

Student ID: 831005828

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Prompt

On the face of it, both perceptible qualities such as heat and color and states of mind like happiness pose a difficulty for Democritus, who tries to explain everything exhaustively in terms of the basic elements in his system which lack these qualities and states. What does Democritus have to say about these qualities and states? Summarize your interpretation of his view as your thesis. What argument does Democritus offer to support his view, on your interpretation? What would be the strongest objection to his argument, and how would you respond to it on behalf of him?

Response

How does Democritus explain our direct experience of life, which consists of emotions and sense perceptions? The thesis of my paper is that sense perceptions are the effects of physical atoms interacting (**T12**), while emotions are the effects of soul atoms interacting (**T25**). In other words, our direct experience is not necessarily true. For Democritus, thinking is the only way to learn the fundamentals of reality, because sensory observation does not necessarily reveal true things (**F3**).

In my interpretation, the structure of Democritus' argument for his view is twofold: first, he must prove that (A) sensory experience is caused by physical atoms. Then, he must prove that (B) states of emotion are caused by soul atoms. If these two are proven, my thesis as the conjunction of A and B is proven as well.

Since my thesis is the conjunction of (A) and (B), the strongest way to disprove it is to prove that (A) or (B) is false (or both). A strong objection to the argument is to reject premise (B) with the counterexample of intentional emotions, which are emotions that are *about* something. For example, you can be sad that it is raining; the sadness is about the rain. This relationship cannot be caused by only soul atoms interacting because, if (A) is true, the rain is purely physical atoms interacting and the emotion is the effect of purely soul atoms interacting. This counterexample suggests that (A) and (B) cannot both be true, because it implies a complete separation between physical atoms and soul atoms. This complete separation is impossible because sometimes something physical (such as the rain) can cause an emotion.

In response to this counter, Democritus could argue that (A) and (B) do NOT imply a complete separation between the soul atoms and the physical atoms. If, by “soul atoms,” Democritus had meant atoms that are nonphysical and therefore cannot interact with physical bodies, the counterargument would be correct. However, the definition of “soul,” in my interpretation of Democritus’ view, does not imply nonphysical. When Democritus was describing his model, he defined different *kinds* of atoms, the soul atoms and the physical atoms. These two kinds of atoms are qualitatively different but exist within the same unit (namely a human body) (T25). As part of the same unit, they can interact. Therefore, if we understand what Democritus meant by the word “soul,” it is obvious that (A) and (B) do not imply a complete separation between physical atoms and soul atoms.

Since the counterargument mentioned above could not disprove (A) and (B), I conclude that Democritus’ argument that sense perceptions are caused by physical atoms and emotions are caused by soul atoms is valid.