

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

Post by "Cassius" of October 3, 2022 at 9:17 AM

This is a thread for discussion Democritus' position that nothing is truly real except atoms and void statement, especially in context with Diogenes of Oinoanda fragment 7:

Quote from Diogenes of Oinoanda

Fr. 7

Even Democritus erred in a manner unworthy of himself when he said that atoms alone among existing things have true reality, while everything else exists by convention. For, according to your account, Democritus, it will be impossible for us even to live, let alone discover the truth, since we shall be unable to protect ourselves from either fire or slaughter or [any other force].

Post by "Don" of October 4, 2022 at 7:35 AM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

In Greek:

Quote

νόμωι (γάρ φησι) γλυκὸ καὶ νόμωι πικρόν, νόμωι θερμόν, νόμωι ψυχρόν, νόμωι χροίη, ἔτεῆι δὲ ἄτομα καὶ κενόν (Tetralogies of Thrasyllus, 9; Sext. Emp. adv. math. VII 135)

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?do...entry=no%2Fmos2>

νόμωι "by custom, conventionally" is an interesting word to use, and I'm not sure I completely disagree with Democritus. We are all - everything - is literally temporary arrangements of atoms and void. That doesn't mean we're not "real". If one drills down far enough, you end up with atoms and void. But through our arrangements of atoms, we interact with the world, each

other. Epicurus himself or Lucretius said atoms don't have color or smell or taste, but arrangements give rise to color and smell and taste.

Edit: I suppose I should also include *ἔτεῃ δὲ ἄτομα καὶ κενόν* "for, in reality, atoms and void." *ἔτεῃ* does mean "in reality." In fact, LSJ uses Democritus's quote in its definition.

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, ἔτεός](#)

Post by “Don” of October 4, 2022 at 9:16 AM

[Lucretius, On the Nature of Things, Book 3 \(English Text\)](#)

On the Nature of Things, Book 3:

In considering these things, [370]

you cannot accept at all the theory

in the revered views of great Democritus

that individual primary particles

of body and of soul are put in place,

alternating one after the other,

and shape our limbs, holding them together.(12)

(12) Democritus (c. 460 BC-c.370 BC), a Greek philosopher, is credited as the first to propose a detailed atomic theory. Democritus claimed that atoms of body and soul were equal in number and united in pairs throughout the human body

Post by “Don” of October 4, 2022 at 9:37 AM

FYI...

[Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, BOOK IX, Chapter 7. DEMOCRITUS\(? 460-357 B.C.\)](#)

An excerpt is below. Both the similarities and differences between Democritus and Epicurus are intriguing.

The third phrase interested me though:

"everything else is merely thought to exist."

τὰ δ' ἄλλα πάντα νενομίσθαι

That last word νενομίσθαι is simply a verb form of the same word used in the Democritus quote above: is by custom, is commonly used, etc. So Diogenes corroborates the reference by a Sextus Empiricus.

[Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, νομίζω](#)

Excerpt:

Such was the life of our philosopher.

[44] His opinions are these. The first principles of the universe are atoms and empty space ; everything else is merely thought to exist. The worlds are unlimited ; they come into being and perish. Nothing can come into being from that which is not nor pass away into that which is not. Further, the atoms are unlimited in size and number, and they are borne along in the whole universe in a vortex, and thereby generate all composite things--fire, water, air, earth ; for even these are conglomerations of given atoms. And it is because of their solidity that these atoms are impassive and unalterable. The sun and the moon have been composed of such smooth and spherical masses [i.e. atoms], and so also the soul, which is identical with reason. We see by virtue of the impact of images upon our eyes.

[45] All things happen by virtue of necessity, the vortex being the cause of the creation of all things, and this he calls necessity. The end of action is tranquillity, which is not identical with pleasure, as some by a false interpretation have understood, but a state in which the soul continues calm and strong, undisturbed by any fear or superstition or any other emotion. This he calls well-being and many other names. The qualities of things exist merely by convention ; in nature there is nothing but atoms and void space. These, then, are his opinions.

Post by "Cassius" of October 4, 2022 at 10:27 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

everything else is merely thought to exist.

Lots of definitional issues that play into all this and have to be clarified in order to avoid the many slippery slopes. Maybe one of the threshold ones is to get a grip on "exist." We tend to think that that which does not exist is of no relevance to us, and is purely imaginary even.

But what matters to us, according to Epicurus, is what we perceive through the senses (and also through the feelings and anticipations (?)).

So if we define "exist" to mean "has a permanent and unchanging nature" then truly nothing "exists" except atoms and void.

But if we define "exist" to mean things we can see, touch, taste, hear, and smell (and maybe what we can perceive through anticipations and the feelings of pain and pleasure) then the world around us absolutely qualifies as "existing" even though it is made up of atoms and void.

So we have this "scientific" vs "common understanding" issue again. It's perfectly proper to define the word "existing" in either way - subatomic scientists can use it one way, and therapists and real-world philosophers can use it another way. But woe to those who mix the meanings, and lead ordinary people to think that they don't really "exist" just because they themselves and human beings don't have a permanent and unchanging nature!

Was Democritus speaking purely scientifically, or was he wandering into "ethics" and suggesting that people shouldn't think in our world that anything really exists excepts atoms and void? Was the slipping down to the slope to Stoicism and thinking that we could through willpower make all our troubles go away by telling ourselves that our bodies and ourselves "aren't real?"

I tend to doubt Democritus himself was doing that, but I strongly suspect that others were making that argument, and Epicurus saw a need to take a stand and affirm to everyone that our lives demand that the things our senses reveal to us do in fact really exist-- and that they are indeed all we have.

So when it is said that "everything else is merely THOUGHT to exist" or "exists by convention" (which implies "consensus?") I can see Epicurus having a huge problem with that perspective as already over the ledge and halfway down the cliff toward radical skepticism and "nihilism."

But right or wrong as to these initial interpretations, all of this shows the huge importance of epistemology and a science of knowledge such as discussed by Epicurus (Herodotus) and Lucretius (mostly book 4).

Post by "Don" of October 4, 2022 at 11:14 AM

For consideration:

[Democritus \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

This has a good section of the implications (and possible misinterpreting) of Democritus's "only atoms and void are real."

Also a thought on the "slippery slope to nihilism" if by nihilism one means "the general mood of despair at a perceived pointlessness of existence or arbitrariness of human principles and social institutions." (Wikipedia) Democritus was known as the "laughing philosopher" so he obviously had a reputation of being of good cheer. I think this stems directly from his "only atoms and void are real" perspective. In the words of The Beatles:

Quote

Nothing is real,

And nothing to get hung about.

"Strawberry Fields Forever"

It seems to me that Democritus was saying, "We're all just ultimately atoms and void. All those problems you worry about, all that fame you're chasing, all that will ultimately dissolve into atoms and void! Just chill out and laugh!"

Post by "Joshua" of October 4, 2022 at 12:29 PM

I don't find much to disagree with in what [Don](#) has written, and I think that those who imagine a necessary relation between materialism and nihilism are never going to be impressed by any amount of space we put between Epicurus and Democritus on this point.

Quote

So when it is said that "everything else is merely THOUGHT to exist" or "exists by convention" (which implies "consensus?")

I certainly don't think this is quite what Democritus was driving at. Merely that these other aspects of nature are contingent on or emergent from matter. "Sweet" exists at the point of interaction between sense receptors on the tongue and one of a number of chemical compounds. When we say "it's sweet", I think what we really mean is "it tastes sweet [to me]".

At this point we ask not the philosophical question but the Darwinian one; why do our bodies register sweetness as a reward?

And maybe now is a good time to remind everyone about the great and glorious [Mochus](#)! This Mochus, the alleged father of ancient atomism, was considered by several early English scientists to have been one and the same with Moses himself; and by this circuitous route they make God out to be the father of Atomism, and they further connect the Greek word atom with the Hebrew name Adam, the "first beginnings". Does atomism lead to nihilism or not? Per usual, they are trying to have it both ways.

Post by “Cassius” of October 4, 2022 at 12:38 PM

I can agree with that for those of us who are confident of our understanding of the universe and the general desirability of life and the pursuit of pleasurable living, but I think there is only a knife blade distance between that attitude and one of general despair, which is probably planted in the first place by religion and the false views of life promoted even by platonic-style humanism which promotes there being an absolute "good.". A lot of people are so "corrupted" by culture and education that they are easy prey to the destructive interpretations.

So I am agreeing with your point, and hoping that it too applies to Democritus as a laughing philosopher, but even laughter itself can be caustic and despairing in some circumstances.

Wow this is very similar to the possibility of misinterpreting "absence of pain" as also a door to nihilism.

I doubt that blame for this lies with either Democritus or Epicurus. It lies with the fact that this is not a party game and there are lots of people who will take ones words and distort and misrepresent them for their own purposes.

Like that part of the speech in AFDIA talks about...the danger of leaving an open door to vice... There is no way to keep the message accurate over time without real living people who understand it continuing to promote it over time and protect it from misrepresentaton.

Post by “Don” of October 4, 2022 at 1:19 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

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Well put, [Joshua](#) ! 👍 👍

[Quote from Joshua](#)

And maybe now is a good time to remind everyone about the great and glorious Mochus! This Mochus, the alleged father of ancient atomism, was considered by several early English scientists to have been one and the same with Moses himself; and by this circuitous route they make God out to be the father of Atomism, and they further connect the Greek word atom with the Hebrew name Adam, the "first beginnings". Does atomism lead to nihilism or not? Per usual, they are trying to have it both ways.

😂 LOL! I was completely unaware of "great and glorious Mochus"! By Zeus, those Christians will co-opt anything!!

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 their 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 other 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.

Post by "waterholic" of October 4, 2022 at 2:07 PM

To my untrained eye the position that only atoms and void exist must be taken in the context of the times when the prevailing understanding of the universe consisted of the four key elements: water, earth, fire and air as well as the distinct expectation of spirit living outside the material realm.

Both Lucretius and Democritus agree on the fact that only atoms and void truly exist and the spirit too consists of atoms, but in the Lucretian understanding "spiritual" atoms are only a very small proportion of human body.

Interestingly, this again reminds me the ever present issue of small vs. big, element vs composite. Just as swerve creates randomness in the micro world, yet in the macro world many things are perfectly predictable, in the same way only atoms and void in the micro world are combined to create the objective reality, which can be sensed (again due to the atoms that are "coarse" for example).

Hard to imagine how one can arrive from all of the above to nihilism. Yet, I trust this is a common problem?

A final note, Lucretius too refers to certain images or perceptions that appear not to "exist". Perhaps this is similar to what Democritus had in mind?

Post by "Cassius" of October 4, 2022 at 2:50 PM

[Quote from waterholic](#)

Both Lucretius and Democritus agree on the fact that only atoms and void truly exist and the spirit too consists of atoms

Given what I write below I would be very hesitant to state the proposition that way - (that they both took the same position that only atoms and void truly exist). I would say that Democritus took that position but Epicurus did not, as he was working from a different perspective of what it means to "exist."

[Quote from waterholic](#)

A final note, Lucretius too refers to certain images or perceptions that appear not to "exist".

See I see both of those comments as relating to the extremely important issue of what we should take "exist" to mean.

If you are talking about dreams, someone correct me if I am wrong but I recall Epicurus/Lucretius as specifically saying that they do "exist" in that they have real impact upon us. But again that hinges on the meaning given to "exist."

So given the statement in Diogenes of Oinoanda my view would be that Epicurus took the very strong position that we should consider the world around us actually does "exist" even though it is ultimately made up of atoms and void, which alone have eternal and unchanging properties.

I know I may sound like I am being nitpicky but I don't think this point is minor, and thus its inclusion on the inscription. The entire "Canon of Truth" seems to be devoted to allowing us to define that which we perceive as "true" and there is only a thin shade of meaning (IMHO) between "true" and "real." If we can validate it with the canon of truth, my interpretation would be that Epicurus would say that it "exists" or at the very least that it is "true" which in this context I would take to be almost exactly the same thing (and maybe exactly the same thing).

Post by “Cassius” of October 4, 2022 at 3:07 PM

I meant to add this earlier:

1) [Joshua](#) do you have a cite for the precise way you [quoted](#) " By convention sweet and by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention color; but in reality atoms and void."

I like that version as making a very clear point, but maybe that is someone's interpretation?

2) Also I know one of the first comments here was Don's "I'm not sure I completely disagree with Democritus." We then proceeded to discuss the details of what we think is correct. But we shouldn't skip over the question: "What point do we think Diogenes of Oinoanda was arguing?" Was Diogenes accusing Democritus of tending toward skepticism, and linking it to the disagreement with Aristotle as to the flux being too fast to perceive any details, and therefore being the slope to skepticism? Or does anyone see another possible point? If so, what?

I think one of the best ways to keep ourselves on track in studying Epicurus is for us to be sure we can articulate the point that was being made in the text before we decide if we agree or disagree with it. This is one of those texts that's probably not entirely clear on its face, and we need to be sure we all think it means the same thing.

Post by “Cassius” of October 4, 2022 at 4:05 PM

This thread has me thinking back to what I think is very close to one of the (or the) ultimate points.

Epicurus seems to think that there is probably no greater plague on humanity than "otherworldiness." PD1 denounces the idea of a supernatural otherworldiness. PD2 denounces

the idea of a heaven or hell otherworldiness. In emphasizing pleasure and pain, PDs 3 and 4 establishes the foundation for seeing that neither virtue nor platonic ideals nor anything other than the pleasure and pain of this world are of concern to us.

From that perspective, everything that focuses the mind on the importance of this life in this world is beneficial to us. Everything that distracts into thinking that this world is an illusion, or that minimizes the importance to us of this world, is detrimental.

It is certainly true from every atomistic perspective that only atoms and void have eternal unchanging existence. But we as humans are not eternal and unchanging beings. What matters to *us* is the world we have as we perceive it around us.

If a perspective about atomism assists us in a full understanding of our place in the universe and the way our world works, and allows us to tune our actions to live more happily, then it beneficial to our well-being and important for us to understand and remember.

If a perspective about atomism leaves out the fact that we are mortal and changing beings, and implies that our existence is somehow of lesser rank or less important than the atoms themselves, then that perspective is destructive to our well-being, and I would expect Epicurus to denounce that incomplete perspective just as he denounces supernatural religion or false claims of life after death.

Post by “Don” of October 4, 2022 at 4:12 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

If a perspective about atomism leaves out the fact that we are mortal and changing beings, and implies that our existence is somehow of lesser rank or less important than the atoms themselves, then that perspective is destructive to our well-being, and I would expect Epicurus to denounce it just as he denounces supernatural religion or false claims of life after death

Okay, now I can see where you're coming from. While I can agree with Democritus (and Epicurus) in that atoms are the only "immortal" unchanging thing in the universe (for the sake of current argument), one can't stop at *that* realization. It's only half the picture. Got it. 👍

Post by “Joshua” of October 4, 2022 at 4:51 PM

Quote

1) Joshua do you have a cite for the precise way you quoted " By convention sweet and by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention color; but in reality atoms and void."

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νόμωι (γάρ φησι) γλυκὸν καὶ νόμωι πικρὸν, νόμωι θερμόν, νόμωι ψυχρόν, νόμωι χροίη, ἔτεῃ δὲ ἄτομα καὶ κενόν (Tetralogies of Thrasyllus, 9; Sext. Emp. adv. math. VII 135)

Sweet exists by convention, bitter by convention, colour by convention; atoms and Void [alone] exist in reality. (trans. Freeman 1948)[1], p. 92.

By convention sweet is sweet, bitter is bitter, hot is hot, cold is cold, color is color; but in truth there are only atoms and the void. (trans. Durant 1939)[2], Ch. XVI, §II, p. 353; citing C. Bakewell, Sourcebook in Ancient Philosophy, New York, 1909, "Fragment O" (Diels), p. 60

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Post by "Joshua" of October 4, 2022 at 4:55 PM

Quote

'Tell us not that that is right which admits of evil construction; that that is virtue which leaves an open gate to vice.'

Quote

VS 29. To speak frankly as I study nature I would prefer to speak in oracles that which is of advantage to all men even though it be understood by none, rather than to conform to popular opinion and thus gain the constant praise that comes from the many.

A rock and a hard place?

Post by "Don" of October 4, 2022 at 5:02 PM

[Quote from Joshua](#)

Quote

1) Joshua do you have a cite for the precise way you quoted " By convention sweet and by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention color; but in reality atoms and void."

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Display More

[Democritus \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

Quote

Texts

The standard scholarly edition of the ancient evidence concerning the views of the Presocratic philosophers is Diels-Kranz' work (cited as DK): H. Diels and W. Kranz, Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker, 6th edition, Berlin: Weidmann, 1951. A fuller presentation of the evidence for Democritus, with commentary in Russian: Solomon Luria, Demokrit, Leningrad, 1970. English translation and commentary (cited as Taylor 1999a): C.C.W. Taylor, The Atomists: Leucippus and Democritus. Fragments, A Text and Translation with Commentary, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999a. See also the report on

Democritus in: Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers (Loeb Classical Library), R.D. Hicks (trans.), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925, book 9.34-49.

"[Democritus] famously denies that perceptible qualities other than shape and size (and, perhaps, weight) really exist in the atoms themselves: one direct quotation surviving from Democritus claims that 'by convention sweet and by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention color; but in reality atoms and void' (DK 68B9, trans. Taylor 1999a)."

Post by "Cassius" of October 4, 2022 at 5:05 PM

HA!

1 - Thanks Joshua for the cite.

2 - Yes it is sort of a dilemma isn't it? I would think that also relates to the issue of speaking publicly in crowds, etc, and the general issue of speaking clearly. If you know the people you are talking to will not understand or accept your message, do you even talk to them? That's the reason (well, one of them) I don't invite myself onto the local nursing home circuit to tell all the 90 year olds that they have been wrong all their lives in religion and that their last breath will in fact be their last. 😊

But really the important point in this discussion I think is that I do think Epicurus meant that he would speak fully and completely, even though it might not be understood, and that he would in fact strive to make himself as clear as possible. The issue here is not that these clips are incorrect in and of themselves - they are not. But they are not the "whole truth" that is relevant to the issue, and if we know that by speaking only part of the truth that the statement we make will be misconstrued, then I would think that we would strive to be as clear as possible and tell the whole truth that is less likely to be misinterpreted. But of course the caveat I have been trying to include is that at least in the case of Epicurus I feel like he did in fact speak the whole truth, and that the rest of it has been lost to us (for reasons that Cicero and other opponents would be to blame for). In the case of Democritus I presume it is more likely that Epicurus had the full texts of Democritus, so if the Epicureans felt like he needed to be criticized on that point, there might be more reason to defer to their judgment, since they probably knew more about what Democritus said than we know about what Epicurus said.

Post by "Don" of October 4, 2022 at 5:06 PM

Also..

https://faculty.umb.edu/adam_beresford/courses/phil_310_08/reading_taylor_democritus.pdf

A solid examination of that quote starts this paper.

Post by "Godfrey" of October 4, 2022 at 5:35 PM

"By convention [or, "custom"], sweet; by convention, bitter; by convention, hot; by convention, cold; by convention, color; but in reality, atoms and void.64 (Democritus DK 68B9)"

This is in Philosophy Before Socrates Second Edition by Richard D. McKirahan.

"DK" refers to "H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th ed., Berlin, 1951 and later editions. The standard edition of the Presocratic Philosophers. Each Presocratic is assigned a number. The fragments of each Presocratic are also assigned numbers preceded by the letter "B." Thus, the number for Heraclitus is 22, and Heraclitus's fragment 101 is referred to as DK 22B101. Testimonia are likewise identified by numbers preceded by the letter "A." The DK references are used widely in books and articles on the Presocratics."

So this quote above would appear to be a fragment directly from Democritus. This particular version has nothing that conflicts with Epicurus as far as I can tell.

Post by "Don" of October 4, 2022 at 5:53 PM

Okay, found it:

[Die fragmente der Vorsokratiker, griechisch und deutsch, von Hermann Diels. v.2.](#)

I was able to use one of the Greek words to track down the quote in Diels book.

P. 25 (digitized page 39) gives it a cited by Galen in his "Elements according to Hippocrates." There appears to be more context with that in the Greek.

P. 60 (74) cites Sextus Empiricus's "Against the Mathematicians" (that's cited in the Wikipedia article)

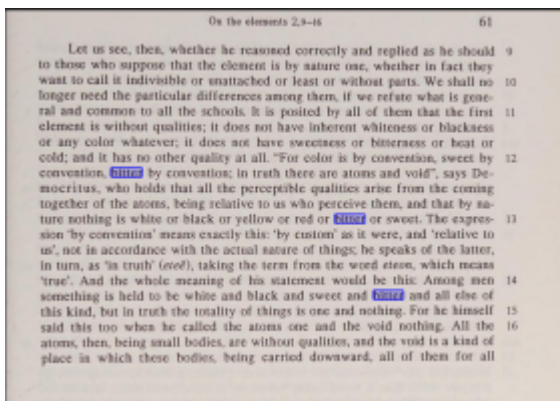
The two has slightly different orders of the characteristics considered conventional:

Galen: χροη (color), γλυκυ (sweet), πικρον (bitter), but in reality atoms and void.

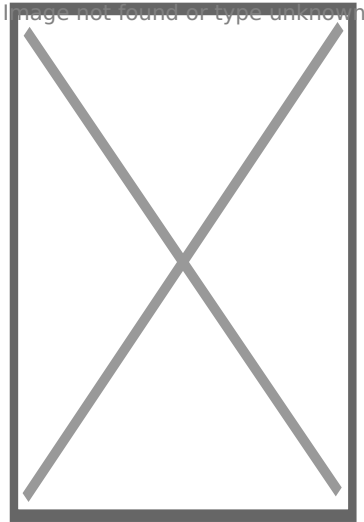
Sextus: γλυκυ (sweet), πικρον (bitter), θερμον (hot), ψυχρον (cold), χροη (color), but in reality atoms and void.

The Sextus citation sets up a nice dichotomy arrangement, but whose to say which is "correctly" quoting Democritus?

Post by “Don” of October 4, 2022 at 6:11 PM



Here's the section where it appears in Galen. I borrowed the book for an hour from Internet Archive, so it's available for anyone to download for that amount of time with a free account:



[On the elements according to Hippocrates : Galen : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

236 pages ; 25 cm
archive.org

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.

Post by "Cassius" of October 4, 2022 at 8:00 PM

As to that article Don cited last, sounds like our back and forth on Democritus is not entirely different than the different interpretations of Democritus advanced by Sextus Empiricus vs that of Galen.

Quote

"Galen is, then, an objective relativist, who holds, contrary to Sextus's view that it is false to call an apple red, that the apple really is red, only not intrinsically, but in relation to perceivers."

Sounds like the way to interpret Democritus in a pro-Epicurus way is through Galen, while Sextus seems to be happier with the "slippery slope to nihilism" side. 😊 (If Sextus is in fact saying that it is "wrong" to call an apple red.)

If one says that it is false to call an apple red, then (leaving aside issues of language and definitions) that is a statement that many people of common sense would interpret as a direct challenge to the reliability of the senses on which Epicurean philosophy is built. Epicurus could not allow such an opinion to go unchallenged.

Also:

Quote

Democritus may then be taken (following Sextus) as maintaining that things are not in fact flavored or colored, but are merely (falsely) called so (because that is how they seem to be), or (following Galen) as maintaining that things are flavored, colored, etc., not intrinsically, but insofar as that is how they seem to us and, consequently, how we (conventionally) describe them. It may be that Democritus did not in fact distinguish these two theses, which are not in any case sharply distinguished from one another, since it is frequently disputed how far something's being generally regarded as F, or called F, is constitutive of its actually being F.

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

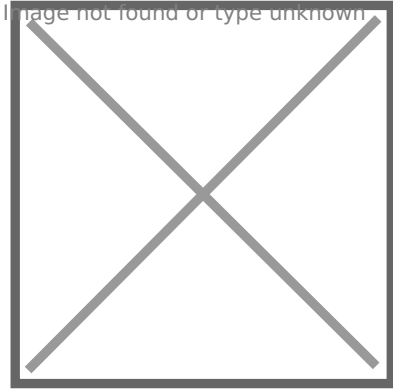
them as such. These different versions open the way for more or less radical criticisms of morality. At one extreme, if all moral beliefs are false, morality would appear to have the status of a discredited theory, such as witchcraft or astrology, and a defender of morality would have the difficult task 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.

Post by "Cassius" of October 5, 2022 at 7:58 PM

Not sure at the moment that this hasn't already been posted in this thread, and I haven't had time to re-read it, but this David Sedley article is probably very relevant to this discussion:



[Sextus Empiricus and the atomist criteria of truth](#)

Sextus Empiricus and the atomist criteria of truth

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