BOOK REVIEWS

Charles Peirce's Guess at the Riddle: Grounds for Human Significance.

What does the origin of the universe have to do with human conduct? Everything, according to Sheriff's exposition of Peirce's cosmogony. It is the beginning of the universe that defines the three active elements in the world—first, chance; second, law, and third, habit-taking" (from Peirce's 'Guess at the Riddle' CP 1.409). Peirce's 'Guess' and passages from Volume VI of Collected Papers define Sheriff's theme that logic, aesthetics, and human conduct are all interrelated and interdependent.

The interrelationship can be seen easily beginning with Peirce's Architectonic Theory. The architectonic is Peirce's triad of First, Second, and Third. In terms of the universe, the First is the flash of beginning; it is what was apart from anything else. It was pure quality, potentiality, indeterminacy, irregularity, and chance. From a distant perspective in time, we can compare our universe with that first moment, but at that first flash, there was no time, no comparison, no law, no habit. That moment was for Peirce a pure First. Second is brute force, comparison, actuality, regularity, and time. Third is the process of establishing the laws, which is regularity, or habit-taking. Sheriff develops Peirce's cosmology (which Peirce called cosmogony), in his first chapter, while the tendency for the universe to take habits is developed in his second chapter. The habit-taking is understood as Peirce's mind of the universe and Sheriff presents two extremes of that universe. At one side (p. 22) is 'pure chance, chaos, feeling; at the other hypothetical extreme of the continuum is pure uniformity and absence of feeling. In between, in time, in the process of evolution, are all the phenomena of the universe.' It is between the extremes that one finds consciousness and self-consciousness, and the generalized nature of signs.

Peirce's semiotic is the topic of the third chapter, where Sheriff discusses the tension of the two extremes of the universe, the move from pure chaos and chance to pure order. He argues that the first includes the ontology of first being, while the generalized order of law is at the second extreme which is the phenomenological. "Just as there is almost no chance/feeling left in such evolutionary habits as gravity, there is almost nothing ontological left in signs of signs [which is thought]." (p. 32) 'Belief, Reality, and Truth,' the fourth chapter, builds upon the concepts of signs to show that truth lies in the future and that creation moves toward some ultimate truth. The reality of the human mind is the process of the individual within the progression toward truth.
The fifth chapter develops the interrelationship of aesthetics, ethics, and logic from Peirce’s 1903 lecture at Cambridge (see in particular CP 5.111). Logic is the study of representation, of signs, Sheriff tells us and ‘it asks what is true. Ethics considers those things whose ends lie in action; it asks what is good. And esthetics treats those things whose ends are to embody qualities of feelings; it asks what is in and of itself desirable, i.e., beautiful. The essence of these sciences is controlled thought, controlled conduct, and the formulation of habits of feelings.” (p.62) Since control is a generalization, a consistency, a habit, we have habit-taking, a type of thirdness, which moves toward the end of the ultimate truth—a final thirdness; toward ultimate action—a final secondness; and toward ultimate feeling, quality, or beauty—a final firstness.

It is in the fifth chapter and the sixth, a short discussion of philosophical sentimentalism, that Sheriff shows how the logic of sign action in human conduct can produce moral behavior. Here one finds that qualities are neither good nor bad in themselves, but that aesthetic judgment “must begin where control of the processes of cognition begins’ (CP 5.114). In other words, moral goodness or badness is not a species of aesthetic approval and disapproval. Moral goodness is action consistent with an ultimate aim. In other words moral goodness is controlled action.” (p. 72) The path is neither deterministic, there is still chance at work, nor hedonistic, because the aim is beyond the individual’s response to feeling, it seeks a self-controlled response toward the summum bonum. That is, one’s tastes begin to become altered over time and experience, within the social context.

Over time habits of aesthetic judgments are formed. The key for Sheriff and Peirce as to why these habits become a “good” social habit, as opposed to a “bad” social habit (as in the case of Hitler’s society, for example) is their optimism in evolution. For Peirce that optimism required one to ‘generalize one’s sentiments, one’s self, one’s interests, to participate in making the world more logical, to participate in the agapastic evolution of the creative consciousness of the universe.” (p. 89) The moral task of each generation is to leave the world more reasonable, which is a logical process of generalizing. Such generalization allows one to “become welded into the universal continuum.” (CP 1.673)

What started as the “first flash” of the creation of the universe, finds expression in the logic of human conduct. While Sheriff’s development of moral character from Peirce’s cosmogony is brief, it is profound and thought provoking. More treatises need to follow including, for example, the relationship of Peirce’s agapastic evolution with process theologian Henry Nelson Wieman’s creative interchange. Both are process philosophies, both are optimistic evolutionary approaches to ethics, and both suggest a truth beyond the moment of human experience. Sheriff’s text moves the “guess” to a new level of understanding, while integrating much of Peirce’s philosophy, and provokes many questions.

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