

## ON THE CONCEPTION OF POVERTY IN DEMOCRITUS

The issue of poverty (πενία) recurs frequently enough in the extant fragments of Democritus to hold that it was a considerable ethical concern for the atomist. As the atomist himself argued (B 291), to bear poverty well is a significant portion of displaying sound ethical judgment (σωφροσύνη)<sup>1</sup>. An inquiry into Democritus' presentation of and solution to the issue of poverty is, then, an enterprise of interest in itself and as part of a general understanding of the ethical position described and promoted by the atomist. In this paper, I will first look at the position of the concept of poverty in Democritus' ethical thought. Having established the place of poverty in the overall system, I will attempt to reconcile certain contradictions which seem to occur in Democritus' stance on poverty with regards to the importance of material poverty and to the advisability of advocating situational change.

There are five fragments in which the concept of poverty is deployed or analyzed by Democritus. The most clearly definitive statement we receive on poverty is given in B 283 where we read:

Poverty (πενία) and wealth (πλοῦτος) are names for want (ἐνδείης) and fulfilment (κόρος). He who lacks (ὁ ἐνδέων) is not rich. He who does not lack (ὁ μὴ ἐνδέων) is not poor<sup>2</sup>.

In the above passage, poverty is made a strongly relative concept. No particular external criteria are made available for assessing poverty. Rather,

1. Unless otherwise stated all fragment and testimonial references are to H. DIELS and W. KRANZ, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, vol. 2, 6th edn., Berlin, Weidmann, 1952, section 68. Invaluable assistance in interpretation is given by making reference to the modern English translations of C. C. W. TAYLOR, *The Atomists: Leucippus and Democritus. Fragments*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1999, and the older but still valuable K. FREEMAN, *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Companion to Diels, Fragmente Der Vorsokratiker*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1946. The recent modern Greek translation is also highly useful: H. DIELS and W. KRANZ, *Οἱ Προσωκρατικοί: οἱ μαρτυρίες καὶ τὰ ἀποσπάσματα*, τόμος β' (ἀπόδοση Β. ΚΥΡΚΟΣ), Ἀθήνα, Ἐκδόσεις Παπαδήμα, 2007.

2. The translations provided are the author's own, though they owe much to the readings of the sources listed immediately above.





it is related to the individual and whether he finds himself in a state of need (ἐνδεια) or satisfaction (κόρος). Poverty and wealth are linked concepts for Democritus, the one showing the other. He engages in a powerful effort to wrest their meanings away from the common understanding of the terms. His aim is to provide a new understanding of poverty and wealth that is measured according to the individual ethical agent and has to do with an equation between desire (ἐπιθυμία) and its possible fulfilment (κόρος). Hence he argues in B 284:

If you do not desire (ἐπιθυμέης) much, but little will seem much. Small desires (ὀρεξεις), then, make poverty (πενίην) equivalent to wealth (πλούτῳ)<sup>3</sup>.

Here Democritus effects a transformation of terms. The everyday view of wealth is that of crates of talents, golden tripods, marble palaces, etc., in which it is imagined one would find great satisfaction. Once the material means of determining the criteria of poverty and wealth is removed and satisfaction (κόρος) is taken as our marker, then holding limited desires will make becoming wealthy a much more realizable task. We have but to change our desires away from unattainable ends to a more immediately available set of objects.

Just as much as the possibility of living a wealthy life in poverty is raised by Democritus, so too does he point out the possibility, given the relative nature of the concepts, of living a life of poverty while being empirically wealthy. He argues:

The desire (ὀρεξις) for money, if not limited (ὀρίζεται) by satisfaction (κόρῳ), is far worse than the most terrible poverty (πενίης φοβερώτερη). For the greatest desires (μέγιστον ὀρέξειν) create the greatest lack (μέγιστον ἐνδείαν). B 219

Here Democritus uses the desire for money as a characteristic example of a desire that does not find an object in the world which is capable of providing it with satisfaction. It is one of the 'greatest desires' which, lacking a satisfactory object, creates the greatest lack in the desiring agent<sup>4</sup>. Thus, the atomist repaints the picture of an individual whom we might naively take to be wealthy, the great merchant or tyrant, depicting their state as precisely the reverse of what we would have thought. They may not live a life of material poverty and yet their life is poor to them

3. I render both ἐπιθυμέω and ὀρεξις as desire in a verbal and noun form respectively. ὀρεξις may be thought to have a slightly negative connotation, as opposed to ἐπιθυμία, but is more or less translatable by the same English term. For Democritus both ἐπιθυμία and ὀρεξις would seem to be neutral terms until they are encountered in excess or deficiency. The use of different terms seems more to add colour to the remark than to illustrate a crisp terminological distinction.

4. Democritus does not make explicit the argument of why the desire for wealth is the paradigmatic insatiable desire. Presumably the argument is that material wealth in its abstract form, i.e. money, forms an infinite set which is an improper object to hold as a pragmatic end.



and unsatisfactory. It is likely an argument like this that underpins the following passage:

Poverty (πενία) in a democracy (ἐν δημοκρατίῃ) when compared with what goes by the name of happiness (καλεσμένης εὐδαιμονίας) in a tyranny (παρὰ τοῖς δυνάσταισι)<sup>5</sup> is as preferable as freedom (ἐλευθερία) is to slavery (δουλείης). B 251

While this has often been read as a political statement<sup>6</sup>, the themes of poverty and wealth in this passage seem just as, if not more, important. Here we revert to the common notion of poverty as a material deprivation and compare it to its opposite: that which is conceived as happiness in the tyrannical state. The concept of well-being in the tyrannical state is, no doubt, an inversed image of material poverty: wealth, power and the other great desires of B 219. It is in this sense that poverty in a democracy, which otherwise might have many faults, is so obviously preferable to the happiness of the tyrants. The tyrant's supposed wealth is a mirage. His is a clear example of seeking power for power's sake and wealth for wealth's sake. He has no other end and he appears to be accomplishing it. Yet, the greater his accomplishment, the more he will desire<sup>7</sup>. The tyrant is in fact enslaved to a desire that creates a lack which he cannot fulfill. The attainment of power does not give satisfaction but breeds the desire for greater power and the worry of the loss of it. The point of this passage is not that democracy is a preferable system but that the conception of happiness of the tyrants is so flawed and counterproductive that even actual poverty in a democratic state is a better practical condition to be in than to have the so-called wealth of the tyrant.<sup>8</sup>

A summarizing statement with regards to the issue of poverty is given by Democritus in B 286:

5. I have translated *δυναστεία* as tyranny in the modern sense. It refers to a group of oligarchic rulers who exercise power arbitrarily for their own personal enrichment. These would be our modern tyrants and despots. For a good discussion of the term, cf. G. J. D. AALDERS, *The Political Faith of Democritus*, *Mnemosyne*, 3, 1950, p. 304 n.10.

6. Cf. C. BAILEY, *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus: A Study*, New York, Russell & Russell, 1964, p. 211. Also consider, G. J. D. AALDERS, *op. cit.*, pp. 302-313. Aalders also treats the fragment as primarily a political statement which fits into a political programme against extreme forms of government, a motif that does fit well with Democritus' overall ethics as we will present them in this work.

7. Cf. *Nic. Eth.*, A 5, 1096 a 6-11 where Aristotle discards the pursuit of wealth as candidate for the ultimate good since it is a forced life. Wealth cannot form an end in itself but is always for something else. If it was for itself, it would be unending. But finite man cannot obtain the infinite.

8. So we may have here at least a backhanded compliment for democracy. Despite all its faults, democracy is conducive to more reasonable desires than the most unreasonable of forms of government: tyranny.



Happy (εὐτυχής) is he who, with a medium level of possessions (ἐπὶ μετρίοις χρήμασιν), is satisfied (εὐθυμεόμενος), discontent (δυστυχής) is he who, with much, is dissatisfied (δυσθυμεόμενος).

If we take poverty and wealth as relative concepts having to do with the ability of our desires to find reasonable satisfaction in the world, then the happy man will have possessions enough to match his modicum of desires. Wealth, in the naive sense of the accumulation of goods, will be seen not as a blessing but as a curse. Though there is a surfeit of goods available to the rich man of avarice, he will not be capable of truly enjoying his goods or his life. Insofar as it is from his wealth that he aims to take happiness, his desires will always exceed the capacity of the world to provide adequate pleasures for them. Such is Democritus' basic position on poverty as we find it in the fragments.

This all sounds, as Barnes once put it, like a «moderately coherent plan of life»<sup>9</sup>, but where in Democritus' ethics does this position on poverty fit? Arguably, it sits very near the core of his ethical thought indeed. The longest remaining passage of Democritean ethical thought is contained in B 191 which contains a reasonably complete elaboration of what Democritus took to be the best life. The best life comes from having moderate desires and a balanced life. This protects the soul from defect (ἐλλεῖπον) or excess (ὑπερβολήν) which causes it harm. Fragment B 3 supplements this, giving the causes of imbalance in ethical life as the defect or excess of desire in relation to the pragmatically attainable given the circumstance of one's capacities (δύναμις, φύσις) and of prevailing conditions<sup>10</sup>. The paradigmatic example of the type of desire that leads on to excess causing harm to the soul is to wonder at (θαυμάζω) and envy (ζηλεύω) the materially rich and powerful (ἔχοντες καὶ μακαριζόμενοι), while the motion that brings the soul back into balance by re-establishing realistic desires is to compare one's condition with that of the less fortunate, the materially poor (ταλαιπωρούμενοι), thus revalorizing that which one actually has and allowing one to set up reasonable expectations with regards to it. Put another way, in face of the situation of lack, the correct solution is the lowering of expectations, through tempering the sting of one's own lack against the lack of those less fortunate than oneself.

Seen in light of this key ethical statement, it is clear why the issue of poverty is so central to Democritus' ethics. Wealth and poverty both threaten the balance of the soul which lies at the core of the good life. Being able to understand and manage these limit cases, which threaten the viability of the good life with extreme excess on the one hand and

9. J. BARNES, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, London, Routledge and Paul, 1982, p. 423.

10. On the necessity of recognizing the pragmatic limitations of given conditions, cf. B 289.





extreme defect on the other, is the basic test for the viability of Democritus' ethical system. His description of the management of poverty and wealth is consistent with his central ethical statements. It attempts to guide the individual ethical agent away from a perception of poverty and wealth as static, objective criteria and, instead, to see them as relative poles of an encounter between ethical subjectivity with certain dispositions, on the one hand, with a pragmatically given situation, on the other. His normative prescription attempts to protect the illiquid, but not truly poor, individual from perceiving a lack that is not present and to disrupt the tendency of the materially rich to create for themselves a lack where there is already the basis of a reasonable satisfaction. In essence, he attempts to transmute the characteristic excess/deficiencies of these extremes towards a moderate middle that will bring satisfaction to both potentials of the human condition. In the light of the central ethical principles which we have thus far attributed to Democritus, his views on poverty look consistent with his central ethical programme.

However, the analysis of this position would be incomplete without bringing it into its seeming contradiction with other basic ethical tenets which Democritus holds. The atomist is commonly known for his metaphysical theory which, as presented to us by Aristotle, appears to be a form of immanent materialism. Essential to this materialism is a commitment to staying true to the appearances<sup>11</sup>. Expressed in his ethical thought, the interest of the atomist in the immanent appearance of good to man led him to strongly criticize those ethical positions which would deny the good of the present life for the sake of some transcendental metaphysical or mystical ideal (cf. frs B 199-206, 297). He is thus also identified with a form of hedonism, in that he takes pleasure as a measure of the good, a thesis verified in his own words (B 188; cf. B 4).

In consequence with this fundamental philosophical commitment to the immanent world, he in fact characterizes actual material and social goods as making up a real part of the genuine good life, since they form a basic category of our actual existence<sup>12</sup>. There are many fragments which support this conclusion. Evaluating restraint and hunger, Democritus argues that they have a valuable place in human life, though they cannot be its only mode of expression for one must also know how to spend (B

11. Aristotle presents Democritus' thought piecemeal in his metaphysical and physical investigations. In *De Anima*, A 2, 404 a (=68 A 101) he tells us that, for Democritus, truth is in the appearances. The appearances are to be explained by the physical principles of atoms and void, as described in *Metaphysics*, H 2, 1042 b. Frustratingly for the study of Democritus' ethics, Aristotle makes no reference to Democritus in his ethical studies.

12. This point has been strongly made by M. NILL, *Morality and Self-Interest in Protagoras, Antiphon, and Democritus*, Leiden, Brill, 1985.



229). Moreover, wealth and its proper distribution play an important role in the smooth functioning of social life (B 282, B 255). Indeed, he goes on to support that life ought to be crowned with parties and enhanced by the experience of rarefied pleasures (B 230, B 232). Even moderation, the level-headed virtue par excellence, does not seem divorced from, but rather is promoted as a source and support for, finding pleasure (B 211). Finally, his critique of the stingy, who foolishly work like bees hoarding a wealth they will never spend, clearly shows his commitment to valuing the pleasures of the here and now (B 227). With so much evidence in its favour, one must come to the conclusion that for the atomist goods cannot be rendered entirely subjective according to the disposition of the individual. Some situational ground of real goods must be available for the individual in order for a good life to be possible. To put it plainly, poverty wouldn't be an issue if there wasn't an actual hardship to some real situation and actual goods wouldn't be desirable if they weren't in some way part of the overall good.

It is also a consequence of this immanent perspective on ethical life, that a change in the actual situation of a man, and not just his disposition, could, in theory, restore the balance of his desires to actual available pleasures. Logically, not only by decreasing desires in proportion to pleasures, but also by increasing available pleasures in relation to desires might a balanced life be restored. An individual actively taking control of and modifying the real material conditions of his life should be able to better it by increasing the amount of available pleasures. Democritus, in fact, makes suggestions to this effect in the case of situations like bad health (B 234). Here he notes the irony of those who pray for good health when it is always and only they who have the power (*δύναμις*) to bring about this change. Their prayerful disposition is contrasted with their woefully inadequate actions. The message seems to be that, in certain situations, we always have the power to make our lives better and this is done not by changing dispositions, *e.g.* lowering expectations of health, but by changing one's actual situation<sup>13</sup>. One is left to wonder, then, especially when the Democritean metaphysics suggests such a malleable world<sup>14</sup>, why the atomist recommends a seeming quietist position

13. It is true that in this case again the role of desire (*ἐπιθυμία*) is highly important. The cause of illness, it is suggested, is intemperate desires. The point remains that these intemperate desires are not to be fixed by good intentions but by a physical transformation of the situation. The individual must literally become a better person via exercise, better diet and so on, all of which requires an active working to change actual conditions in the world.

14. The world is so malleable, in fact, that Aristotle suggests in *Gen. corr.*, A 2, 315b11-15 that in Democritus' system even the change of a single component in the whole can transform the nature of an object entirely. Both tragedy and comedy, he notes, are made up of the same letters.



to the poor man in the face of his poverty instead of recommending he take practical political action to better his lot by adjusting his given situation (e.g. political constitution).

In summary, Democritus seems open to the objections both (a) that his account of poverty does not properly address the actual material lack inherent in poverty – he focuses too much on the mental suffering of the rich and not so poorly off rather than on the seemingly more pressing evil of the real suffering of the actual materially poor – and (b) that he overplays the dispositional response to poverty when a situational change to actual conditions would accomplish equally good results in banishing poverty – he focuses too much on making do with and not enough on making up for poverty. With regards to (a), his position heads towards an asceticism of the cynic type while with regards to (b), it heads towards a reactionary quietism.

In the second half of this paper, I will propose a defense of Democritus' position, from within his own system of thought, which makes sense of his seeming ignoring of real material poverty as an actual evil and his emphasis on change of disposition as the best path for dealing with poverty. To do so, I suggest that we must first turn to the theoretical underpinnings of the picture of the best life which is found in Democritus, so that we can look at his conception of the good more closely. This is important since, if he is not simply in contradiction, he must hold a conception of the immanent and attainable good which is compatible with and/or explains his lack of interest in material poverty and lack of enthusiasm for social change.

Long ago Taylor pointed out the analogy which can be drawn between Democritus' epistemology and his ethics.<sup>15</sup> In the search for truth, there is a building movement from simple sensory truths towards an uncovering of the principles of series of appearances<sup>16</sup>. The seeker of knowledge first encounters the world naively through the senses. The senses give access to the appearances which are themselves glimpses of the truth and point to a truth beyond themselves<sup>17</sup>. But the evidence available to the senses of phenomena are infinite and contradictory<sup>18</sup>. This causes our na-

15. Cf. C. C. W. TAYLOR, *Pleasure, Knowledge and Sensation in Democritus, Phronesis*, 12, 1967, pp. 6-27.

16. The key passage for this interpretation is B11. Here Democritus famously speaks of the dark (σκοτεινή) and genuine (γνησίη) tools of knowledge, by which he means the senses and the mind. Though the senses are criticized as dark when without mind, the mind too comes up for critique in B125 where the senses in turn warn mind that, should it overthrow them, it too will fall.

17. This is another sense which we should keep in mind of the statement attributed to Democritus by Diotimus in SEXTUS EMP., *Math.*, 1, 7, 140 (=68 A 111) that «appearances are a sight of the unseen» (τῶν ἀδύλων καταλήψεως τὰ φαινόμενα).

18. Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Gen. corr.*, A 2, 315b 10-11 (=67 A 9).



ive approaches to the world to break down. That the world is available to be known at all is thanks to our senses (B 125). It is only thanks to the mind, however, that we are able to see beyond the immediately present to come to an understanding of its cause, piecing together the contradictory evidence and making sense thereof (B 11). Knowing the world, then, is a dialectic between perceiving, conceiving, testing and re-conceiving. Sometimes our theory may over-reach the phenomena, sometimes it might under-reach them; always we strive for it to be true by the light of reason while fitting to what is shown. The immediately true is some phenomenon, the ultimately true are the principles that explain them. Starting from a naive perspective we develop progressively better correlations of our conceptions to the phenomena.

Some similar pattern can be seen taking place in the relation of man to world as ethical being. Here, though, one does not approach the world for knowledge and truth, but for pleasure and the good. The world as good is first available to the individual through pleasurable appearance given to desire<sup>19</sup>. These pleasures reveal some actual good (B 188; cf. B 4) but are contradictory and offer glimpses of a greater good. Ethical man looks for the good which appears beyond the given good (B 74). The good comes to us in the first place, because we are desiring beings who take pleasure in simple things. But we are not limited to the immediate pleasure. Ethical mindedness seeks the cause of the good, the pattern and principles which stands behind and makes possible particular goods. The immediately good is some pleasurable thing now, the ultimately good are the principles that ground these pleasures. Sometimes our sounding out of ethical principle may exceed and sometimes fall short of the phenomena (B 233); always we seek to accord it to the greatest range of phenomena. Starting from a vulgar perspective we progressively adjust our ethical attitude to create a greater correlation of our desires to the available phenomena.

Up to here we should be in broad agreement with Taylor but with regards to what follows from and is discovered by this investigation of the good, I will argue for another interpretation. Taylor following, though limiting Vlastos' claim, interprets B 69 to give an intellectualist account of Democritus' ethics<sup>20</sup>:

For each man the good (ἀγαθόν) and the true (ἀληθές) are the same (τὸ αὐτόν); although their pleasures (ἡδύ) differs the one from the other.

19. Democritus sometimes illustrates things with the crude, but effective, succinctness of the later Cynics. The world is a place in which desire is aroused and accomplished. Paradigmatically he says: «Scratching themselves men take pleasure just as they would in love making» (B 127).

20. TAYLOR, *op. cit.*, p. 25.





This tightly packed sentence, lacking its original context, is very difficult to interpret. Nevertheless, it has been reasonably used to support the thesis that Democritus views the ethical activity as an exercise in practical reason that replaces immediate notions of the good, this pleasure here and now, with a rational theory of the good which provides a better account of the good for the individual, a better correlation between what one desires and what is possible. In the case of Vlastos this would be a strong account. The atomic theory is not just a metaphysical but an ethical model, which provides the true picture of how one should act<sup>21</sup>. Taylor proposes a lighter interpretation suggesting the outcome of the rational investigation of the good results in a moderate hedonism that provides a prudential theory for living the most pleasant life. For both scholars, Democritus' good is seen as a rationalized principle of pleasure. Vlastos' intuition that Democritus is offering something stronger than a reasonable hedonism seems sound, but to identify the atomic theory with a theory of the good, as we shall see immediately below, seems incorrect. Taylor's argument, which maintains the importance of pleasure as the criterion of determining the good, seems indispensable but lacks a convincing picture of what the good is in Democritus beyond prudent pleasures.

I propose that, in order to approach this problem again, we suspend the idea that Democritus identifies the notion of truth with the good. We might then pose the following question: When Democritus investigates the world as a knowable object and for the sake of truth, he arrives at the principles of atom and void as the ground of these appearances; when, then, he investigates the world as a desirable object and for the sake of the good, what principles does he find as the ground of these appearances? Posing the question this way is beneficial, because it helps us rule out otherwise attractive possibilities for what constitutes the good in Democritus.

It would seem to immediately rule out that good finds its ultimate ground in the universe or *cosmos* taken from the objective point-of-view. Considered according to its truth, the world lacks in virtually any qualities whatsoever. Democritus is categorical on this point, «by custom (νόμῳ) sweet, by custom bitter, by custom hot, by custom cold; in reality (ἐτεῆτι) atoms and void» (B 9). Qualities are by custom. They do not belong to the reality of atoms and void. This world, even in itself, has virtually no qualities. Of the two primary principles the one is devoid of any quality at all. Void is just exactly the absence of quality. Atoms are characterized by the most abstract of qualities: shape (ῥυσμός), position (τροπή) and arrangement (διαθεγή)<sup>22</sup>. Of

21. G. VLASTOS, Ethics and Physics in Democritus, *The Philosophical Review*, 54, 1945, pp. 578-592.

22. Cf. SIMPLICIUS, *Commentary on the Physics*, 28, 15 (=68 A 38).



these, shape is the seemingly strongest quality, since it belongs particularly to the individual atom, while the other qualities are really only relational. A case could be made that shape itself is a relational quality, since atoms form an infinite series and the particular shape of an individual atom is entailed by its membership in that series. Even the formation of a *cosmos* is no sign of the good, but a process entailed by the infinite combination and recombination of atoms across infinite time<sup>23</sup>. The coming to be of life within the *cosmoi* can be understood according to universal processes of the meeting of like to like (B 164), and individual life forms can be understood *qua* appearance with regard to their shape and colour including man himself (B 165). Goodness, unlike the truth of atoms and void, has quality. It has a character, a timber, a depth, a feeling. It is quality *par excellence*. But the real as real for the atomist is just the eternal shuffling of the atoms, the so-called qualities an illusion. Democritus argues that, while we might attribute goodness or badness to some object, that which is good now is not absolutely so but only relative to my disposition and situation. Water is useful and 'good' for man until your drowning in it (B 172, B 173). In reality, however, all remains atom and void in truth and so-called qualities are to be attributed to custom and custom alone. In the world considered according to its objective content, we will look in vain for the good or signs thereof.

Another candidate for grounding the good would be the individual. Democritus' fragments show a strong concern with the individual and the importance of their agency in the ethical process. In many fragments it would appear the good must be enacted by and for an individual<sup>24</sup>. This has led scholars such as Voros to attribute a Kantian-like position to Democritus<sup>25</sup>. The self becomes the giver of good to himself. Towards solving the apparent contradictions in Democritus' ethics as outlined above, this has a certain attractiveness as a theory. Following this direction of thought, we can present Democritus as an idealist thinker who attempts to divorce the ethical agent as much as possible from actual need and to internalize all ethical agency. The ethical achievement of the good would, then, be available to the philosophically well-adjusted individual who takes pleasure only in higher abstract goods and is not significantly harmed by a lack of real goods or by poor social situation<sup>26</sup>. This is a picture towards which scholars,

23. Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Physics*, B 4, 196a 28, and PSEUDO-PLUTARCH, fr. 179, 72-3 (=68 A 39).

24. Cf. especially the series of fragments B 264, B 244, B 80, B 60.

25. Cf. F. K. VOROS, *The Ethical Theory of Democritus: On Duty*, *Platon*, 26, 1974, pp. 113-122.

26. Fragments like B 146 suggested this almost Aristotelian view. We get here a picture not unlike the picture of the best life described in *Politics*, H 3, where the individual or state leads the best life by living an active life, in which practical activity can be taken to be «thoughts and contemplations which are independent and complete in themselves» (transl: Benjamin Jowett).





such as Farrar, have tended in their descriptions<sup>27</sup>. I believe, however, that Procopé's objection to this position is sound. When we witness Democritus' description of the self, we do not see the individual creating the good *ex nihilo* for himself. Rather, we see him internalizing the notions of the good which are prevalent and available in his own society<sup>28</sup>. This is especially clear in fragments like B 174 and B 262. What is ethically right must be exercised by the individual but the individual is not the source of this good. Rather each individual is the place of its application.

This leads us to the best candidate for standing as ground and principle of the good: society and, particularly, its *nomoi*. The above quoted B 9 has already given us the clue to our solution. Above, we saw this fragment as it is normally read: as the fundamental critique of vain custom by the atomist theorist who has discovered the truth. If we re-approach the fragment, though, and read it again not with regards to the quest for the truth but with regards to the quest for the good, another interpretation of the statement appears. In truth all may turn out to be atoms and void but through custom the world shows otherwise. It appears bitter and sweet, as full of flavour and colour and life. This may not be the being of the appearances or how they are as far as we can theorize them. It is, however, their aesthetic meaning to the observer, to the particular entity that is there to perceive and interact with the appearances: man. The appearance according to custom is how we live the appearances. Why? Man is a social animal, as Democritus argues:

Custom (νόμος) wills to benefit (εὐεργετῆν) the life of men. It can do so when men will to undergo the good (πάσχειν εὖ). In being convinced by custom, men are shown their very own virtue (ἀρετήν). B 248

Man does not find himself first and foremost within a meaningless and hostile universe of atoms and void, but primarily it appears to him as pleasurable and good. These latter qualities are a function of custom (νόμος) in which man always, already and more primarily, finds himself. The activity of seeking the wider good in the appearances leads one on to the investigation of the values and virtues of one's society. Herein, one does not find the empty truth of atoms and void, but the good which is

27. As Farrar argues, «For Democritus, order and well-being both depend primarily upon each individual's capacities, whatever his external condition» (C. FARRAR, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking: The Invention of Politics in Classical Athens*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 1988, p. 233).

28. As Procopé puts it, arguing against Natorp's Kantian interpretation of αἰδώς and B 264, «You will be your own policeman. But this does not mean that you are your own law-giver... there is nothing said here about determining the badness or impropriety of your actions. The standards of propriety, of good and evil, are not in question». Cf. J. F. PROCOPÉ, Democritus on Politics and the Care of the Soul, *The Classical Quarterly*, 39, 1989, p. 324.



man's particular virtue. Custom separates man from nature, red in tooth and claw, or atoms and void, keeping each from doing as he would, but rather binding him to its good (B 245). Objects in themselves are without meaning; but normal human being never encounters objects in themselves. Rather, we encounter objects as full of value, as layered into a series of hierarchically more valuable values. Human being lives in these values because of its particular nature. Man is educated in his society and, as Democritus argues:

Nature (φύσις) and education (διδασχῇ) are similar. Education transforms (μεταρυσμᾷ) a man and as he is transformed (μεταρυσμᾶσα) so is his nature remade (φύσις-παεῖ). B 33

So man lives a second nature of culture. This has become his proper nature<sup>29</sup>. This pleasure of sweetness that one values now is valuable in itself and yet not absolutely. It is valuable as part of a pleasant life: a life that values sweetness, defines it as such and rewards the individual who follows the highest values (virtues) with what is sweet. There would be no good but for the fact of the birth of the individual into a community of value. This community of value, for Democritus, is the *polis*, valuable before all else (B 252). The *polis* safeguards the customs that define the good. These customs cannot be assigned a reality in truth but they open, for the individual, the world as good.

If the above analysis of the principle of the good in Democritus holds, and it is the *nomoi* of society which are the final principles of the good, then we are able to provide an answer to the problems we encountered with Democritus' treatment of poverty above.

What we have already said solves the problem of the lack of emphasis on the evils of material poverty in Democritus. First, he could contend that it is a mistake to attempt to measure the good according to a material standard. This is the category error of both the greedy (B 219) and the gluttonous individual (B 235). While simple material pleasures are signs of the good they are not the good itself, which is, rather, to be found in the societal virtues framing them. Of course, material goods are actually necessary for the continuance of any society, but he need not focus on this fact. The fragments take for granted a functioning *polis* society. To function would mean to accrue the necessary material means for its members, as defined by their common values, and to ensure the enfranchisement of its members to manage and partake in these means. His ethical theory does not stretch beyond this to the slave class which

29. Democritus could have served as a better saint for the Cynics, had it not been so clear in his thought that man is no simple beast who should shed culture in order to refine virtue. Culture is our virtue.



he excludes from ethical consideration (B 270). It would follow from B 191 that, for Democritus, a *polis* which let material differences between its citizens grow to too great an extreme would be subject to the same types of excess and defect to which the individual soul is prone. That is to say it would risk its own destruction. Fixing such problems is a matter of politics, e.g. careful changes to constitutions, and not of personal ethics. It is within this frame that we should read one of Democritus' only practical political recommendations. When he recommends that the rich should be willing to extend loans to the poor (B 255), he is not suggesting a systematic programme of wealth redistribution but, rather, a logical re-balancing of resources to re-establish a mean which is to the benefit of all. The functioning *polis* is man's buffer against basic material want and, so long as it persists, frees the individual from the concern of genuine material poverty.

This interpretation of Democritus' investigation of the good also solves the problem of why he does not propose practical measures to change the structure of the world or society, in order to achieve the good of the individual. Custom is some established pattern and group disposition towards the good. It arranges the world in a certain way and is disposed to a world which has a certain shape. The effort to change a general situation or disposition is dangerous, because it threatens the very foundation of what we take to be the good. It is only on the basis of some custom of the good being thus and not otherwise that we are able to strive for the good at all. We should, thus, trust the tried and tested, not just anything new that comes along (B 67). We should, further, obey the laws, the ruler and the wise (B 47). By changing the basic composition of the actual world situation to which this notion of the good is related, we risk undermining our own good (B 224). For Democritus, those who advocate situational change seem to be inspired by envy/jealousy. They would have that which others have which has been denied to them, though their allocation of goods should already be reasonably sufficient. Nor can there be any 'growing the pie'. That would distort the world of goods in relation to which custom has evolved. So to attempt to change the situational composition of a society is to risk the breakdown of *nomos* and thus to encourage civil war (στάσις). In that event, man is exposed to the state of nature once again, the worst of calamities for all involved (B 249). Civil war is a loss for all involved that deprives each of the greatest goods (B 250), which are the result of living within the spirit of the law (B 245). The exercise of comparing oneself to those who are worse off in life is a much safer practice. It is supposed to reinvigorate the actually existing goods of one's life in a society that genuinely does offer the possibility of meaning to the individual while avoiding the

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danger of tampering with the fundamental *nomoi* from which one's good arises. This is not meant as a quietism though. Society and its custom are seen as the ultimate ground of the good and each citizen has a place within society which offers him a reasonable portion of that good, should he stand in appropriate and reasonable relation to the given.

In Democritus, then, poverty is a lack of proportion between desires and available pleasures. Such feeling of lack creates an imbalance in the soul which is against the interest of living a good life. Democritus grounds the good in customs and values. The *nomoi* of society are the principles that give the meaning of good to appearances which, from a theoretical point-of-view, they lack in reality. Men live thanks to *nomoi* which bind them together as a socially cohesive group holding the same values. For this reason, gross material poverty does not concern Democritus over much, for he assumes that a society, by definition, would not allow its members to fall into this condition. Additionally, it suggests to Democritus that efforts at situational change, modifying the shape of a present society are, at best, last resort measures. It is far preferable to adjust our personal disposition, by reducing our desires and becoming satiated with that which is already available to us, than to attempt situational change. The latter threatens to undermine the composition of our present society which is the very basis of our perception of the good. B 69, which calls the good and the true the same for all men, though their pleasures differ, remains cryptic. Perhaps, on this reading, we might restore it to say that the truth, as atoms and void, and the good, as *nomoi*, are the same for all men, but each will live a different life and face different conditions of pleasure and unpleasure. One can best find one's way with regards to the truth by adopting the theory of atoms and void. One can best live a good life by exploring and then heeding the *nomoi* of one's own city. This is the same for all men, though their customs and good be radically different.

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## ΠΕΡΙ ΤΗΣ ΕΝΝΟΙΑΣ ΤΗΣ ΠΕΝΙΑΣ ΣΤΟΝ ΔΗΜΟΚΡΙΤΟ

### Περίληψη

Το άρθρο αυτό εξετάζει την έννοια της πενίας στην ηθική προβληματική του Δημοκρίτου. Η θέση μου είναι ότι ο φιλόσοφος περιορίζει την έννοια της πενίας, προκειμένου να εκφράσει μια σχέση ανάμεσα στην επιθυμία και στη θεωρητική πραγματοποίησή της σε διαθέσιμες απολαύσεις. Η ικανότητα μετριασμού των πιθανών υπερβολών του πλούτου και της πενίας παίζει σημαντικό ρόλο στη διατήρηση της συνολικής εικόνας του άριστου βίου στον Δημοκρίτο, που συνίσταται ακριβώς στην ισορροπία των ηδονών. Η πενία αντιμετωπίζεται καλύτερα, και ο άριστος βίος επιδιώκεται ορθότερα, με την σύγκριση της κατάστασης του ανθρώπου με εκείνους που βρίσκονται σε δεινότερη θέση από τον ίδιο και, ύστερα, με την υιοθέτηση ενός μικρού αριθμού βασικών επιθυμιών που μπορούν να ικανοποιηθούν με διαθέσιμες απολαύσεις. Στο δεύτερο μισό του άρθρου, διατυπώνονται δύο ενστάσεις προς τη γενική θεώρηση της πενίας από τον Δημοκρίτο: (α) ότι δεν ενδιαφέρεται αρκετά για τις δυσκολίες της υλικής πενίας και (β) ότι δεν αναγνωρίζει τον πιθανό ρόλο της αλλαγής των συνθηκών ως απάντηση στην πενία. Η απόφασή μου είναι ότι η θέση του Δημοκρίτου, τουλάχιστον με τους δικούς του όρους, μπορεί να υποστηριχθεί. Και για να το αποδείξω, υποστηρίζω ότι ο Δημοκρίτος, τελικά, εντάσσει το καλό όχι σε μία κοσμολογική θεώρηση, ούτε στην προσωπική ηθική του κάθε ανθρώπου, αλλά στους νόμους της κοινωνίας. Αν αυτή η άποψη είναι σωστή, τότε μπορούμε να υπερασπιστούμε τον Δημοκρίτο έναντι στις δύο παραπάνω κατηγορίες. Για τον Άτομο φιλόσοφο, η συμμετοχή σε μία εύρυθμη κοινωνία εξ' ορισμού διασφαλίζει ένα μερίδιο υλικού πλούτου ικανού να υποστηρίξει την αξιοπρεπή διαβίωση ενός ανθρώπου, ενώ οι ατομικές προσπάθειες να μεταβληθεί ή δομή της κοινωνίας, για να εξυπηρετήσει το προσωπικό όφελος, υποσκάπτουν τους νόμους, οι οποίοι συνιστούν τη βασική προϋπόθεση για την επίτευξη του καλού.

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