

## Democritus as a moral and political philosopher

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**Nikolaos Tagkoulis:** *You recently published a translation of Democritus's fragments, accompanied by an extensive commentary, with a special focus on his political and moral ideas. Although better known for his atomic theory, Democritus was an encyclopedic spirit: he studied mathematics, music, astronomy, cosmology, logic, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics etc. In a sense, he is a forerunner of Aristotle. Thus, I would characterize him as a bridge between two significant generations of ancient Greek philosophy: the so-called pre-Socratic tradition (Parmenides, Heraclitus) and the Socratic (Plato, Aristotle). It seems that he paved the way for the new generation of philosophers, after confronting the Eleatic controversies.*

**Elias Vavouras:** It is true that the Parmenidean ontology leaves no space for theoretical contradiction in its aspiring skeptics. It draws an emphatic dividing line between existence and non-existence and allows only the certainty of the mind to identify the possibility of the existence: "Mind and existence are exactly the same thing". However, Democritus manages to "fight" the well-fortified Parmenidean argument

by hitting it right at the base of its development: For Democritus, the ontological problem of being and non-being seems to have never been posed. If atoms are the being, the material nature of the creation of things, and vacuum the non-being, that is, something that does not exist, but is absolutely necessary to justify the movement of the atoms in space, the ontological problem of separation of existence and non-existence does not exist anymore.

**N. T.:** *The work of Democritus, like most pre-Socratics, has been preserved in fragmentary form, via narratives of other authors, a fact that creates various interpretive problems. We are not absolutely sure which excerpts are authentic and which to other authors. How easy is it to reconstruct a complete coherent moral theory from the surviving evidence?*

**E. V.:** Although for the whole spectrum of Democritean philosophy we can only rely on fragmentary texts, nevertheless his philosophical view does not seem to fall into contradictions in the end. The description of the functions of the material nature of the human body

and of the soul is in line with the development of moral and political philosophy. The domination of the rational element is the necessary condition of the natural correctness-health (or as Democritus would call it *symmetry* or *bliss*), the correct moral choice through the art of measuring between pleasures, but also the development of political *concord* under the domination of the rational citizens over the irrational.

**N. T.:** *According to Democritus, is ethics and politics mutually complementary?*

**E. V.:** Democritus in his political view is completely consistent with the previous view of human nature. Just as in the human materially structured organism the mind-soul should be the kinetic cause of the body and make rational decisions with the aim of establishing the proper natural order in the human whole, so rational political rulers must be in an unquestionable position of principle in civil society by rationally determining through the scientific knowledge of human nature, which they possess, the right measure between exaggeration and lack in human political things by establishing the correct natural order and making their rationality a *concord* of the overall political creation.

**N. T.:** *What's Democritus' notion of the divine?*

**E. V.:** He does not deny the existence of gods. According to him,

gods have a material nature, which approaches the mental composition of the soul. The nature of the gods is similar to the nature of the human soul, which is identified with the human mind, that is, it consists of spherical, thin atoms, similar to those of fire. The gods were born of celestial fire and their nature is a model of celestial fire. From the divine material beings are emitted forms of images, which are perceived by the human senses and stimulate the mind. Democritean gods are material idols, who approach people either causing them harm or good. In the first case they are idols unlucky, while in the second they are lucky. The divine images are supernatural in size, difficult to wear due to their higher quality composition, but in the end they succumb to the inviolable law of decay that characterizes every material body. Also, these divine idols have the ability to communicate with people through visions and voices and reveal the future to them, although this function of divine revelation is not satisfactorily explained by the philosopher.

**N. T.:** *Scholars converge on the view that Democritus was not personally concerned with religion, yet in his theory there is a strong presence of the divine in cosmic creation. Is there any inconsistency between his ideas about the divine and his personal convictions?*

**E. V.:** Democritus denies god as the cause of the world and as the omnipotent being who can determine

the flow of everything. God, if he exists, is not the first cause, he is not the creator of everything, he does not provide any provision for anything and he is subject to the eternal laws of state necessity, like any other material body in the world. Democritus leaves no place for the existence of a supreme spiritual being.

**N. T.:** *Since man is a natural being and subject to the influence of "necessity" (universal principle), is there a connection between his moral perceptions and his atomic theory? Taylor seems to support the opposite view<sup>1</sup>. Do you agree with this interpretation?*

**E. V.:** Although, at first glance, Democritus' atomic theory does not seem to be related to his moral view, the final conclusion is that atomic theory is dynamically present in the moral-political field. Both *bliss* (*eudaimonia*) on a moral level and *concord* (*omonoia*) on a political level are due to the right order of the atoms of the human soul. If one studies in depth the moral and political passages, it is difficult to prove that they are not related to the necessity of the movement of the atoms.

**N. T.:** *How close and how far is Democritus' theory of bliss (eudaimonia) from that of Aristotle? Does the term "moderation" allow us to identify it with "measure" (mesotita)?*

**E. V.:** Democritus believes that human bliss (*eudaimonia*) derives from the orderly structure of the

human soul. The order of the atoms of the soul is the necessary condition of a properly structured character, who can judge rationally and chooses the right *measure* between exaggeration and lack in every aspect of his life. In this sense, the order of human life is a consequence of order of the human soul. Thus, Aristotelian theory of *measure* as a rational choice between exaggeration and lack between pleasures as a precondition of virtue is directly related or at least moves in parallel with Democritus' view of the art of *measure*.

**N. T.:** *Does the pursuit of bliss involve the concept of self-awareness?*

**E. V.:** Before moral action there is self-awareness, in order to proceed morally, one must know its special nature and realize that the only truth of everything is the material atoms and the vacuum. The wise man is the one who possesses the knowledge of natural right and, unlike the many ignorant people, has the ability to transform the self-awareness of his constituency into moral behavior. The right choice of pleasures that promote happiness consists work of the rationality who can determine the right measure.

**N. T.:** *The work of the pre-Socratic philosophers seems strikingly modern in the way that they laid the foundation for a scientific way of thinking. It is, therefore, not surprising that Marx is preoccupied with their work. Marx's doctoral dissertation focused on the differen-*

*ces between Democritean and Epicurean philosophy of nature. In which sense does this study anticipate his later work?*

**E. V.:** Under these interpretive circumstances, Democritus is a genuinely Greek political thinker of *rationalism, measure and order* and is closer to Plato and Aristotle than to Marx or Castoriades or any other contemporary political thinker. The classification of Democritus in the Greek world is due to the side of the *natural right* and of the *measure*. When there is a natural measure of things, politics must act on the basis of this metering art. The human nature of political society limits political governance, because political correctness is inherent in human nature. Politics is the science of the human natural measure, it is the science which, through rationalism, can establish natural order in the political whole and lead it to bliss.

**N. T.:** *One of the main foci of your research is the political philosophy of Hobbes. What affinities do you find concerning the mechanistic explanation of human behavior in the context of the emergence of social life.*

**E. V.:** According to Hobbes, the knowledge of the first natural principles, the knowledge of the cause of the creation of nature is essentially

useless for man, as long as it does not affect the course of his life. Humans are elements of the physical order and their action is a link in the chain of events and happenings that take place, following endless causal paths, in a mechanically regulated universe. In the same way atomic natural science, although “indifferent” to the discovery of the primary creative principles by attributing cosmic creation to random or automatic, nevertheless introduces a strict causality to all other natural realizations, which dominates every kinetic manifestation of the natural world: no there is a natural event, a natural change, without a cause, every event is due to a cause, scientifically discoverable and logically explainable. Hobbes, as the founder of the idea of the social contract, could not have argued accordingly without the ideas of Democritus – but also of Epicurus afterwards, as well as of Lucretius derived from those of Democritus – his transition from catastrophic pre-political condition to the blissful political condition, but also Abderite’s theory of the primacy of political art, which can establish *rationality and concord* in the human political community. Therefore, we should not see Democritus in the shadow of Hobbes or Plato, but consider him as an equal philosophical thinker and their precondition in the history of philosophy.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Taylor, C.C.W., 2007, ‘Nomos and Physis in Democritus and Plato,’ *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 24 (2): 1–20.