

# The Atomists: Leucippus and Democritus

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*Fragments*

A TEXT AND TRANSLATION  
WITH A COMMENTARY BY  
C.C.W. TAYLOR



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I am grateful to Oxford University for the award of a special lectureship in 1993–4, and to my college for sabbatical leave in Hilary Term 1996. Without the relief from teaching duties thus provided the appearance of this volume would have been even further delayed.

C. C. W. TAYLOR

Corpus Christi College, Oxford  
1998



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## ABBREVIATIONS

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- CAG *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*  
CIG *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum*  
CPF *Corpus dei papiri filosofici greci e latini*, Florence, 1989–95  
CQ *Classical Quarterly*  
CSEL *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*  
DK H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th ed., Berlin, 1951  
Dox. H. Diels, *Doxographi Graeci*, Berlin 1879, repr. 1965  
LS A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Cambridge, 1987  
LSJ Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed., revised H.S. Jones and R. McKenzie, Oxford, 1940  
RE Pauly-Wissowa, *Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Stuttgart, 1874–

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## PREFACE

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The aim of this work is to present the ancient evidence, both direct and indirect, for the thought of Leucippus and Democritus, and to assist the critical evaluation of the thought of those philosophers by the provision of a commentary on the evidence. In accordance with the format of the series to which it belongs, a Greek text of the fragments is provided, accompanied by facing translation, whereas the testimonia are given in translation only. The policy which has determined the selection of fragments is explained in the commentary at the beginning of the section on Ethics and Politics (pp. 222–7).

As explained in the commentary, the evidence for the atomists presents the peculiar feature that, while the number of purported fragments is large, very few fragments deal with the atomists' central doctrines, for which we are almost wholly reliant on doxographical evidence. Consequently the commentary, with the exception of the section on Ethics and Politics, is almost exclusively confined to the testimonia. The following points about the presentation of the latter in this volume should particularly be noted.

1. Though I have presented the biographical evidence, such as it is, for Leucippus separately from that for Democritus, I do not make any distinction between the two in respect of doctrines. That policy seems to me to be sanctioned by the doxographical tradition (see commentary, 'Life and Works,' pp. 157–8).

2. While the biographical section of the testimonia closely follows the order of DK, the various sections on the doctrines of the atomists are not based on any selection previously published. Of the selections available, DK is unsatisfactory for two reasons. First, it omits many important passages (see Concordance A); second, its separation of Leucippus from Democritus results in the arbitrary dislocation of unitary passages of evidence. While

Luria includes virtually everything, he frequently carves up continuous passages into disconnected fragments, often less than a complete sentence, many of which are printed several times in the light of their relevance to different topics. It therefore seemed to me better to start afresh by making my own selection of passages and ordering them as seemed to me best to exhibit the structure of the atomists' doctrines. Where the atomists are mentioned in the context of a continuous argument, as is frequently the case in Aristotle, I have tried, as far as limitations of space permit, to present sufficient of the context to make the direction of the argument intelligible.

3. I have not attempted to include every passage in ancient literature in which the atomists are referred to. Not only would that have made the volume unacceptably large, but it would not have served the purpose of the work, since it would merely have encumbered the reader with a plethora of passages repeating essentially the same information. I have translated what I judge to be enough passages to provide the essential evidence, and have added further references to guide the reader who wishes to research further the doxographical tradition on particular points. These further references are designated by the number of the testimonium to which they are appended, followed by 'cit' (for citation) and (where more than one passage is cited) a lower-case roman numeral indicating the order of the passage in the list of citations. E.g., '21cit i' designates the first additional passage cited under testimonium 21.

I append to the commentary a concordance to allow the reader to cross-refer from this volume to the two other principal collections of evidence, those of DK and Luria, and brief notes on the sources cited.

Fragments are designated by a number preceded by **L** (for Leucippus) or **D** (for Democritus); testimonia are designated by number only. Items in the bibliography are numbered consecutively, and are designated by the author's surname followed by the number, e.g. Barnes 7.

Author's comments or elucidations in the translations are enclosed in square brackets.

I have tried to make the volume accessible to readers who know no Greek. Inevitably, this aim is attainable only in part, since many of the sources cited are not available in translation, and it is not practicable to provide translations for all of them. All translations used in the volume are my own.

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THE ATOMISTS:  
LEUCIPPUS AND DEMOCRITUS

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## FRAGMENTS: TEXT

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### LEUCIPPUS

**L1.** οὐδέν χρήμα μάτην γίνεται, ἀλλὰ πάντα ἐκ λόγου τε καὶ ὑπ' ἀνάγκης.  
STOBAEUS I.4.7c [= AETIUS I.25.4]

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### DEMOCRITUS

#### LIFE

**D1.** ἦλθον γάρ εἰς Ἀθήνας καὶ οὐτις με ἔγνωκεν.  
DIOGENES LAERTIUS IX.36

#### GENERAL

**D2.** Δημόκριτος γοῦν αὐτός, ὡς φασι, ἔλεγε βούλεσθαι μίαν εὐρεῖν αἰτιολογίαν ἢ τὴν Περσῶν οἱ βασιλείαν γενέσθαι.  
DIONYSIUS ap. EUSEBIUS PE XIV.27.4

**D3.** νέα ἐφ' ἡμέρη φρονέουτες  
PLUTARCH *Mor.* 655d, 722d, 1129e.

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# FRAGMENTS: TRANSLATION

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## LEUCIPPUS

### L1. From *On Mind*

Nothing happens in vain, but everything from reason and by necessity.<sup>1</sup>

STOBAEUS I.4.7c [= AETIUS I.25.4]. Context in 74d.

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## DEMOCRITUS

### LIFE

D1. For I came to Athens and no one knew me.

DIAGENES LAERTIUS IX.36. Context in 6 (36). Also in CICERO, *Tusculan Disputations* V.36.104.

### GENERAL

D2. Democritus himself, so they say, said that he would rather discover a single explanation than acquire the kingdom of the Persians.

EUSEBIUS *Praeparatio Evangelica* XIV.27.4 [citing DIONYSIUS of Alexandria]

D3. Thinking new things every day.

PLUTARCH attributes this proverbial-type expression to Democritus three times: *Convivial Questions* III.6.4, 655d; VIII.3.5, 722d; *On the Maxim 'Live out of the public eye'* 5, 1129e.

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<sup>1</sup> For the translation of *matēn* and for the interpretation of the fragment see commentary 'Chance and Necessity,' pp. 188–90



WORKS ON NATURE

**D4.** λέγων τάδε περὶ τῶν ζυμπάντων

SEXTUS M. VII.265

[Sextus changes the verb from present indicative to present participle to fit the construction of his own sentence. Cicero (see opp.) indicates that Democritus' own words were probably τάδε λέγω ...]

**D5.** ἄνθρωπός ἐστιν ὁ πάντες ἴδμεν.

SEXTUS *ibid.*

**D6.** καὶ γὰρ ζῶα ὁμογενέσι ζώοις συναγελάζεται, ὡς περιστεραὶ περιστεραῖς καὶ γέρανοι γεράνοις, καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν ἄλλων ἀλόγων· ὡσαύτως δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἀψύχων, καθάπερ ὄρᾶν πάρεστιν ἐπὶ τε τῶν κεκοσκινουμένων σπερμάτων καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν παρὰ ταῖς κυματογαῖς ψηφίδων· ὅπου μὲν γὰρ κατὰ τὸν τοῦ κοσκίνου δῖνον διακριτικῶς φακοὶ μετὰ φακῶν τάσσονται καὶ κριθαὶ μετὰ κριθῶν καὶ πυροὶ μετὰ πυρῶν, ὅπου δὲ κατὰ τὴν τοῦ κύματος κίνησιν αἱ μὲν ἐπιμήκεις ψηφίδες εἰς τὸν αὐτὸν τόπον ταῖς ἐπιμήκεσιν ὠθοῦνται, αἱ δὲ περιφερεῖς ταῖς περεφερέσειν, ὡς ἂν συναγωγόν τι ἐχούσης τῶν πραγμάτων τῆς ἐν τοῦτοις ὁμοιότητος.

SEXTUS M. VII.117–18

[Sextus does not reproduce Democritus' Ionic dialect, but the elaboration of the sentence construction suggests at the least a close paraphrase.]

**D7.** δῖνον ἀπὸ τοῦ παντὸς ἀποκριθῆναι παντοίων ιδεῶν

SIMPLICIUS *Phys.* 327.24–5

**D8.** ξυνουσίη ἀποπληξίη σμικρῆ· ἐξέσσυται γὰρ ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ἀνθρώπου καὶ ἀποσπᾶται πληγῇ τινι μεριζόμενος.

HIPPOLYTUS *Ref.* VIII.14 ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ἀνθρώπου ἐξέσσυται καὶ ἀποσπᾶται ... μεριζόμενος; STOBÆUS III.6.28 ξυνουσίη ... ἀνθρώπου.

WORKS ON NATURE

**D4.** This I say about everything.

**D5.** Man is what we all know.

SEXTUS *Against the Mathematicians* VII.265

Democritus, imitating the voice of Zeus and 'Saying this about everything,' tried to set out his conception [sc. of the nature of man], but achieved no more than the commonsense statement which he put as 'Man is what we all know.'

[Also CICERO *Academica* II.23.73

What shall I say about Democritus? ... He was bold enough to begin with 'This I say about everything.']

**D6.** Animals flock together with animals of the same kind, doves with doves and cranes with cranes and similarly with the other irrational creatures, and so with non-living things too, as one can see in the case of seeds in a sieve and pebbles on a beach. In the one lentils are sorted out by the swirl of the sieve to lie together with lentils, barley with barley, and wheat with wheat, and in the other oblong pebbles are pushed by the motion of the waves into the same place as oblong and round into the same place as round, as if that sort of similarity in things had a kind of attractive force.

SEXTUS *Against the Mathematicians* VII.116–18

There is an ancient opinion that like things are recognized by like. Democritus seemed to have devised some considerations in support of this opinion ... he based his argument on the behaviour of living and non-living things. For 'Animals flock together,' he says, 'with animals ... attractive force.' [Cf. **124.**]

**D7.** A swirl of forms of all kinds was separated off from the totality.

SIMPLICIUS *Commentary on Physics* 327.24–5. Context in **71c**.

**D8.** Sexual intercourse is a mild apoplexy; for man issues from man and is torn away, separated by a sort of blow.

This saying is preserved in two senses, as follows:

HIPPOLYTUS *Refutation of All Heresies* VIII.14

Man issues ... blow.

STOBAEUS III.6.28

Sexual intercourse ... from man.

---

## 6 Fragments

μικρὰν ἐπιληψίαν τὴν συνουσίαν ὁ Ἀβδηρίτης ἔλεγεν σοφιστῆς ... ἄνθρωπος  
γὰρ ἐξ ἀνθρώπου ἐκφέεται καὶ ἀποσπάται.  
CLEMENT *Paed.* II.94

**D9.** ἄνθρωποι εἰς ἔσται καὶ ἄνθρωπος πάντες.  
Diels suggests ἄνθρωπος ἐξέσσεται ἐξ ἀνθρώπου παυτός.  
Ps-GALEN *Def. Med.* 439 (XIX.449 K.)

**D10.** ξυόμενοι ἄνθρωποι ἡδονται καὶ σφιν γίνεται ἄπερ τοῖς ἀφροδισιά-  
ζουσιν.  
HERODIAN ap. EUSTATHIUS in *Od.* XIV.428

**D11.** Διόβλητον μὲν οὐδὲν ... παρ' αἰθρίης στέγειν ... σέλας.  
Pohlenz οὐδὲν <γήμων οἶον τὸ> παρ' ...; Diels οὐδέεν <οἶον μὴ τὸ>; Diels  
στέγειν <εὐαγές>  
PLUTARCH *Mor.* 665f

An alternative version is that of CLEMENT *Paedagogus* II.94

The sage of Abdera called intercourse 'mild epilepsy' ... for man grows out of and is torn away from man.

[It is uncertain whether Democritus himself used the terms 'apoplexy' and 'epilepsy' or whether either term or both paraphrase his own terminology.

Cf. GALEN Commentary on Hippocratic *Epidemics* XVII A.521; id. XVII B.28; GALEN *Is the Foetus an Animal?* XIX.176; PLINY *Natural History* XXVIII.16.58.]

**D9.** One will be men and man all.

Ps-GALEN *On Medical Definitions* 439 (XIX.449)

Democritus and Hippocrates say that the sperm is secreted by the whole body:<sup>2</sup> Democritus says 'One ... all.'

[The sentence reported by ps-Galen is unclear in sense, and does not seem capable of expressing the sense required by the context. Hence Diels suggests that the words are a corruption of another version of **D8**, with the sense 'Man issues from the whole man.'

SENECA *Letters* 7.10 [= DK 68 B302a] records a saying of Democritus on the theme of the importance of the individual: 'Unus mihi pro populo est, et populus pro uno' (To my mind one man is worth as much as the people, and the people is worth as much as one). The structural resemblance to the unintelligible sentence recorded by ps-Galen is striking, and it is possible that that sentence is a garbled version of an ethical maxim (recorded by Seneca) which was introduced into the biological context by an unintelligent copyist, through confusion with a version of **D8**.]

**D10.** When people scratch themselves they experience pleasure like that of sex.

EUSTATHIUS Commentary on *Odyssey* XIV.428 [citing HERODIAN, a grammarian of the second century AD]

**D11.** Nothing struck by lightning <can> contain the flash from heaven.

PLUTARCH *Convivial Questions* IV.2.4, 665f

[The mss. have gaps after 'lightning' and before 'flash.' Editorial restorations give conflicting senses: Pohlenz restores to read 'No earthly thing struck by lightning can contain [i.e. withstand] the bright flash from heaven,' Diels 'No lightning sent from Zeus does not preserve the pure brightness of the heavens.' The context, which deals with the different effects of lightning-strikes on different kinds of things, indicates that the sense of Democritus' statement is that suggested by Pohlenz.]

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<sup>2</sup> See 135, with commentary 'Science and Mathematics,' pp. 198–9

LITERARY CRITICISM AND THEORY OF LANGUAGE

**D12.** ποιητῆς δὲ ἄσσα μὲν ἂν γράφη μετ' ἐνθουσιασμοῦ καὶ ἱεροῦ πνεύματος, καλὰ κάρτα ἐστίν.  
CLEMENT *Strom.* VI.168

**D13.** "Ὅμηρος φύσεως λαχὼν θεαζούσης ἐπέων κόσμον ἐτεκτήνατο παντοίων.  
DIO CHRYS. 36.1

THEOLOGY

**D14.** τῶν λογίων ἀνθρώπων ὀλίγοι ἀνατείναντες τὰς χεῖρας ἐνταῦθα, ὃν νῦν ἡέρα καλέομεν οἱ "Ἕλληνες 'πάντα, <εἶπαν>, Ζεὺς μυθέεται καὶ πάνθ' οὗτος οἶδε καὶ διδοί καὶ ἀφαιρέεται καὶ βασιλεὺς οὗτος τῶν πάντων.'  
Reinhardt <εἶπαν>  
CLEMENT *Protr.* 68.5 ὁ Δ. τῶν λογίων ἀνθρώπων ὀλίγους φησὶν ἀνατείναντας ... πάντα διαμυθεῖσθαι [Heinse Δία μυθεῖσθαι] ...  
CLEMENT *Strom.* V.102 ὀλίγους γράφει τῶν ἀνθρώπων οἱ δὴ ἀνατείνουτες [EUSEBIUS *PE* XIII.13.27 ἀνατείναντες] ...

EPISTEMOLOGY

**D15.** ἐτεῆ δὲ οὐδὲν ἴδμεν· ἐν βυθῷ γάρ ἡ ἀλήθεια.  
Stephanus ἐτεῆ: mss. αἰτίη.  
DIOGENES LAERTIUS IX.72

**D16.** νόμῳ γλυκὺ καὶ νόμῳ πικρὸν, νόμῳ θερμόν, νόμῳ ψυχρόν, νόμῳ χροιή· ἐτεῆ δὲ ἄτομα καὶ κενόν.  
SEXTUS M. VII.135

LITERARY CRITICISM AND THEORY OF LANGUAGE

**D12.** What a poet writes with inspiration and the breath of the gods is very fine.

CLEMENT *Miscellanies* VI.168. Context in **166c**.

**D13.** Homer, by getting a share in the divine nature, accomplished the ordering of all kinds of verses.

DIO CHRYSOSTOM 36.1. Context in **166d**.

THEOLOGY

**D14.** A few learned people, raising their hands towards what we Greeks now call the air, said 'Zeus thinks of all things and he knows all things and gives and takes away, and he is king of all things.'

CLEMENT *Protrepticus* 68.5

Democritus says that a few learned people ... king of all things.'

CLEMENT *Miscellanies* V.102

Democritus writes that there were a few people who, raising their hands ... king of all things.'

EPISTEMOLOGY

**D15.** In reality we know nothing; for truth is in the depths.

DIOGENES LAERTIUS IX.72. Context in **179b**.

**D16.** By convention sweet and by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention colour; but in reality atoms and void.<sup>3</sup>

SEXTUS *Against the Mathematicians* VII.135. Also DIOGENES LAERTIUS IX.72; GALEN *On Medical Experience* 15.7; GALEN *On the Elements according to Hippocrates* I.2. Contexts in **179a–d**. See also **206**.

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<sup>3</sup> Democritus here characterizes the contrast between how things appear to the senses and how they are in reality in terms of the distinction between convention (*nomos*) and nature (normally *phusis*, for which he substitutes the term *eteē*, reality or truth, a word which Galen (179d) indicates was a coinage of his own). The contrast was widely applied in fifth-century thought; for discussion of its application to moral and political questions see commentary 'Ethics and Politics,' pp. 229–30, and for a full discussion see W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* vol. 3 (Cambridge, 1969), ch. 4. There are

**D17.** ἡμεῖς δὲ τῷ μὲν ἐόντι οὐδὲν ἀτρεκὲς συνίεμεν, μεταπίπτου δὲ κατὰ τε σώματος διαθήκην καὶ τῶν ἐπεισιόντων καὶ τῶν ἀντιστηριζόντων.  
SEXTUS M. VII.136

**D18.** ἐτεῆ μὲν νυν ὅτι οἶον ἕκαστον ἔστιν ἢ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐ συνίεμεν, πολλαχῆ δεδήλωται.  
SEXTUS M. VII.136

**D19.** γινώσκειν τε χρὴ ἄνθρωπον τῷδε τῷ κανόνι ὅτι ἐτεῆς ἀπήλλακται.  
SEXTUS M. VII.137

**D20.** δηλοῖ μὲν δὴ καὶ οὗτος ὁ λόγος ὅτι ἐτεῆ οὐδὲν ἴσμεν περὶ οὐδενός, ἀλλ' ἐπιρυσμίη ἐκάστοισιν ἢ δόξισ.  
SEXTUS M. VII.137

**D21.** καίτοι δηλον ἔσται ὅτι ἐτεῆ οἶον ἕκαστον γινώσκειν ἐν ἀπόρῳ ἐστί.  
SEXTUS M. VII.137

**D17.** In fact we know nothing firm, but what changes according to the condition of the body and of the things that enter it and come up against it. SEXTUS *Against the Mathematicians* VII.136. Context in **179a**.

**D18.** That in reality we do not know what kind of thing each thing is or is not has been shown many times. SEXTUS *Against the Mathematicians* VII.136. Context in **179a**.

**D19.** By this principle man must know that he is removed from reality. SEXTUS *Against the Mathematicians* VII.137. Context in **179a**.

**D20.** This argument too shows that in reality we know nothing about anything, but each person's opinion is something which flows in.<sup>4</sup> SEXTUS *Against the Mathematicians* VII.137. Context in **179a**.

**D21.** Yet it will be clear that to know what kind of thing each thing is in reality is impossible. SEXTUS *Against the Mathematicians* VII.137. Context in **179a**.

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in fact two contrasts, since what is the case in reality or in the nature of things, independently of human choice or agreement, may be opposed either to (i) things which are in fact *F*, but only because human beings have decided or agreed that they are to be regarded as *F* (e.g., being socially acceptable), or to (ii) things which are not in fact *F*, but are merely called *F* (e.g., what is really separation of elements is called destruction, Empedocles fr. 9 DK). To the extent that it is disputable how far anything actually becomes *F* by being generally regarded as, or by being regularly called, *F*, these two contrasts shade into one another. That seems to be so in this case, since Democritus might be taken as saying either that things do have secondary qualities only because people agree that they have them (since that is how they seem), or that they do not in fact have those qualities, but people agree to say that they do (since that is how they seem), or as not having distinguished the two theses. Either way, the crucial point is that the convention of using secondary quality terminology is not arbitrary, since it captures how things appear to us. See further commentary 'Secondary Qualities,' pp. 175–9.

<sup>4</sup> Following DK, I translate *epirusmiē* as an adjective, qualifying *doxis* (opinion), having the sense 'flowing in,' from the verb *epirreō*. That is the sense of the word (which is found only in this passage) attested in the fifth century AD lexicon of Hesychius. On the other hand, *rusmos* (an Ionic form of *ruthmos*) was an atomistic technical term for 'shape' (45, 46a) and one of the titles preserved in Diogenes Laertius' list of the works of Democritus (40 (47)) is *Peri Ameipsirusmiōn* 'On Changes of Shape,' where *ameipsirusmiē* is a noun. Further, though the noun *epirusmiē* is not itself found, the verb *epirruthmizein* does occur (very rarely) in the sense of 'alter.' Most scholars (including Langerbeck 11, Guthrie 9, Luria 2, Alfieri 5, Barnes 7, and Salem 15) therefore interpret the word here as a noun, a variant for *ameipsirusmiē*, giving the sense 'opinion is a reshaping.' (de Ley 91 actually proposes amending Sextus' text to read *ameipsirusmiē*.) The point of the



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