Democritus of Abdera (ca. 460–360 B.C.)

Nothing occurs at random, but everything for a reason and by necessity.

Leucippus

Truth is in the depths.

Democritus

Personality – Life

In contrast to Anaxagoras, who was reputed to be dour of countenance, Democritus would be dubbed the ‘Laughing Philosopher’ “because of his inclination to laugh at human vanity” 68A2 But he would also be styled ‘the Wise one’, 68A2 since he was the last -and one of the most significant- of the great Presocratics. He was born around 460, B.C., of well-to-do parents, in Abdera, Thrace. An intense and restless spirit, he would strive even as a young man to gain knowledge of other civilizations, investing his inheritance in visits to Egypt, Babylon, Persia, and possibly Ethiopia and India – lands where “he gleaned wisdom from people of all walks of life”. 68A2 He was the pupil of Leucippus – a decisive factor in the development of his atomic theory. Of modest and dignified demeanor, he would return finally to his place of birth to devote himself to teaching and writing. Of serene and sunny disposition, he encountered life with a patient and cheerful spirit. It is said that “among the wise who seek to quench their rage, Heraclitus did so with tears, Democritus with humor . . . He found each meeting with a new acquaintance to be an occasion for merriment”. 68A21

It is said that contact with things gives us knowledge, whereas distance from them gives us wisdom. According to an unconfirmed story, Democritus “blinded himself because he believed that his thoughts and the insights of his spirit pondering the laws of nature would be deeper and more precise, were he freed from the grip of the visual and the impediments imposed by sight”. 68A2; 68A22

He died in extreme old age, probably beyond the age of one hundred. Democritus’s brilliant intellect was steeped in the widest knowledge from all the domains of thought: mathematics, physics, grammar, logic, ethics, theology, aesthetics, history, education, art. He devoted his life entirely to study and research, and “he remarked that he would prefer discovering the cause of something to being King of the Persians”. 68B118 He was, as Zeller and Nestle put it, a “universal intellect that encompassed all the knowledge of his time in his philosophy, and in this regard can be compared with Aristotle alone”. 1

1 E. Zeller and W. Nestle, Grundriss der Geschichte der Griechischen Philosophie, 82.

Writings

He would be honored as ‘all-knowing’ Democritus, who broke through the limits of all the preceding Presocratics. Indeed, the extent and diversity of his work can only be compared to that of Aristotle. Truly prolific, he would be judged the first Greek encyclopedic mind by Marx and Engels. Later commentators would classify his work into thirteen thematic tetralogies in five parts: Ethical (two tetralogies), Physical (four), Mathematical (three), Musical (two), Technical (two), as well as nine unclassified works. The works of the Physical section, which are also the most numerous (sixteen), contain the treatises, Small World-System and Great World-System, portions of which are attributed to Leucippus.

His writings are, by general consent, literary masterpieces. From the mass of his works only approximately three hundred fragments have survived today, most of which are gnomic practical sayings concerning the prudent and ethical life. Unfortunately nothing has survived from his original and extensive treatise, On Natural Things, where, among other subjects, he elaborates upon his atomic theory. Thus, to discover his scientific teachings we are indebted exclusively to later scholars, mainly Sextus, Theophrastus, Eudemus, Alexander Aphrodisiensis, Simplicius, and Ioannis Philoponus, who are recognized as relatively the most trustworthy commentators, and Aristotle. “Democritus”, Nestle notes, “was an Aristotle before Aristotle, and one could ask himself, what the historical evolution of Greek philosophy would have been, had his works survived like those of Plato and Aristotle. In any case, in him Greek thought had already reached both a peak and a turning point”.

Leucippus

The work of Democritus is solidly linked to the teachings of Leucippus, who was Democritus’s ‘teacher’ and will always be referred jointly with Democritus. Upon the city’s devastation by the Persians, he fled to Elea in southern Italy and was apprentice to Zeno, intertwining the philosophy of Parmenides and Melissus. Finally, he would settle in Abdera, Thrace, where he would found his own philosophic school. It is impossible today to evaluate separately the contributions of Leucippus and Democritus to the development of atomic theory. This is the reason that the writings of all the atomists of that period were gathered under the concise title, Corpus Democriteum.

“’It is as if natural philosophy in the person of its most recent representative would make a last, staggering attempt’, writes Nestle in his lucid style, “to achieve its great goal, a unified interpretation of the cosmos, lest it be carried away in the flood of

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2 R. Löbl, Demokrits Atomphysik, 62.
3 W. Nestle, Vom Mythos zum Logos, 205.