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Commentary on Novak

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In Response to: Joseph A. Novak's *Abduction and Aristotle's Library*

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I would reconstruct Novak's account of Peirce's argument about the Aristotelian library as follows.

First, Peirce asks us to consider the following facts (p. 6):

(F1) The original corpus of Aristotelian writings, as catalogued by Diogenes Laertius, contains three times more works than the currently extant corpus but does not include many that are part of the latter.

(F2) In antiquity, Aristotle's writings had the reputation of being stylistically elegant, whereas the extant corpus exhibits a dry academic style.

(F3) In the extant works, many passages and even whole chapters are often repeated.

(F4) There are many internal cross-references to Aristotle's own works, sometimes to works no longer extant, other times to works that we possess but under different titles.

Second, according to Peirce, a possible explanation of these facts is the following story advanced by Strabo:

[E] Aristotle bequeathed his own library to Theophrastus Theophrastus bequeathed it to Neleus; and Neleus took it to Scepsis and bequeathed it to his heirs much later, when the books had been damaged by moisture and moths, their descendants sold them to Apellicon of Teos Apellicon was a bibliophile rather than a philosopher; and therefore, seeking a restoration of the parts that had been eaten through, he made new copies of the text, filling up the gaps incorrectly, and published the books full of errors immediately after the death of Apellicon, Sulla, who had captured Athens, carried off Apellicon's library to Rome, where Tyrannion the grammarian ... arranged the titles and Andronicus of Rhodes, who received the writings from him, published them and edited the titles which are now current. [P. 2]

This is the essence of a slightly longer story, but even this could be reduced simply to the claim: that after Aristotle's death, his papers and manuscripts were damaged by water and eaten though by moths during storage, and they were incompletely and inadequately restored by someone (named Apellicon) who lacked the requisite philosophical knowledge.

Third, Peirce reasons that if this explanation were true, then certain consequences would follow; that is, the extant corpus would frequently exhibit these features (p. 7):

(P1) Trivialities instead of original insights;

(P2) Errors or puzzling passages at intervals of about 70 Bekker lines;

(P3) Transposition of some passages by about 70 Bekker lines; and

(P4) Frequent omissions of passages one page in length.

To support this quartet of conditional claims, Peirce makes several auxiliary assumptions, such as that "the number of lines per papyrus sheet" (p. 8) was about equal to 70 Bekker lines and other claims about "the pasting and storage of papyrus sheets" (p. 8).

Fourth, Peirce examines Aristotle's extant writings and finds that the implied consequences are indeed present. Finally, Peirce concludes that Strabo's story is confirmed.

Besides articulating such a reconstruction, Novak indicates how this argument exemplifies Peirce's own theory of the scientific method as applied to historical inquiry.

Novak also advances three criticisms for the arguments. Let us begin with the second one, which is the clearest. The difficulty is that what gets confirmed is not Strabo's supposition by itself, but it together with the Peirce's own auxiliary hypotheses, for both are needed to deduce the consequences to be tested (P1-P4). For example, Peirce needs to assume that a papyrus page contained about 70 Bekker lines to deduce the occurrence of the errors, puzzles, and transpositions of which (P2) and (P3) speak. But he seems to have no independent confirmation of these two hypotheses. In fact, the fourth one of Peirce's own abductive rules stipulates that "we should split up a hypothesis into its items as much as possible, so as to test each singly" (p. 12, n. 14). Thus, Peirce's argument about the Aristotelian library also violates one of his own rules.

Here I agree with Novak that Peirce's argument is open to this line of criticism. However, I would part company with Novak insofar as I think he should have explored further what Peirce has to say about this problem. Novak starts doing this when he refers to another essay where Peirce discussed how one physical theory can support another. However, the point is not pursued sufficiently to resolve the question whether Peirce's argument has this flaw. Thus, as things stand, we are merely left with a question rather than a criticism.

Novak's first criticism involves the distinction between facts that serve as data explananda and facts that provide confirming evidence. But it is unclear what the problem is supposed to be. Novak "wonders why Peirce did not include what were the facts which serve as confirming evidence (P1, P2, P3 and P4) among the original facts which were the data" (p. 9). But then Novak suggests that Peirce might reply that he first learned of the data to be explained; that this led him to postulate Strabo's account as a possible explanation; and that it was later that he used Strabo's hypothesis to predict (or to be more precise, to retrodict) additional and previously unknown facts about the extant Aristotelian corpus; and that eventually he verified these predictions. And Novak himself suggests that this procedure is not dissimilar from what happens in the physical sciences.

So what is the problem? I ask this question not because I do not think there is a problem, but because Novak does not state what it is. I believe the difficulty could be formulated as follows. Suppose we contrast Peirce's argument as reconstructed above with another possible reconstruction. In such a different reconstruction, one begins with eight premises embodying not only the four original facts to be explained (F1-F4), but also the four verified consequences (P1-P4). Then one argues that if Strabo's account is correct and one adds other assumptions about the papyrus pages, then all these eight facts would follow. Then, given that there is no other way of explaining the eight facts, one concludes that Strabo's account is probably true.

The problem reduces to the following questions. Which of these two reconstructed arguments is stronger? And why? In particular, given that the intuition and the practice of most scientists and scholars is that the former is stronger, why is it stronger? What is the significance of this fact, if it is a fact, for the question of the limitations of formal logic and of the need of some kind of informal logic? Once again, here I can't help believing that Peirce had some insightful things to say about this problem, and I wish Novak had tried to articulate them.

The third criticism advanced by Novak is that "there is some fundamental circularity" (p. 10) in the argument because Peirce supports Strabo's supposition by means of facts such as (P1-P4), and he establishes the truth of these same facts by using Strabo's supposition. I must confess that here I see no circularity. It is not true that Peirce establishes the truth of (P1-P4) by using Strabo's supposition. Rather, he uses Strabo's supposition to predict them, but he establishes them by direct examination of the extant Aristotelian corpus.