

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

**Post by "Cassius" of October 4, 2022 at 7:54 PM**

Excellent finds by Don and Godfrey above - this is where we can do so much more working together than alone.

And of course by now we are close to delinquent in not relating this to the "properties" and "qualities" that are discussed pretty extensively in both the letter to Herodotus and in Lucretius book one (I think), along with the "Trojan War" analogy. I think we are missing a key piece of the Epicurean worldview by not discussing this issue of properties and qualities more frequently. Its through that insight that we explain what is real to us and what, and how we divide the permanent from the temporary. Without this distinction the universe is pretty much indecipherable and it is as if the flux is indeed too fast for us to grasp anything.

This whole issue of explaining to people how to think about what is permanent and unchanging (atoms and void) versus what we should think about what we perceive with our senses (the qualities, which are not random, but which arise from the properties of the atoms and void then and there present in our contextual circumstances) is clearly a subject of first importance. If we don't understand why things in our experience change over time, but that they do not change "randomly" or "chaotically" or "supernaturally" but according to nature, then we can never have confidence in of our conclusions about anything. We will flip flop between (1) a variation of hard determinism with implications that lead to a sort of Calvinism that everything was set in motion without exception from the beginning of time, and (2) a radical skeptical / nihilistic view that nothing can be projected with any confidence whatsoever, and then we are like flotsam and jetsam tossed about helplessly in the waves.

It's only through a coherent perspective from which we can unwind the changing from the seemingly permanent that we can make headway in explaining the universe without resorting to the supernatural or throwing up our hands in total frustration.

In a way I see this much as Sedley has talked about Epicurus' basis for the swerve. Epicurus didn't need an electron microscope to validate the swerve in particular or atomism in general. Atomism is where we arrive when we observe the facts around us and when we deduce from them a mechanism which allows us to rationally explain what we see in a way that is consistent with all the evidence we see and not contradicted by anything. The swerve is where we arrive when we observe the indeterminate actions of intelligent life, and think about the way elements must interact in space. And we have no grounds to criticize and say "Epicurus was just guessing because he didn't have an electron microscope" because what Epicurus was doing was not guesswork, but logical inquiry based strictly on justifiable rules of evidence - the same way we

deduce no life after death. We don't think it's a legitimate argument in every case to require someone to go there (death, walk through a fire) and come back to tell us about it, and neither should we require that we "see" elemental particles directly before having confidence that they exist.

We never see the gods (or anything else) create something from nothing, but we see continuity and regularity in the physical world around us, so we can reason from those observations that there must be some elemental point of origin that is unchanging and eternal. It matters not whether that elemental origin is the "atom" or some "subatomic particle" or "energy" or what. What matters is that what we see, and what we do not see, impel us toward the conclusion that there is a natural elemental foundation, without good reason (based on evidence from the senses) for doubt.