

DEMOCRITUS AND THE FRAGMENTS OF ANCIENT GREEK MATERIALISM PHILOSOPHY 210:

Seminar in Greek Philosophy

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Monte Johnson, Associate Professor of Philosophy, UCSD

The first aim of this seminar is to reconstruct as coherently as possible the philosophy of Democritus of Abdera (c. 460-c. 370 BC), founder of atomism and the primary representative of ancient Greek materialism. The second aim is to develop practical skills in researching ancient and fragmentary authors (writers whose work survives in part or entirely in the works of other writers).

The topics to be covered are: (1) life and works; (2) principles and causality; (3) cosmology; (4) biology; (5) psychology and epistemology; (6) anthropology; (7) theology; (8) ethics; (9) politics; (10) influence. Democritus was the first philosopher to present an all-embracing naturalistic conception of physics, logic, and ethics, and he has been a seminal influence on the development of each of these areas of thought. But although his views are frequently discussed by other ancient writers throughout antiquity and his philosophy was adapted by the Epicureans, none of his original works survived the middle ages intact. Nevertheless he exercised an immense influence on key figures of the renaissance and the early modern scientific revolution, and was still being recalled by the founders of modern atomic physics.

Each member of the seminar is encouraged to explore Democritus' views as they relate to their own research interests. Each member will (either alone or in a group, and in consultation with the professor) assemble a collection of fragments and testimony of Democritus' views on one of the above topics, amounting to 15-30 pages of photocopied material from various primary sources. These readings will be distributed one week in advance to the whole seminar. Each member will then lead a discussion of the veracity of the sources, and attempt to produce a coherent account of Democritus' views on the basis of the evidence presented. Each member will finally write a 10-20-page review of the status of the question on the same topic, including a bibliography of secondary sources. Evaluation will be based on: participation (20%); research and presentation (30%); and final paper (50%).

The seminar is recommended especially for those looking to satisfy

a breadth requirement in Greek Philosophy or History of Philosophy, those interested in the techniques of research into ancient philosophical views, and those interested in the history of materialism, atomism, and naturalism.