

# Philosophy of the Human Person

## Lecture #17

### Democritus

his epistemology (#1–4)

two kinds of knowledge

obscure sense-knowledge

of what? the ordinary properties of ordinary objects

e.g., the color of a flower

known how? by the senses

sense-knowledge is obscure because...

Anything that shifts its character depending on the state of the observer is obscure

Sense-knowledge shifts its character depending on the state of the observer

[syllogism; form :Barbara

what is it about sense-knowledge that makes it obscure?

the middle term provides the answer]

genuine knowledge

of what? reality (atoms & the void; see below)

known how? by reason, the “finer means”

how does this epistemology compare with that of modern science?

what role for sense-knowledge & reason in science?

his ontology (#5–6)

philosophical context—Parmenides’ challenge

Democritus’ reply

two fundamental principles (each grounded in a distinction)

(1) “the existence of the non-existent”

the distinction

two kinds of space—the full & the empty

two kinds of being—atoms (matter) & the void

its use—it makes both pluralism & motion possible

both Eleatic arguments depended this:

non-being does not exist

empty space is non-being

a possible argument for Democritus’ view

what Democritus & Parmenides agree on:

[motion]  $\square$  [existence of non-being]

equivalently: [motion]  $\uparrow$  [the non-existence of non-being]

where they differ:

if one can't have both, which should one keep?

(2) the macroscopic is made up of the microscopic  
the distinction

two kinds of thing—ordinary objects & atoms

atoms are quasi-Parmenidean objects of logical insight

there are (given the previous distinction)

(1) many

(2) mobile

but each is

(1) indivisible, hence the name “atom”

(2) unchangeable

ordinary objects (the objects of sensible experience) are

(1) composite, not one

(2) divisible (into atoms)

(3) changeable (by rearrangement of atoms)

(4) moveable

its use—it makes divisibility & change possible

a possible argument for Democritus' view

Parmenides' principle—If change occurs, then something non-existent comes into existence—has limited scope

it applies to atoms

the only way for an atom to change is for the atom-as-it-was to cease to exist and the atom-as-it-will-be (which hitherto did not exist) to come to exist

so atoms don't change

it does not apply to ordinary objects

this is not the only way for an ordinary object to change

ordinary objects are composites

composites change (or come to be) when their constituents fall into the appropriate arrangement

elaboration of the doctrine of atoms

atoms

ways in which atoms can differ

shape, orientation & arrangement

ways in which atoms can change

local motion (change of place) only

- ordinary objects
  - what they are—collections of atoms
  - ways in which they can change
    - coming to be—by congregation of appropriate atoms
      - & passing away—by dispersal of their atoms
    - change in size (quantitative change)—by accumulating more atoms (or losing some)
    - change in features (qualitative change)—by rearrangement of atoms
      - NB: ordinary qualities are the effects of atoms on us
        - such qualities are not “real” (i.e., in things)
        - they are merely perceptual
    - change in place (local motion)
- arguments for Democritean atomism
  - (1) reversing Parmenides’ arguments
    - since Parmenides’ arguments are valid, rejecting the conclusion requires rejection of one of the premises
    - the arguments against pluralism and motion
      - both depend on the non-existence of a void or vacuum
      - this Democritus denies
        - (an alternative would be
          - to argue for pluralism on the basis that contiguity things are spatially separate, but not separated by a vacuum
          - to argue for motion on the basis of mutual displacement, which also does not require a vacuum)
    - the argument against change
      - depends (once Democritus has made the case for an atomist ontology) on the claim that if a particular arrangement of atoms does not already exist it cannot do anything and hence cannot come to be
        - this Democritus denies
          - (an alternative would be
            - to distinguish various senses of being and kinds of change)
  - (2) argument to the best explanation
    - Fact: The world contains many things, each of which can move and change.
    - Warrant: The best explanation of those facts is Democritean atomism, since
      - if the world were made up of mobile atoms it would behave the way it does [predictive accuracy; scope]

atomism is a reasonably economical theory [simplicity]  
it's consistent with what else we know about the world  
[external consistency]

Conclusion: (Probably) Democritean atomism is true.

questions

does it in fact have all the advantages cited?

is it better than alternative explanations?

his anthropology (or just physiology?) (#7–9)

life in general

the question—what gives some things the powers we call “life”?

in particular, motion (both growth & local motion) & perception

Democritus focusses on motion

life-motion is made possible by a particular kind of atom

“soul atoms”—small, mobile, & dispersed throughout the body

their presence makes a body alive

their mobility causes the motion we call life

at their departure, the body becomes dead

[how is this like and how is it different from modern scientific explanations  
of life and death?

what does modern science say gives a thing the powers we call life?

what account does it give of death?]

human life

distinctive human powers—no Democritean account survives

immortality

soul atoms are neither created nor destroyed

but they disperse at death

there is no aggregate of soul-atoms that continues to exist as “you”