Definition: Democritus from Philip's Encyclopedia

Greek philosopher and scientist. Only fragments of his work remain. He contributed to the theory of atomism, propounded by his teacher Leucippus, by suggesting that all matter consisted of tiny, indivisible particles.

Summary Article: Democritus
From The Encyclopedia of Ancient History

Democritus of Abdera (ca. 460–360 BCE) was a Greek philosopher and student of Leukippos. He developed ancient Atomism into an influential philosophical system. We have titles of over 60 of his works, all now lost except for fragments. Democritus taught that everything around us is made up of atoms (atomoi, literally, "uncuttables") moving through an infinite void. Atoms are very small, indivisible, and indestructible particles, and they exist in an infinite number of different shapes. Atoms are in constant and eternal motion and travel through the void until they collide with other atoms and move off in different directions. As they move and collide, atoms sometimes come together to create "vortexes," which in turn can become "worlds" (kosmoi). There is an infinite number of worlds like our own, and they constantly come into and out of existence throughout the infinite void. Within these worlds all compound bodies – inanimate objects, plants, animals, and humans – are made up of atoms moving back and forth in the void. The human soul, too, is made of atoms, and is thus mortal, disintegrating with the body at death. Little is known about Democritus' views of the gods, though he seems to have taught that humans developed their belief in divinities as a result of receiving images of huge and powerful anthropomorphic beings. In his Ethics Democritus made euthymia ("contentment") the chief goal of life. His teachings greatly influenced the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who further developed and refined the atomic system.

SEE ALSO: Epicurus and Epicureanism; Soul, Greece and Rome.

References and Suggested Readings


Walter Englert
APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA