

Stephen Lumsden, essay for Units 13-15, Program C: The First Philosophers

(Question 6: “Democritus sometimes does away with what appears to be the senses and says that none these appear according to truth, but only according to opinion; the truth in real things is that there are 'atoms and void'.” – Is that the truth about how things are?)

Today we may be comfortable with the idea that we cannot recognise every little thing in the world around us. This was not so with the Pre-Socratics. To understand this view one must first review the context and background in which it was made with respect to the theory of Atomism, and who influenced it. We shall then discuss different approaches to the limits of perception and how this may cohere to the Pre-Socratic model in general and Atomism in particular. We shall then comment on the significance of Democritus' views as above.

Atomism agrees with Parmedeian thought in the respect that each atom is a 'one' (being) and all that separates them is the void (non-being). Such was the influence of Parmenides, whose works *The Way of Truth* try to describe the true reality of things (the objective reality of the world as it really is) and *The Way of Opinion*, which describes how it merely appears. Thus Parmenides, and in turn Democritus, pointed out the limits and scope of what we can and cannot directly experience. In positing the idea of atoms, so small and invisible to the naked eye, Democritus forces us to take a leap of faith, as we are told to believe a theory we cannot directly witness. In this respect the theory was a purely rationalist exercise for the Atomists. Not until Galileo improved and popularised the microscope and telescope in the sixteenth century, could we take for granted the existence of microscopic or distant worlds.

Atomism, as the conclusion of the search for the basic stuff of the universe as begun by Thales (and the materialism initiated by the Pre-Socratics), does not appear to distinguish between different views on perception such as Naive realism (the idea senses provide us with direct awareness of objects as they really are) or Representative realism (the idea that we only get some kind of indirect, not entirely clear view of such objects). It was not until John Locke proposed that objects can have secondary qualities in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that there was any prominent effort made to distinguish objects in themselves from their apparent qualities. Later Bertrand Russell's *Problems of Philosophy* would recognise the subjective reality and individual perspective that each of us would have if we viewed a wooden table, but such views were only formulated long after Democritus tried to explain perceptive reality by following Parmenides' influence. Such approaches contrast with Atomist speculation that sense data can have a direct relationship with certain qualities of atoms. For example Theophrastus postulates that taste can depend on the particular shape of an atom, with sweetness corresponding to rounded angles in contrast with sourness emanating from more pointed angular atoms. Therefore we must appreciate that the Pre-Socratic's view of the senses and their role in the acquisition of knowledge would not have been argued in any similar manner with later modern philosophy. Their reasoning may rely on different assumptions.

If we are restricted to a certain view, what is the real instance of something? How can we hope to experience its true essence? If we are just limited to qualia (subjective qualitative experience), then this really is just opinion, or the *Way of Opinion*, with the objective reality (truth) in the background, though out of view. This may encourage scepticism, and even could be a basis for radical scepticism (the doubt that anything really exists at all). However the author does not believe that Democritus is going so far as this, but is merely pointing that which we cannot know for sure. Even while Democritus does, in effect, minimise the role of qualities in themselves and everything can be reduced to basic 'atoms and void', he does postulate that not all knowledge has to

be completely certain. He posits that there are two forms of knowledge, one in reason, which coheres with truth and is genuine, and the other the senses which are described as 'dark'. This allusion is apt, because we can still see, somewhat restrictively, in the dark, though far from perfectly. Thus sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell are limited and are not infallible, but that does not restrict them entirely. Knowledge does not equate to complete certainty. In arguing a point, one must afford oneself the ability to argue against it in order to prove its plausability. This may be the case when Democritus merely points out the limits of the senses in positing the idea of atoms and the qualities in the world that they may or may not contribute to. In this respect he recognises in himself the limited confines of his own direct sense knowledge, but points out that this is all he has to work with. The fact that atoms are not visible is not a cause to refute their existence.

In concluding we have shown the main historical influences that drove Democritus' theory. We have also explained how the recognition of such an invisible world may have been rare until then, but not since. The onset of the idea a certain reality beyond the senses did encourage new frames of reference and approach, from scientific method and theory down to everyday life, through history to the current day.

References

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