

Notes on “Democritus”

- I. Democritus—last of the natural philosophers
 - A. Native of Abdera in Thrace
 - B. Said to have traveled to Egypt and Persia
- II. Believed, with other natural philosophers, that nothing could come from nothing, and nothing actually “changed.”
 - A. He attempts to mediate between the Monism of Parmenides and the pluralism of Empedocles
- III. Believed everything built of tiny eternal and immutable blocks called atoms
 - A. “Atom” means un-cuttable
 - B. Atoms are different, otherwise no variety, but each constitutes a Parmenidean “One”
 - C. Formed all things, re-arranged themselves into other things
- IV. Came to theory of atoms as a rational deduction from premise that nothing can come out of nothing—i.e., a rationalist
- V. Democritus a *materialist*; one who believes in nothing but material things
 - A. Thus Democritus believed that all life was governed by mechanical laws, the inevitable law of necessity
 - B. This makes him a “determinist”
 - C.
 - D. The question “why,” when asked of natural phenomena, can mean two things: “What purpose did this event serve?” or “What earlier circumstances caused this event?”
 1. The first question is only answerable by *teleology*, the study of design (intent, purpose) in nature
 - a. This question can only be asked about an aspect of existence, not existence as a whole—who/why created the creator?
 2. The second question can be answered by science
 3. Democritus asks only the second question
 4. Bertrand Russell claims that the subsequent philosopher’s interest in the first question led science up a blind alley until the Renaissance.
 - E. Because the atoms constituting the soul disperse at death to form other souls, there is no immortal soul or eternal life once the body disintegrates
 - F. Held that qualities such as warmth, taste, and color are not really in the object but in the perceiver, whereas such qualities as weight, density, and hardness are in the object