

Indivisibility And Its Significance

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quite likely that he wanted to save the doctrine from the criticisms, notably by Aristotle, offered against the first generation of atomists: Democritus and Leucippus.¹¹ It is clear, in any case, that Epicurus wished to keep the doctrinal core of atomism, which he shared with Democritus, in the face of criticism from those who preferred to think of matter as continuous, of whom Aristotle is a leading example. As we shall see, Epicurus did not remain content merely to restate wholesale Democritus' view. If he is Democritus' heir, he is so in the sense that he takes up a number of *problems* and offers his own original response. The difficulties produced by Aristotle against the idea of reducing bodies to atoms play an evidently central role in this process. In this light, we may suppose that the first historical impetus for Epicurean physics was the preservation of and support for a discontinuous conception of material composition: to identify the primary material elements and affirm that these atoms are the ultimate indivisible components of matter. However, Aristotle was not content in his attack on Democritus merely to reject atoms in favour of the continuum; he also denounced the general explanation of phenomena which – in his eyes – could not properly account for generation. For Aristotle, on the one hand, the first atomists explained neither the motion nor the organization of matter since they knew only the 'material cause' and not the 'efficient', 'formal' and 'final' causes. On the other hand, their notion of matter, because it consists in juxtaposed existents incapable of intermingling, makes it impossible to understand how a higher-level unity might be produced. It is in effect impossible to understand, according to Aristotle, how a genuine unity can be produced from a plurality of elements, such as the atoms, which cannot cause one another to alter and cannot therefore produce change. Generation, after all, is a kind of change. And unity thus produced is merely apparent.¹² It is possible that the atomists, or Democritus at least, had candidly admitted that the generation of composites was merely apparent since their components – the atoms – was absolutely unalterable. However, as we shall see, that

responding to Aristotle's