

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

Post by "Cassius" of October 4, 2022 at 8:07 PM

Yep - a pretty good summary of the "slippery slope" issue:

Quote

In its moral application, the contrast clearly allows for the same ambiguity as we have identified above in the physical sphere. On the one hand, we have the thesis that, though we believe some things to be just and some shameful, nothing is in fact just or shameful. Hence, all our moral beliefs are false; this amounts to what is called an "error theory" of moral belief.⁸ On the other hand, we have the thesis that things are just, or shameful, not intrinsically, but insofar as there is an established usage of regarding them as such. These different versions open the way for more or less radical criticisms of morality. At one extreme, if all moral beliefs are false, morality would appear to have the status of a discredited theory, such as witchcraft or astrology, and a defender of morality would have the difficult task of showing why it is better to hang on to a set of false beliefs than to abandon them, and to accommodate to a better theory the phenomena that those beliefs attempted to describe.⁹ Somewhat less radically, the theory that moral characterizations are relative to our social practices seems to shift the criticism and defense of morality to the level of those practices themselves. To the extent that those practices are arbitrary, grounded in nothing more than local usage or ancestral tradition (or even the product of conscious fraud perpetrated by interested parties), the moral judgments that express them are arbitrary too; but to the extent that those practices can be seen as well-founded (e.g., as meeting fundamental human needs, or interests that are constant across a wide range of different cultures), the moral judgments in which they issue can be defended as themselves well-founded.

I definitely think Epicurus would have been very concerned to prevent an improper view of atomism from being used to rip the foundation from under ALL morality, because people need a morality they can have confidence in to organize their lives successfully.

After discarding supernatural and Platonic-based morality, he would (and apparently did) thus spend a lot of time discussing how human relations can be built on a firm foundation of recognizing pleasure and pain (and probably the anticipations and feelings) as the true basis for a science of human relationships. Once based on the right foundation, we can deduce the Epicurean view of ethics that in fact leads to happy living, and in that pursuit we deal with all the ethical issues we see mentioned in the PDs and the Vatican sayings, including justice - and in fact all the "virtues" -- after first placing them on the proper foundation. That's largely what

Cicero has preserved for us in the Torquatus narrative and what we see in Menoeceus and throughout the rest of the texts.