

To Fast from Evil or from Excess: Presocratic Ethical Systems of Empedocles and Democritus

Much Presocratic philosophy done after Parmenides focuses on refuting or revising Eleatic monism. As a result, less attention is given to many Presocratic ethical systems. Ethical theories from thinkers like Empedocles and Democritus are often overshadowed by their other ideas: elemental pluralism and atomism, respectively. This paper serves to compare the ethical systems of these two thinkers. This will be done in three parts; the first will introduce Empedocles' and Democritus' general philosophies. Next, an account of their ethical systems will be provided and contextualized in relation to their other philosophical commitments. Lastly, these thinkers' ethical systems will be compared and contrasted directly. Understanding Empedocles' and Democritus' ethical systems is inherently valuable, but it can also provide new perspectives on contemporary ethics and general Presocratic philosophy.

Empedocles was born in Akragas (now Sicily) around 492 BCE. His most famous works are *Physics*, which focuses on natural philosophy, and *Purification*, which focuses on ethics and religion. His pluralist metaphysical system is composed of *four roots* (earth, water, air, and fire) as well as *Love* and *Strife*. Like Parmenides, he believed that nothing that exists could be created or destroyed and argues that the elements that do exist can change in proportion. In this system, *Love* and *Strife* are the immortal forces that unify and separate materials. Likely influenced by Pythagoras, Empedocles believes in the transmigration of souls. Additionally, he believed in divine beings known as daimones (Empedocles, F53).

With some of Empedocles' general ideas now established, his ethical views can be introduced. He proposes a universal negative ethics which condemns bloodshed and explicitly speaks against eating flesh (Empedocles, F15, F17, F19). The condemnation of bloodshed has

anti-meat eating and anti-war implications, and from his available fragments against bloodshed, one can also induce general rules against the harm of others. Empedocles also says to, “fast from evil,” which simultaneously reinforces the negative aspect of his ethical system and the motif of consumption (Empedocles, F22). Additionally, he believes that one should respect the gods in addition to humans and animals (Empedocles, F7). In his ethics, there are external reasons for doing what is deemed to be right (namely for other humans and divinities) (Empedocles, F8).

Empedocles’ ethical views fit neatly into his other philosophies. His Pythagorean view on transmigration explains the condemnation of bloodshed, since this as well as eating meat involve the killing of former humans (Empedocles, F17). Bloodshed and meat eating can also be seen as unethical since they involve separative processes which occur through Strife (Empedocles, F48). Empedocles also believed that “all things possess thought and a portion of intelligence,” which further solidifies his position against doing harm to non-humans (Empedocles, F116). Lastly, Empedocles’ condemnation of those with dim opinions of the gods relates to his overall views on divinities.

Democritus was born in Abdera around 460 BCE. A contemporary of Socrates and student of Leucippus, he wrote over seventy books, including *Mikrokosmos*. Like Empedocles, Democritus proposes a metaphysical compromise system inspired by Eleatic monism known as atomism. Atomism is similar to Eleatic monism in that what is can neither be created nor destroyed, but instead of existence being composed one thing, it is composed of miniscule atoms that move around in a space called the void. Democritus notes that while everything objectively consists of atoms and void, human experiences of these atoms and void is conventional (think of honey that is conventionally sweet but is truly atoms and void).

Despite being best known for his atomism, Democritus wrote primarily on ethics. Much like distinguishing between the objective and conventional, he argues that what is good is not always the same as what is pleasurable (Democritus, F56). Furthermore, what is pleasurable is subjective, while goodness is universal (Democritus, F57). Democritus advocates moderation as well as cheerful living with as little distress as possible (Democritus, F54, F60, F61). There is also a sense of internality in his ethics; one does what is good in order to live a cheerful life and not merely to appease the gods. Democritus also encourages individuals to, “be disturbed by no fear or superstition or any other emotion” (Democritus, F55). This imperative effectively shifts ethical authority away from divinities.

Democritus’ ethical system becomes more clear in light of his metaphysics. In atomism, the primary role of god-like intervention in natural phenomena is displaced. This explains the absence of external appeals in Democratic ethics; one need not make appeals to the atoms and void, rather, they should be concerned with their own well-being. Democritus does mention movements within the soul based on external activities, but it is unclear whether this soul is part of a theological-divine network or simply a word to describe the inner self or the mind (Democritus, F54).

Both Empedocles’ and Democritus’ ethics are prescriptive; they tell others what needs to be done (or avoided) in order to lead a good life, and each one also has some notion of a consistent good (Empedocles, F21 & Democritus, F57). However, what *good* looks like is quite different. While Empedocles urges humans to “fast from evil,” Democritus suggests that one merely needs to live in moderation and makes no mention of evil in his ethics. Democritus even warns against being disturbed by superstition, which could place his ethical justifications

squarely against those of Empedocles. Much of Empedocles' ethics is concerned with eating flesh, while Democritus does not propose any dietary restrictions. Despite this, both have warnings about eating; Empedocles focuses on what one eats, while Democritus focuses on how much one eats. Motivation for Empedocles' ethics is to not harm others, while Democritus' focuses on not harming the self through excess.

In light of this investigation, one can see that the ethical systems developed by these two thinkers not only have different emphases but are affected by their mentorship and philosophical inheritance. Ultimately, Empedocles' ethics hinges on belief in transmigration of souls and divinities, while Democritus' is at least partially inspired by his atomism and ideas on convention.

References:

1. *A Presocratics Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*. Second Edition. Edited by Patricia Curd. Translated by Patricia Curd and Richard D. McKirahan. Indianapolis/Cambridge. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2011.

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