intricacies of being unless we keep these two things, the Occurrence and the Real Fact, sharply separate in our Thoughts. (MS 647: 8)

Here lies the significance of Peirce's claim that "Nature, in connection with a picture, copy, or diagram does not necessarily denote an object not fashioned by man, but merely the object represented as something existing apart from the representation." (CP 3.420, note #1).[3]

Peirce indicates the above position from a slightly different direction in his cryptic claim that "The inkstand is a real thing. Of course in being real and external, it does not in the least cease to be a purely psychical product, a generalized percept" (CP 8.261). See also his claim, which will be utilized in the following chapter, that "There is no thing which is in itself in the sense of not being relative to the mind, though things which are relative to the mind doubtless are , apart from that relation" (CP 5.311). Or as he elaborates, a "this" is an object selected by a subject from the continuum of possibility (MS 942: 16). Reality independent of our thinking exerts an influence on our ways of thinking about it, but what facts and objects it contains is partially dependent upon the conceptual framework in terms of which we delineate objects and facts within the backdrop of a world. Indeed, according to Peirce "External Fact" can change in accordance with the way human minds "feel, think, or suffer" (MS 642: 16). Peirce offers a helpful clarification about his limited intentions in his numerous statements concerning the independence of real objects, claiming that, the real object can be "an object shaped by thinking … ; but so far as it is Real, it is not modified by thinking about it (MS 634, p.9).

The failure to distinguish between the metaphysical possibilities contained in and giving rise to emerging occurrences, and the logical or epistemic possibilities which allow us to grasp occurrences in such a way as to give rise to a consistent system of facts, results in the identification of ontological possibility with some type of Platonic essence. The possibility of the ideal world, of which the sensible world is but a fragment, is not another Platonic world which in some way allows the actual sensible world to participate in reality, but rather is an ideal world of logical possibilities whose structure is dependent upon human intelligence: "It has come about through the agencies of development that man is endowed with intelligence of such a nature that he can by ideal

experiments ascertain that in a certain universe of logical possibility certain combinations occur while others do not" (CP 3.527). Thus, it is through developing human intelligence that there is an "evolution of Platonic Forms" (CP 6.200). Evolving concepts are analogous to "Platonic Forms" not in the sense of being metaphysical essences, but in the sense that each successive concept can itself be characterized as fixed, eternal, unchanging and, indeed, "toward the side of math." For, according to Peirce, meanings do not literally change, but rather a new meaning replaces an old meaning. Though the same words may be used, there is a substitution of the meanings or concepts attached to them (CP 2.302). Thus Peirce, in the context of discussing the semiotic interrelationship of ground, object, and interpretant, can hold that ideas are "to be understood in a sort of Platonic sense" (CP 2.228).

In short, the ideal world as indicating a realm of logical possibilities within which the actual world must be located is not some realm of metaphysical forms; indeed, it is not a topic for metaphysics at all, but rather belongs to the area of epistemology. The ideal world is the conceptual world of the logically possible or the consistently thinkable within which the facts of experience must be located. To turn the conceptual realm into the metaphysical realm is a reification which obscures the character of the independently real, the character of our mode of grasping the independently real, and the character of the world as that which emerges through their interaction. From this backdrop, the following discussion can now turn to a general characterization of such an emerging world.

The above analysis has attempted to show that the real world is ontologically one with independent reality as an infinitely rich continuum of qualitative events. It is, metaphysically, that independently real. Yet, a world is dependent upon the meaning system which grasps in a way in which reality as independent is not, for a world is that perspective of the infinitely rich reality which has been "fixed" or "carved out" by a system of ideas. Knowledge is abstractive and selective. A world, though concrete, is nonetheless selective in the sense that a world, as the concrete content denoted by a system of meanings, is a way in which the concreteness of reality can be delineated or "fixed." A system, once chosen, limits the alternatives possible within it, but alternative systems may be possible. As Peirce notes, "Truly natural classes may, and undoubtedly often do, merge into one another inextricably" (CP 1.209), and thus boundary lines must be imposed, although the classes are natural (CP MS 427: 40-41). The continuity is there; where the "cut" is imposed is, in part, our decision. Like the boundary lines of natural classes, the "boundary lines" that constitute the world may have been differently

drawn, giving rise to different possibilities within the world. A world is delineated by a system of facts, but facts are not independent of the selective knowledge process, for facts are abstracted portions of a continuum of events.

A world is by definition consistent because a world is the concrete content which is delineated by a set of consistent propositions. The world answers to the laws of excluded middle and non-contradiction, and thus it represents the ideal of that which has been conceptually articulated – and hence made precise – to its ideal limit. "The world," then, is at once the basis for every experience and the ideal of a complete synthesis of possible experience. Perhaps it can be said, somewhat metaphorically, that while reality is the infinity of a continuum or ongoing process, the world is the logical fixation of an infinite number of possible cuts within it. Thus, the world is the context of meaning within which all other frameworks and objects may be articulated in the sense that the world is the "outermost" content or encompassing frame of reference of the application of a set of meaning structures to the independently real and hence of the propositions which can delineate experience consistently within the context of these meanings. Such a world then, opens in one direction toward the structures of the independently real and the possibilities its presents, and in the other direction toward the structures of our modes of grasping the independently real and the possibilities such modes of grasping allow. What can occur in the world must conform to the possibilities available within the world we have structured – though the world we have structured has arisen through the successful interaction with the possibilities offered by the independently real.

Peirce's theory of truth reflects the bi-polar dimensions of world. Before examining his understanding of truth in relation to traditional alternatives of correspondence or coherence, it will be helpful the clarify at this point the type of realism involved in discussing the correspondence theory of truth, for it is not the realism which lies in opposition to nominalism and which asserts the reality of universals. Nor is the point at issue the question of the externality of the real, but rather the relation of the externally real to the knower. As seen above, the contours of world and the objects within in are partially dependent upon the noetic acts of finite minds. Thus, while Peirce cannot be called an idealist neither can he be called a realist in the traditional sense. For, though Peirce holds we are in direct contact with an external "brutely there" reality which limits our interpretations, thus rendering the coherence theory of truth incomplete, yet the relation of the knower to this known external reality cannot be understood in terms of correspondence. And, although it may well be an oversimplification to say that

coherence theories of truth belong to idealism while correspondence theories of truth belong to realism, an interpretation of Peirce as an epistemological realist in the traditional sense accepted by most others using this label leads to the view that at least the ideally true and final opinion on any matter would involve a relation of correspondence. To the question, what alternative remains when one rules out the correspondence of realism as well as the coherence of idealism, Some type of coherence theory of truth operates within the framework of ontological phenomenalism as well. the answer is, the pragmatic alternative. Peirce's pragmatic theory of truth is ultimately intertwined not just with his understanding of scientific method as the method of fixing belief but also with the entire gamut of his unique pragmatic epistemology and metaphysics. Perhaps the term 'perspectival realism' seems appropriate at this point, and it may well be. Yet, this label does not seem to quite capture the full import or implications of Peirce's pragmatic theory of truth.

Because for Peirce the hereness and nowness of events and the real connections they display is independent of, yet enters directly into interaction with, our conceptualizations and the possibilities they allow, coherence or consistency is not a sufficient criterion for the truth of empirical assertions. Rather, there must be a pragmatic interplay between our concepts and actual experience. There is an ontological dimension to what appears within experience which limits our interpretations in terms of workability. But, true knowledge, even ideally true knowledge, could not be correspondence, for the nature of our intentional link with reality through conceptual structures, and the nature of reality as a continuum which "swims" in indeterminacy, makes the relation of correspondence literally senseless. Rather, Peirce claims that a true thought is one which answers , which leads to thoughts in harmony with nature (CP MS 934: 24). The relation of "answering" is ultimately two directional. Reality answers our questions, and determines the workability of our meaning structures, but what answers it gives are partially dependent on what questions we ask, and what meaning structures work are partially dependent upon the structures we bring. Truth is always worldly truth, for "nothing else than a Fact possibly can be a 'witness' or 'testimony' " (MS 647: 26), and facts, it will be remembered, are always relative to the framework of a discriminating mind. Yet the witness of a fact is the real, "since it is truly in that which occurs" (MS 647: 26).

Worldly truth is thus perspectival, and other perspectives are always possible. Truth involves convergence, but convergence within a common world which we have partially made, and continually remake in various of its aspects. Thus Peirce, in speaking of truth,

whether scientific, moral, metaphysical, or common sense (CP 5.565-5.568), states that "the perfect truth of a statement requires that it should involve the confession that the perfect doctrine can neither be stated nor conceived" (CP 5.565-5.568). Again, Peirce claims that an essential ingredient of truth includes a confession of its "one-sidedness". That this is intended not as a factual limitation on present knowledge but as a theoretical limitation due to the nature of knowledge is found in Peirce's comparison of the ideal limit of convergence, the ideal of a "final ultimate opinion", to the ideal limit of pei. It is "an ideal limit to which no numerical expression can be perfectly true." It is an unattainable ideal not only in fact but by the very nature of that which sets the ideal limit (CP 5.566; 5.565). Thus, Peirce can present the following hypothetical situation: "Suppose our opinion with reference to a given question to be quite settled, so that inquiry, no matter how far pushed, has no surprises for us on this point. Then we may be said to have attained perfect knowledge about that question. True, it is conceivable that somebody else would attain to a like perfect knowledge which should conflict with ours. This is conceivable." Peirce then goes on to say that though it is theoretically possible it is not practically possible "considering the social nature of man", for we would "compare notes; and if we never do compare notes, and no third party talks with both and makes the comparison, it is difficult to see what meaning there is in saying we disagree." That Peirce is not using the term "perfect knowledge" in a loose common sense way can be seen from his explicit distinction between it and "practically perfect belief" (CP 41). Thus, even the ideal of convergence to a final ultimate opinion, to perfect knowledge, is always convergence within an accepted framework or perspective. And, there are always other and possibly better ways of cutting into reality, of delineating the context within which convergence can occur. This is implied by the very nature of reality as a continuum which swims in indeterminacy. Thus, convergence toward one final truth is "a regulative principle, an intellectual hope", and such a rule of hope must be followed, for "despair is insanity" (CP 1.405). Yet, even such a rule of hope, the "cheerful hope" which animates the followers of science involves " something approximating " only (CP 3.432), for the "indeterminate" nature of reality may mean that concerning " the answer, that is, the final answer … there is none." (CP 4.61).

The objects within our world do not copy the independently real but rather emerge through our modes of grasping the independently real. Nor do the modes of grasping via which emerge the objectivities within our world copy the independently real but rather they serve as conceptual tools for "cutting the edges" of the independently real continuum of events which "swims" in indeterminacy. The ideally true opinion would be that opinion which would perfectly work in anticipating possibilities of experience, and

would work not because it adequately copied, but because it adequately "cut into" the independently real. Finally, the world within which specific meanings and beliefs arise, and within which objects or facts emerge for conscious awareness, is not a copy of an independent reality, nor is it identical with an independent reality in its character as independent. Rather, such a world is the encompassing frame of reference or field of interest of organism-environment interaction, the ultimate backdrop of rationality within which emerging facts are situated. And thus Peirce can proclaim that "In its proper meaning realism is a kind of idealism. It is the doctrine that ideas play a part in the real world" (MS 967: 1). This realism that is an idealism is in fact neither, but rather is a manifestation of that thread of pragmatic pluralism which runs through his position, for this "realism that is a kind of idealism" emerges from his understanding of the pragmatic interplay between the indeterminately rich reality which offers its independent influence and the meanings by we render it intelligible and suitable for our needs.

In one sense it can be said that the world within which conscious belief, questioning, and discussion emerges becomes many different worlds because of new meanings, shaping new worldly contours, that emerge from varying attitudes of response to emerging problematic contexts. In another sense, however, such pluralism is not absolute but emerges within the backdrop of community. For, in its deepest sense, the questioning which changed the world could only occur within a context which did not change but lent the prereflective constancy and commonalty of its meaning in a general though vague sense to the meaningfulness of both the problematic contexts and the possible resolutions in terms of alternative structurings.

References

Lewis, C. I. (1929). *Mind and the World Order*. New York: Dover Publications.

Endnotes

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1. This point is discussed in some historical detail by C. I. Lewis (1929, p. 154) in relation to the development of his own position. Although Kant is considered the beginning of "the rejection of the spectator," he himself was not immune to some of its presuppositions. Thus, in accepting the later two characteristics, he rejected the first. ↩
2. Though Peirce is referring to Hegel's method in the long discussion in which this statement is housed, this particular statement refers to Peirce's own modification, as can be seen by

the context and by references given there to other of his claims. ↩

3. Mill’s failure to recognize this mind relatedness of worldly nature, according to Peirce, led him astray in his analysis of the “uniformity of nature” (CP 6.67). ↩