

The Legendary Predecessor of Epicurus

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Greetings again, Epicurean friends. This post is a talk I gave 15 years ago to an Atheist/Agnostic Club. It mentions Epicurus only in passing, but features a soulmate of Epicurus, a fellow materialist.

Democritus the Materialist

Gene Gordon

Good afternoon friends in the Rossmoor Atheist/Agnostic Club! Let me ask you today to name two of the foremost philosophers. Which ones come immediately to mind? Please tell me: who are said to be the greatest philosophers in the world? What? Yes, Socrates and Plato! Isn't that true? Are there any others even in contention for that honor?

Well, I could tell you of a dozen philosophers any one of whom is infinitely superior to Socrates and Plato combined. But I will confine myself today to one of the very greatest - Democritus.

Democritus was a supreme and sublime philosopher - a giant among the ancient Greeks! He was a leading thinker of his time and, as we shall see, of all time. But we know very little if anything about Democritus while we can never hear too much about Socrates and Plato, Plato and Socrates. Why should this be so?

Is it because philosophy is not just carefree chitchat or an airy exercise in an ivory tower? Is philosophy serious stuff - deadly serious? Yes, philosophy is literally about life and death! Philosophy is behind class struggles, civil wars, and revolutions. Philosophy takes sides. Philosophy is political and very partisan in its politics. No philosopher is above the battle and there is always a battle, isn't there?

Plato hated Democritus and wanted all his books burned. That's how fierce philosophy is! In fact, Plato would not be above burning the person of Democritus himself!

Plato, to establish his Republic, would have cast out of the city everyone over the age of ten. The ruler, he swore, must wipe the slate clean: the philosopher/king must perforce expel from society all over age ten so that he may begin with fresh young minds. Yes, he would do this forcefully, violently with the aid of hoodlums, goons - Plato's 'genteel' young friends, the 'well-bred' and wealthy darlings of the time.

Did you know this about Plato? No, we are never told this about this 'paragon' of philosophy.

But this is philosophy with a vengeance, is it not?

Plato and Democritus had fundamentally different outlooks on life - two diametrically opposed ways of understanding the world and the universe.

Plato was the epitome of *philosophical idealism*; Democritus the perfect example of *philosophical materialism*.

Ah, but straight away with these two terms we come to confusion. 'Idealism' has good connotations: it implies optimism, hopefulness, even the romantic. "So and so is an idealist; she is a great gal." 'Materialism,' on the other hand, is taken today to mean something rather mean: greediness, acquisitiveness, even avarice. "So and so is a materialist; all he does is hoard money and possessions."

But that is the common or even the vulgar usage. In philosophy 'idealism' and 'materialism' have no such implications. Idealism and materialism are *technical* terms in philosophy. In fact idealism and materialism are *ultimate* terms in philosophy in the sense that all schools of thought, all beliefs about the world and the universe tend toward idealism or materialism.

In philosophy idealism says that *idea* is primary: mind, the subjective, thought, spirit - this is where the idealist philosopher begins. Idea is fundamental: the world, the universe - all that exists - depends upon idea. Thus with Plato *forms* are the ultimate reality. Forms or perfect concepts are eternal and unchanging and are grasped, not by the senses, but by the reason. Forms are the only true reality and all else in the material world a mere imperfect and impermanent copy.

The materialist philosopher on the other hand holds *matter* to be primary: nature, the objective physical world is fundamental. All depends upon matter in motion. Thought is a property of matter. Thought is a consequence of highly organized matter. Thought cannot be separated from a brain that thinks.

Now if matter is primary then it was not created by a spirit or god or idea but always existed. Cause and effect, something always coming from something, matter in motion forever and ever or what science now calls the law of the conservation of matter: it cannot be created nor destroyed but simply changes its arrangement.

Thales, the first scientist and first philosopher - and a materialist - began the Western discussion on the true nature of matter; in the East - in India and China - there were materialist philosophers as well. 180 years after Thales this Greek discussion culminated in Leucippus and Democritus with their ingenious insight. Atoms! What an idea! A brilliant conception so long ago and yet so close to our modern understanding of chemistry... Leucippus and Democritus, materialist philosophers, positively deserve first prize for the best guess in antiquity.

Of course, their notion of atoms is rough and falls far, far short of today's knowledge. We know now atoms are not indivisible and indestructible as Democritus thought. Protons, neutrons, electrons, leptons, gluons, mesons... - so many particles make up the atom we get dizzy listing them! Hadrons, nucleons, neutrinos... The muon, the tau, and the quark... There are six different kinds of quark: up, down, charmed, strange, top, and bottom. And each quark comes in three different colors: red, blue and green. Leptons have six different "flavors." There seems to be no end to it. What's more, corresponding to every particle there exists an anti-particle! Does the microcosm of the subatomic world go on and on into infinity as does the macrocosm of the galactic world with its supergalaxies and clusters of galaxies and great sheets and walls of galaxies? Perhaps. But it is certain that Leucippus and Democritus had not the faintest notion of the inexhaustibility of the atom.

"Nonetheless," to quote a Web site, "Leucippus and Democritus came closer to the truth than anyone else in the following millennium. They developed a fully mechanistic view of nature in which every material phenomenon is seen a product of the atom collisions. Democritus' theory had no place for the notion of purpose and the intervention of gods in the workings of the world. He even held that mind and soul is formed by the movement of atoms. In this regard, his attitude was genuinely materialistic."

Sadly, Leucippus and Democritus were the last in the line of ancient materialist philosophers - and there were many - whose focus was the nature of the physical universe. After them philosophy took a major turn with Socrates and Plato to individual concerns and to mystical speculation.

But Democritus' atomic theory shines forth despite the unfortunate fact that all that we know of it comes from *critics* of that theory, such writers as Aristotle and Theophrastus. For though Democritus lived, some say, to 109 years and devoted all of his time to science and philosophy, to study, to teaching and writing - he wrote 60 or as many as 90 works some say - only a few fragments of his voluminous writing remain and they deal with ethics.

Plato in his works never once mentioned Democritus. Plato disliked the ideas of Democritus so much that he resolved - since he could not burn his books - to kill the work of Democritus with disregard.

But the brilliance of Democritus can never be diminished. He was the first philosopher to realize that what we call the Milky Way is the light of stars - suns like ours - very far away. Other philosophers argued against this, even Aristotle. Democritus was among the first to propose that the universe contains many worlds, some of them inhabited.

Democritus traveled much - to Babylon, to Egypt, Ethiopia, and possibly to India. What kind of man was he? Let an anecdote told about him give us some idea: "Hermippus wrote that when Democritus was nearing his end, his sister was upset because his death could prevent her from worshipping at the three-day festival of Thesmophoria. Democritus told her not to worry, and kept himself alive by inhaling the fresh smell of baked loaves until the end of the festival, when he relinquished his life without pain." Hipparchus wrote that Democritus was then in his 109th

year.

Democritus, called “The Laughing Philosopher,” taught that the true end of life is happiness to be accomplished through self serenity. Cheerfulness was the highest good, achieved through moderation and - most essential - freedom from fear. There were no gods to be afraid of. This is what so distressed Plato - and, of course, the church and the state for two thousand years now.

Yes, for many centuries Socrates and Plato have been elevated while Democritus has been disregarded and disparaged. Democritus and Epicurus were the two greatest philosophers among the Greeks. But the moneyed rulers of society have very good reason for wanting us to revere Plato and Socrates and to be ignorant of Democritus and Epicurus. The two former philosophers would steer us down a very reactionary channel - in Plato’s case to actual fascism. The latter two would - as the name Democritus itself implies - guide us in the paths of freedom and equality.

Our new friend from Walnut Creek who attended our meeting a few weeks ago - I forgot his name, darn it - described himself as a “fundamentalist atheist.” By this he means that he goes back to fundamentals, to the Greeks, the materialists.

And I do too. The essential thing about Democritus is not his source for the idea of the atom. No doubt he got it from his teacher Leucippus. Where Leucippus got it from we don’t know. What’s important is that both Democritus and Leucippus taught that these atoms are material entities, that their number is infinite, and that they exist through all eternity. The fundamental fact is that Democritus was a philosophical materialist and that materialism - philosophical and scientific - is the only solid basis for atheism. Thank you...

