

## IN THE WORKS

### “SCIENTIFIC FALLIBILISM”: PEIRCE’S FORGOTTEN LECTURE OF 1893

Everyone is at least minimally interested in a few philosophical problems, such as those concerning the soul and the afterlife. The Middle Ages provided people with fully satisfying answers to these problems, while regarding as most difficult and occult all questions dealing with the natural mysteries of heat, light, elasticity, planetary motions, and the like. A thousand years or so later, the perception has been reversed: modern science has been very successful at explaining nature’s mechanisms, while it provides no answers to the old philosophical questions. But modern science at least has taught philosophy a most important lesson: how to cultivate the spirit of inquiry.

Such is, in summary, the preamble that opens an exciting lecture on the philosophy of science and nature that Peirce appears to have written in the summer of 1893. It has been only recently, in December 2000, that the full text of this lecture has emerged from the Peirce papers. Not that it had been ignored in the past, since significant portions of it had been published in the *Collected Papers*,<sup>1</sup> and since a number of scholars (CP editors, Max H. Fisch, Carolyn Eisele, Kenneth L. Ketner, PEP editors) had already much pondered and wondered about the occasion that prompted Peirce to write the lecture. But the full extent of the text had never been reconstituted. Titled “Fallibilism, Continuity, and Evolution” by the CP editors and then by Richard Robin in his *Catalogue*, the paragraphs in CP 1.141–75 reproduce, with some deletions, the principal content of R 955.<sup>2</sup> The CP editors recognized that these pages were part of a lecture (the internal evidence leaves no doubt), and dated them c. 1897, on the basis of terminological connections with some of the Cambridge lectures of 1897–98. Fisch at some point speculated that the lecture could have been one Peirce gave on 21 May 1892 before the Graduate Philosophical Society of Harvard University, but, as Ralph Barton Perry had already speculated earlier,<sup>3</sup> and as confirmed in Peirce’s letter of 24 May 1892 to Paul Carus, it was a version of his paper on “The Law of Mind” that Peirce had read there instead. Ketner, in 1992, theorized that R 955 was a talk Peirce reportedly gave at Royce’s home or Royce’s seminar later in May 1892, but a letter from Dickinson Miller to Fisch revealed that the “talk” was actually an informal conversation between Peirce and Royce in the latter’s office (with Miller as one of the silent witnesses), in which Royce had the lion’s share. What lecture, then, was R 955 a part of?

That R 955 was only a part of a lecture was clear enough since Peirce timed its delivery by indicating intervals of five minutes at the top of every three to four pages throughout most of the document. Given that the first recorded time is “35” while the last is “70” (with fourteen more pages to go), R 955 turns out to be the second half of a very long lecture, the whole reading of which would have taken Peirce an hour and a half. Where were the pages Peirce intended to read during the first thirty-five minutes, however? Diligent research led us to find them for the most part in R 860, titled by Robin “Nominalism, Realism, and the Logic of Modern Science.” Three pages of it were published in CP 6.492–93 under the title “Knowledge of God,” and were dated c. 1896 by the CP editors. The initial “5” minute mark shows up on the third sheet and minute “25” on the fifteenth sheet, with seven more pages to go. A related set of pages, bearing the telling “30” minute mark, was subsequently found in R 589. They constitute clearly the missing transition between R 860 and R 955. The text of R 860 was heavily altered by Peirce with a pen dipped in ink different from that of the main text (brown instead of black). This may indicate that R 860 was composed at some earlier time in 1893, and then recycled for

use in the full lecture, since portions of R 955 are also in brown ink. As a whole, the entire document has a complex compositional history. A number of paragraphs were heavily altered and then deleted to be rewritten on fresh isolated sheets that ended up scattered in other folders. Page R 860: 18, where the transition to the second part begins, is followed by no less than seven competing sequences of pages. The paragraphs of CP 6.492–93 are part of the first sequence, while those of CP 1.141–46 constitute the first half of the sixth sequence, which means that the *Collected Papers* does not provide the most mature version of some parts of the text.

This most mature version consists of a reconstructed sequence of sixty-seven pages, reassembled from five Robin manuscripts (S104, 860, 855, 1574, and 955).<sup>4</sup>

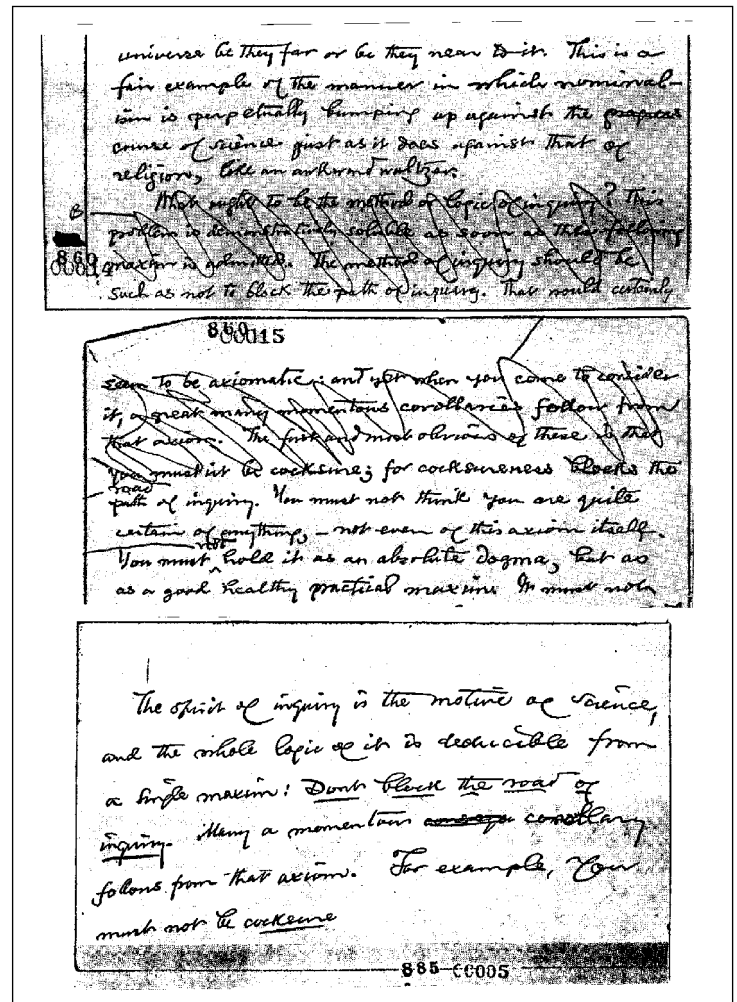


Fig. 1 shows how Peirce deleted the bottom of R 860:14 and the top of R 860:15, and then rewrote the transition between the two pages on a fresh sheet, which later got separated, and was retrieved in R 885:5.