

PURPOSELESS ELEGANCE



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Purposeless Elegance

By Ross Hartwell

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The concept of "chance" brings about many known and unknown implications. One such idea, brought forth by Dr. Mary Beth Saffo is "that both chance and adaptation play important evolutionary roles."¹ The thesis of Dr. Saffo's article, "Accidental Elegance," revolves around the theory that chance "is another factor shaping evolution."² Though she does not state that everything stems from one single chance happening, she nevertheless writes as if a string of chances influence the universe as it exists today. Other than her own practical scientific experimentation, Saffo does not mention any past authoritative influences for her evolution by chance theory.

The idea of chance does not enter the world "by chance," nor was chance hatched through any modern research scientist. If one considers the origins, along with the self-defeating nature of chance, their research and findings would be profoundly impacted and as such will lead to different conclusions. This short paper is not meant to lead the reader into any conclusions other than that the philosophical sentiment "the world and its living organisms began by chance" is truly absurd. The actual causes shaping the world will be left for later discussion.

One can credit Democritus (460-370 BC) for seeking answers beneath the realm of what he could see with his own eyes. Any serious consideration on the origins of chance theory should be gleaned from this respected thinker. His ideas on atomic theory continue to impact scientific inquiry, today. Democritus settles on atoms as "eternal and indestructible," and "the only true non-being is the infinite void," in which the atom exists.³ But, these speculations leave unanswered questions between the theory and his second highly contested hypothesis "that every event in the universe is causally determined by ... the impacts of atoms upon each other."⁴ Other than some unexplained cosmic puff, Democritus never clearly justified the initial cause of the atoms movement toward each other.

1. Mary Beth Saffo, "Accidental Elegance: How Chance Authors The Universe," *The American Scholar*, 74 no. 3 (2005), 18, 20.

2. Ibid.

3. Phillip Stokes, *Philosophy: 100 Essential Thinkers* (NY: Enchanted Lion Books, 2006), 27.

4. Ibid.

5. Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson, eds. and trans., *The Epicurus Reader*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub, 1994) 7.

6. Ibid., 7, 8.

7. Ibid., 97, 29.

8. Ibid., 49

9. Inwood and Gerson, 50

10. Ibid., 50

11. Ibid., 102

12. Circular reasoning at its finest.

13. Inwood and Gerson, 25

14. David Hume, *An Inquiry concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub, 1994), 37.

15. Ibid., 64

16. R.C. Sproul, *Not A Chance: The Myth of Chance in Modern Science and Cosmology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 163.

17. Ibid., 209

18. Ibid., 179

19. Law of non-contradiction: "A, cannot be A and non-A(-A) at the same time ... For something to come to nothing it must, in effect, create itself. Self-creation is a logical and rational impossibility." Ibi

Though Democritus was the first to expansively pontificate on the atom, Epicurus (341-270 BC) also embraced atomistic metaphysics, but with a major caveat. In a letter to the historian, Herodotus, he wrote that the void and atoms are unlimited in time, space, and differences of shape.⁵ The philosopher explains that the “unlimited” differences and continuous movement allowed the atoms to come together to form the shapes as they are seen, adding, there “is no principle for these [entities] since the atoms and void are eternal”⁶ Through this rationale, and among many other ethical conclusions credited to Epicurean thought are two most relevant for this discussion. Of the first, one peer wrote “Epicurus says all things [occur] by necessity, by choice, and by chance,” and secondly, the philosopher claimed people have no reason to concern themselves with death because that state of affairs only means they no longer exist.⁷

One critic, Cicero (106-43 BC), attempts to untie this Gordian knot, writing that by Epicurean reasoning, “if an atom exists and it does swerve, it does so without cause.”⁸ He then comments that Democritus “accept[s] that all things happened by necessity,” while also weighing this speculation as absurd evidence supporting Democritus’ antecedent force as an inexplicable “blow.”⁹ Once Epicurus combined necessity, choice, and chance, he threw in the towel for ultimate responsibility. Cicero imparts that “Epicurus introduced this line of reasoning because,” if the atom was guided by any other force, “we would have no freedom.”¹⁰ Epicurus also noted, “self-sufficiency is the greatest wealth of all.”¹¹ One can deduce that from his opinion, as applied to atoms and recorded above, self-sufficiency is the uncaused cause providing the necessity and chance, which generates the choice of self-sufficiency.¹² The conundrum between Democritus leaving the door open to something powering the atom (ie. The puff/blow), and Epicurus’ self-sufficient atom, causes a split in thought: one, proposed by Cicero, returning philosophy to a Hellenistic, deity influenced world, and the other leading mankind to an evolution caused by the circular chance paragon.

In contrast to those who think the universe evolves from chance, or an anomaly affecting the eternal atom, are those who believe chance to be an irrational illusion. Included, but not limited to the following chance deniers are a mixed bag of respected thinkers. The philosopher/scientist, Aristotle (384-322 BC), the skeptical atheist, David Hume (1711-1776), and modern

day Christian apologist, R.C. Sproul (1977-2019), all opposed any idea of chance as a cause. Aristotle surmised, “the concept of purpose. ..explain[ed] the behavior of everything in the universe.”¹³ Hume reasoned “chance” to be an answer indulged through “ignorance” which “begets a like species of belief or opinion.”¹⁴ He also writes, “nothing exists without a cause ... and that chance [holds no] ... real power.”¹⁵ The noted theologian, R.C. Sproul, understands “chance” as the excuse supporting the theory of “random selection” preventing the universe as being the product of an ultimate designer.¹⁶ He also supports Hume, writing “chance is an unreal cause, which is no cause.”¹⁷ Sproul further hypothesizes that the chance as a cause theory leads to a model for “self-creation”¹⁸ which, in turn, violates the law of “non-contradiction.”¹⁹ The conclusions of Aristotle, Cicero, Hume, Sproul, and even Democritus are rational options to base modern scientific method. Researchers such as Dr. Mary Beth Saffo, and others, who prompted the subject of this argument, should consider the sound philosophy, science, and theology of these alternative experts. Dr. Saffo's article is titled “Accidental Elegance: How Chance Authors the Universe.” Had she considered the origins of chance theory, along with the self-defeating nature of chance, her research and findings would be profoundly impacted and would lead to purpose, not accident, as the author of this elegant universe.

Saffo's theory which combines chance and evolution is illogical. For evolution to occur, the evolving form needs a purposeful cause. It is the form's purpose in which its elegance is derived. Epicurus attempted safe passage through turbulent philosophical waters by including necessity, choice, and chance as theories for existence. But he cannot have his cake and eat it, too. According to him, death only means people no longer exist. If this is the truth, then to choose to live is a slice in which he must not indulge. Choosing life when death is the sole outcome is ludicrous. Life does not flourish out of necessity, or choice, or chance-life is bestowed. The question is, “who (or what) is the first giver of life?” By answering this question one will find their purpose.