Type: Article in Journal

Author: Ostdiek, Gerald

Title: The Manufacture of Chance: Firstness as a Fixture of Life

Year: 2014

Journal: Biosemiotics

Keywords: Firstness, Semiotics, Sentiency, Absolute chance

Abstract: Whereas Peirce's logic (and belief therein) drove him to postulate a primitive sentiency of physical matter, this essay argues that life exhibits behavior that is radically discontinuous from its preconditions; e.g., life manufactures chance by semiotic means. A sign being something that stands for another thing to a mind, signs are brought into existence only by acts of 'reading.' Peirce argued that this action is an element of physics, and thus the entire universe 'lives.' This essay postulates a degenerate form of Firstness that is contingent upon 'caused' forms of apparent but not actual chance, and which consists of possibility sans sentiency. This argument limits the range of Peirce's semiotics to biology; chance remains radical, though its roots now lie in the coextension of semiotics and life. As living things live only by incorporating extant phenomena, continuation depends on the ability to enter into successful semiotic relationships. This results in the 'minding' behavior that is both biological sentiency and genuine Firstness, and which expresses radically discontinuous behavior. Thus chance becomes something akin to truth: neither exists 'metaphysically' (as with James' mythic Jack of Spades), both are quite distinct from being, and both happen only as a consequence of interpretation as it is generated by and re-generates sign-wielding beings as they seek what they need to go on living. While quite distinct from Peirce, this notion of chance may well result in a more productive use of his semiotics.

ISSN: 1875-1350

DOI: 10.1007/s12304-014-9208-x

Language: English