PEIRCE'S PARADOXICAL SOLUTION TO THE
LIAR'S PARADOX

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1 *Peirce's analysis of the problem* (*1864-65*) In Lecture 1 and Lecture 3 of a series of lectures presented in 1864-65 (Lectures on the Philosophy of Science delivered at Harvard), Peirce discusses the Liar's Paradox. In Lecture 1 he discusses the sentence, "This very proposition is false."; in Lecture 3 he examines the sentence in the form "What is here written is not true." This sentence, as we know, leads to paradoxical conclusions. I will first consider Peirce's analysis of the problem and then his solution to it.

1.1 The Problem Stated

S1   This very proposition is false.
S2   What is here written is not true.

Peirce argues that the problem with this sentence is that it is logically meaningless or logically nonsense, where nonsense is defined as "that which has a certain resemblance to a symbol without being a symbol."[1] Each genuine symbol is subject to three systems of formal laws; these are the laws of (1) grammar, (2) logic, and (3) rhetoric. Each symbol to be meaningful must satisfy the formal conditions of grammar, of logic, and of the intelligibility of symbols.[2] This symbol is grammatically correct but fails to be a genuine symbol because it does not satisfy the formal conditions of logic.

In the case of the above sentence, S1, a logical law, the law of the excluded middle, does not apply. Peirce says,

This is a proposition to which the principle of the excluded middle, namely

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1. Ms 340, 1864.

2. Ms 340; Ms 347, 1864-65.