

American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914)

Post by "Godfrey" of February 27, 2021 at 4:56 PM

Has anyone here heard of the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce? The attached article showed up in my inbox and explores how Peirce studied Epicurus and used the idea of the swerve in some of his thinking. It would seem that his acceptance of Epicurus' ideas was very limited, but it was a pleasant surprise to come across a new name relating to Epicurus!

Post by "Cassius" of February 27, 2021 at 6:11 PM

Thank you Godfrey I had never heard of any of that. Two parts I note in the article of special interest to me are:

In short, the Epicurean notion of the swerve is that there is a minimal amount of un-necessitated atomic movement, a deviation of atoms from their normal trajectory, not significant enough to generate chaos on the macroscopic level, but enough that the future is left undetermined. Explicit discussion of this atomic swerve is absent from the few surviving works of Epicurus.¹² Yet Lucretius credits Epicurus for first formulating the swerve, and, from among other sources, we also know it from the lesser known contemporary of Lucretius, the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus, whom Peirce reportedly admired, and from whom he derived his term "semiosis."¹³

This is a point made in AA Long's "Chance and Natural Law in Determinism" and I have always thought it to be hugely important to keep in mind: Yes the swerve exists, but it generally does not break through to the macroscopic level so as to result in chaos. In my view people tend to talk about the significance of the swerve too broadly without noting this very important limitation.

Also:

Yet there is, Peirce says, another group of objectors for whom he has more respect. These objectors "... are shocked at the atheism of Lucretius and his great master" (RLT 260). They fail to realize that what really bothers them is not the Epicurean notion of the atomic swerve as a model of Firstness, but rather "... the attribution of this firstness to things perfectly dead and material" (RLT 260). Peirce agrees here with this second class of objectors, because "... whatever is First is *(quo facto) sentient*" (RLT 260). He recoils from any attribution of spontaneity to something strictly material. So Peirce, unlike the orthodox Epicurean, is not a strict materialist. He is far from it. Instead of holding a materialistic view of atoms with just "... a small dose of sentience added, ..." Peirce expresses the theme that the nature of the universe is constituted by Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness (RLT 260).¹¹

So in the end Peirce seems to be very far from Epicurus, as the article's conclusion admits. Sounds like he is pretty much someone who agrees with Epicurus in opposition to hard

determinism, but really doesn't agree with Epicurus on much else.

Post by “Godfrey” of February 27, 2021 at 7:20 PM

That seems to sum it up pretty well. I guess he's just a historical curiosity from an Epicurean perspective.

Post by “Cassius” of February 28, 2021 at 7:02 AM

Even if so, thanks for posting that. There's a lot to be learned from observing people who accept certain parts of Epicurus while rejecting other important parts. Seems to me that you can definitely see patterns in people picking and choosing only certain parts, and thinking about how they make those choices helps expose key questions that are very helpful to trace down and be clear on ourselves.