HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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# **Democritus** (460 B.C.-

An atomist, Democritus received his inspiration from an even less known predecessor, Leucippus. (These early philosophers are known to us largely from remarks in later writers' texts, or from references in Diogenes Laertius (#75), whose *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* was written in the third century A.D., and who is, though a shaky source, often our primary knowledge base for earlier Greek thinkers.) The two of them are considered Atomists, for they both believed that the primary constitution of our world is indivisible particles in motion. The container for these particles, as they understood it, was a void, an empty space in which the atoms were in constant movement. We know that Democritus was especially concerned, in formulating this philosophy, to counter the view point of Parmenides, that motion is impossible, and that multiplicity is an illusion, which was in turn Parmenides' counter to Heraclitus, who maintained that all is flux. (We have to be amazed, as we review the density and interaction of philosophical view points, at this time, by just that, the speed and accuracy with which one thinker knew another one's position within the thought world of the Mediterranean Basin.)

The movement of the atoms, Democritus believed, was toward a constant rearrangement of the same components of the universe. Each atom, in a fashion appropriate to its own nature, was provided with hooks and barbs, with which it fitted into its fellow atoms, and in a fashion which held the totality together. The finesse of the interactions of these particles was infinite; adjustment, and the necessity which accompanied it, was continually at work; so fine was this intersection that our own perceptual process, and even our thought process, is made possible by the absorption or manipulation of the films or emanations from the atomic world. Within this system there was no first or final cause, in the Aristotelian sense, but infinite extent in time and space—the effectual meaning of the *void*. As for the ethic which pertained to this system of thought, it came down to a moderate hedonism, devoted to the modest life. Not surprisingly, considering his insights as what some have called 'the first scientist,' Democritus went so far as to sketch even an anthropology, by which he viewed the society of human beings in terms of evolution, from primitive to the polis.