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'We in actuality grasp nothing for certain' (252/148). - Does Democritean atomism necessarily entail scepticism about human knowledge?

Before we can begin to attempt answering the question before us we must first have an understanding of what Democritean atomism entails as well as what it is for us as humans to have knowledge. We begin with the former. The crux of this philosophy could be summed up in the phrase "the truth in real things is that there are atoms and void." But what are atoms? What is the void? For Democritus atoms are indivisible particles which are perfectly solid with no internal gaps. These atoms may vary in size and shape. They are also indestructible and ungenerated. Apart from these qualities they possess no other definable features and are only subject to change in location. That is, these atoms can move about. When in motion these atoms collide and form clusters or repel one another. Hence all objects of our experience are just collections of atoms and void.

The void is supposedly a region of empty space. But is this space composed of something or nothing? If something then it would have to be atoms since all that exists are atoms and void. But if the empty space is composed of atoms then motion becomes impossible for there would now be no unoccupied spaces. As such the space has to be occupied by nothing. What is nothing? Nothing is the absence of everything. Nothing is nonexistence. Nothing is non-being. If this is the case then how can an atom move in nothing? Can motion be ontologically on par with nothing? Probably the void as espoused by Democritus has been suggested to be a region that is temporarily unfilled between atoms rather than absolute nothingness. Under this explanation the void has the intrinsic quality of 'yielding' which is in directly opposite to the resistance felt between atoms. Hence atoms tend to drift from more densely packed regions into empty spaces as they 'yield' their position due to collisions. Let us grant for sake of argument that this explanation is sufficient to describe the void.

One must keep in view that both atoms and the void are devoid of sensible qualities. As earlier stated all atoms possess size, shape and the ability to move. If this is the case then where do the qualities of our common experience come from? Furthermore can all qualities be reduced to quantities? Take for instance water which is made up of a particular arrangement of atoms; two atoms of hydrogen to one atom of oxygen. But if we added an extra atom of oxygen, we get something totally different from water called Hydrogen Peroxide, which does not taste like water and it bleaches. Or suppose we were taking a walk on a rocky beach. We can clearly hear the sound the waves make as it crashes into the rocks. Suppose we had superman's x-ray vision and we could see as an atom of the wave hit the rock. Would we hear a sound? I think not, because relatively bigger objects like a turkey feather falling to the ground would not make a sound. Now add to this zero sound the next zero sound of an atom that hits the rock.

It should be evident that no matter how many atoms of the wave that hits the rock the cumulative sound will still be zero because zero sound added even till infinity will still give you zero sound. Therefore if the atoms and void are the fundamental realities then sensible qualities must exist only in our consciousness and have no status in reality.

The concept of knowledge even though still hotly debated, is nevertheless understandable. Also a lot of the disputing parties will largely agree that those who have knowledge about anything are also in possession of the truth about that same thing. That is simply to say knowledge presupposes truth. Knowledge also presupposes a mind, for there has to be a thinking substance that is in possession of this truth. But this thinking substance entails that there must be a subject (that which is doing the thinking) and an object (that which is known). Hence knowledge entails truth and a mind in possession of this truth. It is these two pivotal pillars of knowledge that Democritean atomism knocks down leaving a pile of skeptical rubble.

Let's start with the subject/object distinction. As long as Democritean atomism regards the Atoms and the Void as more real than the objects they compose there can clearly be no subjects or objects. As already noted above, a subject would have to display the characteristics of a thinking substance, such as having a unique first person ontology which is the referent of the term 'I', enduring from one moment to another as one being and be able to account for mental states. If according to Democritus, I and everything else is just the same stuff, albeit differences in arrangement, how can one distinguish between everything else and me (just imagine having superman's x-ray vision and all you can see are Atoms and void)? Can there even be a one to do the distinguishing? Why also suppose there are separate entities when everything is ultimately atoms in motion and void?

As already noted knowledge presupposes truth. Truth can be understood to be correspondence with reality. Truth is what corresponds to its referent. This truth applies to both abstract as well as actual realities. As such there can be mathematical truths, truths about ideas, but in each case there must be an object which truth accurately expresses. Truth is also objective. What objective means is simply independent of its knower and his/her consciousness.

From the foregoing it is difficult to see how Democritean atomism can account for truth. For on this theory truth would be a physical motion of Atoms. But a physical motion is a fleeting event numerically distinct from any other event. Hence no two combinations of Atoms (persons) can have the same motion nor can one person have it twice. If both subjects and truth which are prerequisites for knowledge cannot be accounted for under Democritean Atomism, then it must necessarily entail skepticism.