

# Democritus' "Nothing is truly real but atoms and void" statement

Post by "Cassius" of October 4, 2022 at 1:44 PM

This is the quote from chapter seven of "A Few Days In Athens" I keep forgetting:

Quote from A Few Days In Athens Chapter Seven

"Zeno, in his present speech, has rested much of the truth of his system on its expediency; I, therefore, shall do the same by mine. The door to my gardens is ever open, and my books are in the hands of the public; to enter, therefore, here, into the detail or the expounding of the principles of my philosophy, were equally out of place and out of season. 'Tell us not that that is right which admits of evil construction; that that is virtue which leaves an open gate to vice.' This is the thrust which Zeno now makes at Epicurus; and did it hit, I grant it were a mortal one. From the flavour, we pronounce of the fruit; from the beauty and the fragrance, of the flower; and in a system of morals, or of philosophy, or of whatever else, what tends to produce good we pronounce to be good, what to produce evil, we pronounce to be evil.

So for example, if someone walks into a psychiatric hospital (which I am not sure the modern world is very far from being) and announces to everyone simply and with no further explanation :

*"By convention sweet and by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention color; but in reality atoms and void."*

Or:

*"By pleasure we mean freedom from pain in the body and trouble in the mind."*

That person would be IMHO creating much more havoc and disruption than leading to any benefit to the people hearing him. And in this case there would also not be any excuse in saying that he was simply speaking the truth even at the cost of being misunderstood. These statements standing alone without explanation "leave an open gate to vice" and "admit of evil construction" because they can be taken to mean the opposite of what we think Epicurus (and probably Democritus, if he was truly happy) meant to convey.

There's a reason that witnesses in court are asked to swear to tell "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. People who don't have the full context of a statement will naturally take it out of context and in this case they would do so with disastrous result.

So to repeat I am not blaming Epicurus or Democritus for any errors of any kind. These statements in full context convey important points. And neither they nor any other philosopher can control what later generations choose to repeat from the things that they say and write.

All we can do ourselves is try to be sure that the things we say "do not admit of evil construction" or "leave an open gate to vice." Truncating the message too far can do exactly that, and that's what we are seeing in so many casual internet articles. And it's particularly important to avoid speaking obscurely when we are aware that there are legions of Stoics and Buddhists and others lingering in the outer rooms looking eagerly for ways to turn statements on their head, and to use to undermine the goal of pleasurable living rather than support it.