THE RELIGIOUS THOUGHT OF DEMOCRITUS

There has been a trend either to reject or to minimise the presence of a religious element in the thought of Democritus. On the question of the account of gods associated with his name which is normally alone considered, scholars may be divided, broadly speaking, into two groups. The first is inclined to regard Democritus' account of the gods as purely aetiological in nature designed to explain away traditional beliefs. The second group while allowing that Democritus believed in the existence of beings whom he regarded as gods, seems to hold that he did so merely because he could not deny altogether the authenticity of previous theological views. No attempt is made to show that his belief occupied a place of importance in his thought. In this paper I wish to examine afresh the material relevant to what may be regarded as a religious aspect of Atomism. I propose to consider first Democritus' view of the soul, and secondly his theology. The latter, I believe, is subordinate to and dependent for its significance on the former.

Democritus believed that the soul or mind, like fire, was composed of very small spherical atoms. Thought was dependent upon a concentration of

1 G. VLASTOS (Ethics and Physics in Democritus. Philosophical Review 54, 1945, 581) regards the eidola as an aetiological explanation of the popular belief in the gods, and nothing more. C. BAILEY (The Greek Atomists and Epicurus. Oxford 1928, 175) considers it doubtful if Democritus believed in the existence of the gods. BAILEY'S account seems unsatisfactory even within the cautious limits which it sets itself. For example at the beginning of his account he tells us "If, which will be seen to be doubtful, he (i.e. Democritus) believed in the existence of the gods, we may safely assume that like Epicurus he held that they took no part in the affairs of our world." He makes no attempt to justify this "safe assumption" in the light of evidence against it including B 166 which he himself subsequently cites.

2 This might be said to be the position of the following: E. ZELLER, Presocratic Philosophy. Vol. II Eng. Trl. London 1881, 286 ff. K. FREEMAN, Companion to the Presocratic Philosophers. Oxford 1946, 314 ff. W. JAEGGER, The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers. Oxford 1947, 180 ff. JAEGGER, whose account is, perhaps, the most sympathetic, can only conclude concerning the gods that Democritus "relegated them to a twilight realm of materialised psychical phenomena." An exception to this general line of interpretation is F. M. CORNFORD (Principium Sapientiae Cambridge 1952, 65 f.) who indicates in passing that he regards Democritus' theology as possessing vitality. He is not concerned, however, with a systematic exposition nor with defending his position against the account of Bailey. CORNFORD'S remarks precede those of VLASTOS.

3 A 1, 101, 102, 104. All references are to DIELS-KRANZ, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker.
these atoms placed in a certain disposition in the brain. The nature of his psychology is thus clearly atomic. In contradistinction to the mainstream of Presocratic thought, soul for Democritus was a secondary existent formed by the union of atoms which were themselves devoid of life. It is true that the view has been put forward by C. Mugler that spherical atoms differed from ordinary atoms in that they possessed life or consciousness as a primary characteristic. The silence of our authorities, however, seems decisive evidence against this view. Aristotle, who is our main authority and who gives a fairly detailed summary of Democritus' views of the soul, gives no hint of his holding such a theory. He tells us only that spherical atoms were chosen because being themselves in a constant state of motion and possessing unusual powers of penetration, they were best able to cause motion in other things. His comparison of the sphericals with the quicksilver in a wooden statue might be taken to indicate clearly that he himself believed that Democritus had reduced life to purely mechanical terms.

There is evidence, however, that in another view of the soul Democritus came close to the position of other Presocratics. The association of mind with divinity is an idea upon which increasing emphasis is laid in the Presocratic period. It first appears prominently in the thought of Heraclitus. The primary fire of which he believed the universe to be composed and which he regarded as divine was identified by him in its purest form with soul or mind. Consistently with this position he stressed the rational nature of the divine guiding principle in the universe. "Wisdom is one thing, to understand the thought which steers all things through all." Under the influence of Anaxagoras who separated Mind from other forms of being and who, though he did not call it divine, may be regarded as approximating to this idea, the association of mind with divinity was stated in its most complete form by Diogenes of Apollonia. After identifying intelligence with air, Diogenes goes on "This (i.e. air in which intelligence inheres) seems to me to be divine and to extend everywhere." The human soul is not called divine in the extant fragments of either Heraclitus or Diogenes. This idea, however, at any rate in the case of Diogenes, might be deduced from the belief that the cosmic intelligence is

1 H. Cherniss, Aristotle's Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy. Baltimore 1935, 292. Aetius (A 104) locates the mind on one occasion in the brain and on another occasion in the breast. The latter idea is favoured by Bailey op. cit. p. 160.


3 De anima 404a 5ff. 4 A 104.

5 Cf. Xenophanes B 25.


7 B 41. I follow here the view of most scholars. For an alternative interpretation see G. S. Kirk, Heraclitus. The Cosmic Fragments. Cambridge 1954, 386 ff. Whichever interpretation is adopted, however, the idea seems implicit in Heraclitus' thought. Cf. G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, The Presocratic Philosophers, Cambridge 1960, 204. For associated fragments see B 32, 64, 78.
divine of which the human soul is a portion. Theophrastus makes it clear that this is how he himself understood Diogenes. Speaking of the latter’s views he says "The air within (i.e. our soul) is for us the source of perception being a small portion of the divine".

The importance which Democritus himself attached to the soul is clear from many fragments. He values the soul’s power of thought and contrasts it with the pleasures of the body as the only proper means of attaining happiness. In speaking of the soul, however, he goes much further. B 37 He who chooses the goods of the soul, chooses the more divine, he who chooses those of the body, chooses the human. B 112 "It is the essence of divine mind always to contemplate the noble. B 129 Divine things are thought by the mind. Commenting on Democritus’ use of ‘divine’, G. Vlastos explains it as an example of the well established practice of Ionian rationalism to salvage religious terms so long as: (a) they can be adapted to the exigencies of naturalistic logic; and (b) they do not inhibit rationalist criticism of magic.

He compares the position of the author of the Sacred Disease who, arguing against the view that epilepsy was a special sign of divine anger, made the statement "No disease should be considered more divine than another. All are divine and all are human. Each has a nature and power of its own. None is hopeless or incapable of treatment." I cannot be sure that I understand Vlastos here. He is arguing primarily against attaching supernatural significance to Democritus’ use of 'divine'. In this respect his citation of the Sacred Disease is valid since 'divine' there is clearly being used in a non-supernatural sense. Vlastos, however, might seem to imply that the Sacred Disease is sufficient warrant for seeing no religious significance whatsoever in Democritus’

1 64 A 19. For a recent discussion of the theological thought of Diogenes see Friedrich Höffmeier, Teleologische Weltbetrachtung bei Diogenes von Apollonia, Philologus 107, 1963. 131ff. Höffmeier argues against the view that in the question of teleology the thought of Diogenes represented an advance on that of Anaxagoras. Even if, however, we reject for Diogenes the existence of a teleological scheme together with that of a micro-macrocosm argument, it is not necessary at the same time to reject the authenticity of A 19. We need not, as Höffmeier himself points out, read into the latter a micro-macrocosm argument of the type found in Plato and Xenophon. If we accept Usener’s emendation in B 5 ll. 6—7 as probable, as I think we must, and believe that Diogenes spoke of the divinity of air and the intelligence inherent in it, then we may regard as a natural extension of this idea the view reported by Theophrastus that the same air and intelligence when present in man should be regarded with a similar religious emotion.

2 B 40, 171.

3 The view expressed by Vlastos (Philosophical Review 54, 1945, 582) that B 129 "may well be a critique of the popular belief in the gods as a 'bastard' inference from sense-perception produced by the 'eidola' seems strained. The probability clearly is that the use of 'divine' here is similar to that in B 37 and B 112 leaving aside the question of what the significance of this use may be.


use of 'divine'. I say this because at the same time he apparently takes the treatise as sufficient warrant for seeing no religious significance in Democritus' statements about the gods which he thinks imply no belief in gods on Democritus' own part but are made simply to accommodate traditional prejudices. If this is VLASTOS' interpretation then it is unjustified. In referring to the divinity of Nature as a whole, the author of the Sacred Disease may be regarded as using 'divine' in a sense which had a profoundly religious significance for himself. That he is not simply rationalising away the concept of divinity is shown by his words earlier in the treatise. I hold that a man's body is not defiled by a god, the one being utterly corrupt, the other perfectly holy . . . . It is the divine which purifies, sanctifies and cleanses us from the greatest of our sins. We have here clearly the statement of a religious belief and, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, this earlier use of 'divine' may properly be taken as related in some way to the later use.

If we reject the existence of any evidence for the use in Ionian thought of religious terminology which had no religious significance for the user—and this applies to Democritus' statements about the gods as well as to those about the soul—then it is possible to believe that under the influence of Presocratics who saw in mind an excellence of being which they characterised as divine, Democritus, through his view of the soul, sought to incorporate religious values in the atomic system. It is true that soul or mind was no longer for him a primary existent and to that extent the gap between his view and that of others remained unbridgeable. On the other hand, it possessed in the power of thought the same peculiar excellence in which Diogenes had seen divinity and it may be held to have inspired in Democritus an emotion which was qualitatively identical. B 189 It is best that a man should spend his life in as great a state of wellbeing as possible . . . . This will happen if he does not look for pleasure in mortal things. Here the mortal/immortal contrast is clearly the same as the human/divine and body/soul contrast in B 37 above. The importance of the fragment is not only that it testifies to the same religious conception but explicitly links this conception to 'well-being' (euthumia). It is generally agreed that the latter was a central idea in Democritus' ethics, representing the goal towards whose attainment life should

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1 According to VLASTOS (op. cit. 582) B 37 means 'Devote to the soul that supreme concern you have been taught to give to things divine'.

2 After quoting the Sacred Disease VLASTOS (op. cit. 582 f.) observes that Democritus (sc. without believing) is content to say 'the gods give men all good things' (B 175) so long as men remember that 'sharpeyed intelligence (sc. of men themselves) directs most things in life' (B 119).

3 Observed most recently by JAEGGER op. cit. 158. HAROLD MILLER, The Concept of Divine in De Morbo Sacro. Transactions of the American Philological Association 84, 1953, 1 ff.

4 MILLER op. cit. 2.

5 Sacred Disease 4.

6 e.g. BAILEY op. cit. 188.
be directed. In the connection between ‘well-being’ and divinity, therefore, lies an indication that Democritus gave religious values an important place in his thought.

Our tradition on Democritus is slight. To his own words, however, may be added two doxographical reports. Aetius attributes to him the belief that *The Divine is mind in fiery spherical atoms*¹, while Cicero carries the view that according to Democritus *the elements of mind are divine*². Both these accounts may clearly be taken to refer to a general belief in the divinity of mind and to place Democritus in the tradition represented by Diogenes of Apollonia.

In deciding to what extent the emotion which Democritus felt towards the soul should be regarded as genuinely religious, an answer must be looked for partly in the terminology which he uses. Another method of answering this question, however, is to look for an aspect of his thought which is clearly religious and which, in turn, is dependent upon his view of the soul. I wish now to turn to a consideration of his theology.

Evidence for Democritus’ theology is fragmentary, yet, taken together, it points clearly to a belief in gods endowed with extraordinary powers. His theology, it should be noted, is not a resort to supernaturalism. The gods are ultimately products of the same Nature which produces other existents and like these must return eventually to their primary constituents. In view of this fact it is clear that polytheism must have been for Democritus, as might have been expected, a conception essentially subordinate to some more fundamental belief. A failure to recognise the subordinate nature of his theology has in part led VLASTOS to reject it altogether. He sees in the destructibility of the *eidola*, the term which Democritus used to denote the gods, evidence that they were not regarded by him as gods at all³. This, however, is to misunderstand the nature of polytheism in Presocratic thought. Where this conception is retained⁴, divinity attaches, not as in the traditional theology, to the actual persons of the gods which for the Presocratics are essentially destructible, but to some characteristic which they embody and which in time will pass to other beings. Thus Empedocles in his theory of Nature speaks explicitly of

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¹ A 74 νοῦν τὸν θεὸν ἐν πυρὶ σφαιροειδεῖ.
³ Justifying his view that the *eidola* have only an aetiological significance, VLASTOS (op. cit. 581) says *As ‘perishable’ they (i.e. the *eidola*) lack the defining property of the ‘immortal’ gods*.
⁴ For various references to a belief in polytheism see Anaximenes A 7, 10. Xenophanes B 1, 18, 34. Heraclitus B 5, 53, 62. Empedocles B 3, 21, 23, 112, 115, 126, 131, 132, 146. In the case of Heraclitus we may infer, perhaps, from his possible belief in the survival of human souls after death (cf. KIRK and RAVEN op. cit. 209) that the gods were beings of a fiery and rational nature. If we can regard Empedocles’ thought as forming a unified whole, the gods might be regarded as beings who embodied the characteristic Love.
long-lived gods\(^1\). He saw no absurdity in this conception clearly because he attached divinity not to the persons of gods but to the quality of their lives\(^2\). It is in this sense, I believe, that Democritus uses the term 'gods.' Although a subordinate conception, however, due to the nature of the atomic theory polytheism had a greater role to play in his thought than in that of other Presocratics who may have retained it in some form.

On the question of the atomic composition of the gods, we may look first for an answer in Democritus' conception of the soul. He associated divinity with the soul which was composed of spherical atoms and it may be inferred that the gods possessed a large proportion of this type of atom. It is exactly this idea which is indicated by Tertullian. "Democritus believes that the gods came into being with the rest of the heavenly fire\(^3\)." The upper regions were regarded as fiery in nature since the finer spherical atoms were forced upwards by the motion of the whirl (δύν) which preceded the formation of a world. The agglomerations of fire, which formed the heavenly bodies, at the same time formed the gods, who like the heavenly bodies therefore were largely composed of spherical atoms. Tertullian is supported indirectly by Aetius whose statement that "The Divine is mind in fiery spherical atoms" may perhaps be an explicit reference to the gods as well as to the general divinity of mind. In this conception of their atomic composition emphasis may be seen laid on the gods' spiritual or quasi-immaterial form. Although present in large numbers in the air\(^4\)—a conception paralleled in Plato's Epinomis\(^6\)—they were invisible to the eye because of the fine texture of the fiery atoms. It may be conjectured that, in anticipation of Epicurus, Democritus believed that they could be perceived by the mind alone. The same quasi-immateriality is stressed by the use of the term eidola to denote them. This use has caused considerable difficulty because of the employment of eidola as a technical term in atomism to denote the films which emanated from objects and by means of which vision was explained. It has been thought, for example by C. Bailey\(^6\), that the use of eidola to denote the gods was comparable to this latter use, and indicated that the gods were films whose actual entry into our minds gave rise to the belief in their existence. The general effect of Bailey's view is to

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\(^{1}\) B 21, 12. So Democritus' gods are 'long-lived' (B 166).

\(^{2}\) See p. 389 n. 4 above. Thus in B 112 >I go about you as an immortal god< the term itself 'immortal' may refer only to the divine quality of Empedocles' coming life and not to its imperishability, since Empedocles, perhaps, will be reunited in time with the cosmic Love. Cf. Kirk and Raven Op. cit. 355ff. It is this type of semantic shift (cf. Democritus B 189) that Vlastos fails to take into account.

\(^{3}\) A 74 cum reliquo igni superno deos oros Democritus suspicatur.

\(^{4}\) Hermippus A 78 τὸ μέντοι τοῦ Δημοκρίτου <ὁ> καλὸς ἄν ἔχωι παραλαβεῖν. δὲ εἴδολα αὐτοῖς (sc. τοῖς δαίμονασ) ὁμοίασιν μεστών τι εἶναι τὸν ἄρα τούτων φησι.

\(^{5}\) 985 A—B.

discredit the position of the *eidola* as a serious theological conception. It is not clear, for example, how on this interpretation they would materially differ from hippocentaurs which were regarded as films which entered our minds after having formed by chance in the air and which corresponded to no objective reality. If on the other hand Democritus did not regard the gods as fictitious entities, why did he violate his own theory of perception according to which real objects were never perceived directly? It was presumably on these grounds that BAILEY himself was led to doubt the reality of Democritus’ belief. The difficulty, however, arises from a failure to take into account all the relevant evidence. While Sextus, Hermippus and Cicero mention the use of *eidola* by Democritus to denote the gods themselves, Clement speaks of Democritus’ belief that films or *eidola* came *from the divine beings*. Clement is supported by Cicero who in the same passage in which he mentions the use of *eidola* to denote the gods, also reports its use of films which emanated from them. According to VLASTOS, Clement’s phrase *‘from the divine being’* is his own interpretation—clearly a confusion with Epicureanism, while the evidence of Cicero, who carries a mention of both uses of *eidola*, is inconclusive. To suppose that Clement represents a confusion with Epicureanism is clearly simply an assumption and one which we ought, if possible, to avoid. Cicero, it may be held, is far from being inconclusive. The hostile Epicurean spokesman is trying to show the inadequacy of Democritus’ conception of the gods. If he did not distinguish between objective divine beings on the one hand and the representations of gods which enter our minds on the other, why are we not

1 This, at any rate, is the only reason which may be connected with his earlier expression of doubt as to the reality of Democritus’ belief.

2 A 166 The relevant passage in Sextus runs as follows: Λ. δὲ εἴδωλα τινά φησιν ἐμπε-λάθειν τοὺς ἄνθρωπους καὶ τούτων τὰ μὲν εἶναι ἀγαθοτερὰ τὰ δὲ κακοτερὰ ἐθνὶ καὶ εὐγένετο εὐλόγγον νυκτί οἴδωλον. εἶναι δὲ τούτα ταμήλα τε καὶ ὑπερφυή καὶ δύσοφατα μὲν, όπως ἀφθοντα δὲ, προσημηναίει τα τὰ μέλλοντα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις θεωρομένα καὶ φανός ἁρφι-έντα. οὗτος τούτων αὐτῶν φαντασίας λαβόντες οἱ παλαιοὶ ὑπενήσαν εἶναι θεὼν, μηδενος ἄλλον παρὰ ταύτα ὑπό τοῦ θεοῦ ἄφθορον φύσιν ἔχοντος.

3 A 78.

4 A 74.

5 A 79: καθόλου γοῦν τὴν περὶ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐννοιαν Εὐνομίας ὁ Καλχήδονος οὐκ ἀπελαύ-ζει καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἀλόγοις. Δημοκρίτος δὲ, κἀκεῖ ἂν, ἀμικητής διὰ τὴν ἀκολουθίαν τῶν δογμάτων. τὰ γὰρ αὐτὰ πεποίημεν εἴδωλα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις προσπλήθοντα καὶ τοῖς ἀλόγοις ζῷος αὐτοῦ τῆς θείας οὐνίας.

6 A 74 The relevant passage is as follows: *Quid Democritus qui tum imagines sorumque circumitus in deorum numero referi, tum illam naturam quae imagines fundat ac mittat ... nonne in maximo errore versatur?* Here *naturam quae imagines fundat* clearly corresponds to Clement’s *ἀπὸ τῆς θείας οὐνίας* and refers to the view also held by Epicurus of divine beings who emit films of themselves which enter the minds of men.

7 Op. cit. 581. Thus in the case of Clement VLASTOS is able to produce the idea that the *eidola* fall aimlessly or mechanically on animals which, if true, would make it absurd to regard them as divine beings.
simply told this? From the Epicurean viewpoint\(^1\) the inadequacy of his attitude to the gods could not have been more effectively demonstrated\(^2\). The implication must be that this view was unknown to the Epicurean tradition in Cicero which attributed to Democritus the true Epicurean theory of emanations from divine beings, because unfortunately it could not deny that he had held it. On this question of the use of *eidola* our authorities may be brought into harmony if we believe that Democritus employed the term in two distinct senses. He shows himself flexible in its use and it appears in the fragments with yet another two meanings\(^3\). In the first sense the word is used to denote the gods themselves in order to emphasise their quasi-immaterial form. A similar sense is to be found in Homer's use of *eidola* to denote spirits in Hades\(^4\) and later in Pindar's use to denote the immortal soul upon its liberation from the body\(^5\). The second use of *eidola* concerning the gods is the technical use in atomism to denote the films which emanated from them as from all objects. The Epicurean in Cicero may be understood as deliberately trying to confuse these two senses. He is endeavouring to belittle the theology of Democritus and, as in the case of other philosophers, so in his case he represents as inconsistent ideas which were not in fact so. Final evidence against BAILEY'S view is supplied by Plutarch. The latter reports\(^6\) a theory evolved by Democritus to account for dreams in which it was explained that beings might emit *eidola* or films carrying their thoughts to the minds of others. The probability is that this theory was in part concerned with explaining divine apparitions in sleep. It therefore testifies to the existence of objective divine beings who emit eidola or films which enter the minds of men.

So far discussion has been concerned with the spiritual form of the gods. Evidence however suggests a deeper sense of their spirituality. Although it is clear that Democritus considered the gods to be of human shape, we need not believe that this idea had any essential connection with his view of their nature. He was compelled to adopt anthropomorphism since the gods were actually perceived in human form, and on the basis of the atomic theory perceptions must correspond to external reality. In believing, however, that the gods were largely composed of spherical atoms, which formed the matter of the soul, Democritus would have been led consistently to the view that the essence of their nature lay in intellect or mind, divinity attaching not to their

\(^1\) The Epicureans must have been extremely sensitive to this point. The charge that the gods were not different from hippocentauros was evidently a standard one against themselves. Cicero de nat. deor. 1, 38, 105.

\(^2\) It was certainly more effective criticism than the charge, to many patently false, that Democritus was merely muddle-headed.

\(^3\) In B 119 the term is used to denote a false concept. In B 195 its use is doubtful, but it seems to refer to statues or images.

\(^4\) e.g. Odyssey 11. For *imago* see e.g. Virgil Aeneid 4, 654.

\(^5\) Frag. 136 (Turyn).

\(^6\) A 77.
persons but to this characteristic, which, as has been seen independently from evidence on the soul, he regarded as divine. Herein lies an indication of the importance of deity in its relationship to man. Attention has rightly been drawn to the important Epicurean concept of piety based on the ideas of reverence for an imitation of the excellence of deity. It should be noted, however, that Democritus' presuppositions would have led him to an identical view, and it is not fanciful to believe that here as elsewhere he may have been the precursor of Epicurus. As beings who embodied perfectly the life of reason which he valued in its manifestation among men, the gods would have been objects worthy of reverence or adoration. On the other hand, since their divinity attached to the characteristic of reason which also existed potentially in man, it was open for them to perform the same paradigmatic function as the gods of Epicurus. Through contemplation of deity, men might come to recognise the divine nature of the life of the mind and be inspired to actualise the same characteristic of reason in themselves. A third idea not open to Epicurus, although he tried to approximate to it, is that of love or friendship between man and deity. B 217 *Only those are dear to the gods who hate injustice*. These words suggest that Democritus believed in the possibility of a spiritual relationship based upon a community of nature. So far as man devoted himself to the cultivation of his soul and made the good his object in life, to that extent he might enter into a communion with the gods who were favourably disposed to those who shared in their own qualities.

I come now to B 166 which we owe to Sextus and which mentions three ideas, two of which may be related in part to the foregoing.

The first idea expressed in B 166 is that of prayer. Here the tendency to minimise the significance of Democritus' theology may be seen. We are told that he prayed (ev'iero) that he might meet with propitious eidola or gods. Scholars who recognise in the eidola the existence of gods have nevertheless sought to translate ev'iero as meaning 'wished'. It is clear that the internal evidence with the close conjunction of ev'iero and eidola or gods, together with the mention in B 166 of other religious factors, creates an almost over-
whelming probability against this interpretation whose foundation is the general unsupported assumption that prayer cannot have had a place in the type of theology evolved by Democritus. The only justification for taking εὐχέτω to mean «wished» would be the view that the eidola represent not gods but merely an aetiological device. This idea, however, has yet to find a sound basis in the evidence, and to the other factors against it must be added the prima facie probability created by this close conjunction of εὐχέτω and eidola. Finally, mention must be made of the position of W. Jaeger. After recognising the use of prayer in B 166, Jaeger goes on «But prayer too had come to mean something rather different, for the philosopher could bring himself to admit only one kind as reasonable—the wish ‘to encounter propitious images’ (eidola)¹. The basis of this statement is simply the fact that this is the only use of prayer of which we hear. It is clear, however, that where evidence is as fragmentary as in the case of Democritus’ theology, an argument ex silentio, always dangerous, cannot be regarded as possessing any force. The ideas of reverence for and friendship with deity, the second expressed in Democritus’ own words, point clearly to a further use for prayer.

The second idea mentioned in B 166, which may be related to the communion between deity and man suggested in B 217 above, is that of prophetic communications by the gods to men². Evidence indicates that Democritus paid careful attention to the phenomenon of divine visitations, since, as has been stated above, the theory explaining dreams which is recorded in Plutarch was perhaps to a large extent concerned with accounting for divine apparitions. The power of knowledge presupposed by the gods’ gift of prophecy may be related without difficulty to their atomic nature. We know from several fragments that Democritus believed that the mind, when it reached a certain level of perfection, acquired the power to transcend what may be regarded as purely rational processes. He valued highly the special insight into truth which the poet possessed, and, what is important, explained this power in terms of his greater divinity³. It is probable that this intuitive power which may be identified with an extra sense which we are told that Democritus believed the gods, in common with the wise, to possess, formed the basis of their peculiar capacity. We have therefore confirmation of the view that the essence of their nature lay in intellect or mind⁴.

² This idea is discussed by Cornford op. cit. 65f.
³ See B 17, 18, 21.
⁴ Α 116. Ἀ. πλέον εἴναι αἰσθήσεις περὶ τὰ ἄλογα θέα καὶ περὶ τῶν σοφῶν καὶ περὶ τῶν θεῶν. There is no basis for Zeller’s statement (op. cit. 287) that the mention of gods here cannot belong to Democritus. It may be observed that in A 116 the rationalist nature of Democritus’ thought is evident. The intuitive faculty, which can only exist in rational beings when their intellect has reached a certain level of perfection, exists already in irrational animals, due, presumably, to the absence of any opposition from intellect.
It is clear that Democritus rejected the superstitions which commonly attached to the traditional theology. We are told explicitly\(^1\) that he followed other Presocratics\(^2\) in rejecting the association of the gods with meteorological phenomena, and it may be understood that he supported the type of critique of popular misconceptions made by Plato in the *Republic*. At the same time, however, he did not abandon the fundamental belief that deity must be related in some significant way to the lives of men, and we are told in B 166 that he believed that the *eidola* or gods might bring about good or bad fortune. VLASTOS has argued that the description of the *eidola* in B 166 as beneficial or harmful refers to their specific physical effect on the organism as in the case of the *eidola* whose bad effect is described by Plutarch (A 77) "They disturb and harm body and soul"\(^3\). VLASTOS' interpretation, however, lacks any satisfactory support. The theory which Plutarch mentions in A 77 explaining how *eidola* or films may be emitted carrying malevolent thoughts which disturb other minds and which give rise to the phenomenon popularly known as the 'evil eye' is not connected in any way with the gods by Plutarch himself\(^4\). Throughout his essay he discusses the 'evil eye' only as it arises among men. There is not even *prima facie* evidence of a connection. The *eidola* with which Plutarch is concerned are exclusively *eidola* which have been emitted from objects, while in B 166, as VLASTOS agrees, the *eidola* are not emitted from any object but denote the gods themselves. Finally VLASTOS' interpretation requires us to reject Democritus' own words. B 175 "The gods give only good to men . . . . As for what is evil, harmful and non-beneficial, this the gods have never given either now or in the past. The good referred to here is clearly of the wider type envisaged by traditional thought. B 175 makes explicit, however, the problem which arises from the mention in B 166 of bad as well as good fortune. If the divinity of the gods lay in the perfection of their nature, and if Democritus accordingly inferred, as he does in B 175, that they are responsible only for good, how can they be said to cause misfortune? This problem may be resolved if we believe that they acted in a purely moral capacity. A similar idea is presented in Plato's critique of popular theology\(^5\). The gods, Plato\(^6\) argues, can be the cause only of good. If they bring about misfortune, then this is to be regarded as good since it is a merited punishment which will benefit the evil. This seems to be the sense in which Democritus speaks of the gods as causing misfortune. B 217 "Only those are dear to the gods who hate injustice. If the gods are favourable to the just then there is ground for

\(\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\) A 75.  
\(\text{\textsuperscript{2}}\) CORNFORD op. cit. 142.  
\(\text{\textsuperscript{4}}\) This passage, I suggest, should be placed in DIELS-KRANZ with the evidence dealing with Democritus' psychology.  
\(\text{\textsuperscript{5}}\) Republic 379 B-380 C.  
\(\text{\textsuperscript{6}}\) It is unlikely that Democritus himself used *κακοποία* of the gods in B 166. Even if he did, however, we need not read into him the technical distinction which Plato draws between *κακόν* (evil) and *κόλασις* (punishment).
inferring at the same time that they are unfavourable to the unjust. This interpretation is supported by Pliny\(^1\) and also by Democritus’ own use of prayer in B 166. He prays that he may meet with propitious gods and thereby implies that their activity, propitious and unpropitious, in being susceptible to prayer is both rational and moral\(^2\).

The theological evidence is inevitably extremely fragmentary, yet, taken with evidence on the soul, it might be held to present a picture which in general outline is reasonably clear. It shows, I believe, that there is little support for the view that the *eidola* had only an aetiological significance. Such an interpretation rests either upon assumptions, or, as in the case of the use of the term *eidola*, upon what is ultimately an arbitrary selection of evidence. It is discredited further by the unsatisfactory assumption that Democritus repeatedly said what he did not mean. This supposition is legitimate only if some basic incompatibility of evidence can be shown to exist—a condition, I suggest, which is not satisfied in the case of Democritus. The view, on the other hand, that his theology was otiose\(^3\), lacks the inner coherence which attaches to the aetiological interpretation. If Democritus evolved a theology at all, we might expect it to be given an integrated and significant place in his thought. This expectation, I believe, is confirmed by evidence which suggests for his theology a twofold importance. The first lay in its function as a vehicle to carry a vital belief in the divinity of the life of the mind. The gods actualised this divinity which existed only potentially in Nature, and so gave real expression to a religious need. The second importance lay in the relation of deity to man. Evidence directly or indirectly points to three possible aspects. The first was the orthodox position of the gods as perfect beings whom men might honour and reverence; the second was the possible role of deity as an exemplar upon which man might model his own life; a third aspect lay in the personal relationship which existed between gods and men\(^4\).

In what I suggest is a religious aspect of the thought of Democritus, we are presented with a conception which is coherent and systematic and which

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\(^1\) A 76. *Innumeros quidem credere (sc. deos) atque etiam ex vitii hominum, ut Pudicitiam, Concordiam, Mentem, Spem, Honorem, Clementiam, Fidem, aut, ut Democrito placuit, duos omnino, Poenam et Beneficium, maiorem ad sociardin accedit*. According to ZELLER (op. cit. 289) Pliny’s interpretation involves a ‘misunderstanding’. BAILEY (op. cit. 176) calls it a ‘ridiculous parody’. Neither of these scholars gives any basis for supposing that Pliny has misinterpreted *δυαθοντι και *μακοτονι in B 166.

\(^2\) This interpretation is also supported *a priori* by the fact that the idea of evil spirits—a common interpretation of B 166—is one which is wholly foreign to Presocratic thought. It might be thought that Democritus would have been the last to introduce it.

\(^3\) The expression is that of Miss FREEMAN (op. cit. 315).

\(^4\) The view that Democritus’ theology represented a significant religious conception is confirmed by the fact that there is no reference in the whole of antiquity to any alleged irreverence to the gods on his part. This seems inexplicable in the light of current views of his position.
is not dissimilar to that found elsewhere in Presocratic thought. On the one hand we have Democritus’ most important belief which was in the divinity of Mind. Subordinate to this conception was his belief in polytheism. This latter belief was important because Mind no longer represented any kind of primary existent, still less any kind of personal being. The significance of the gods lay in the fact that as personal beings they actualised Mind to a perfect degree—a degree to which man himself could approximate by developing his potential qualities. While both gods and men must in time perish, Democritus, it may be held, believed that others would in turn arise in whom Mind would continue to be exemplified.

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NEUE FRAGMENTE ZUM ESOTERISCHEN PLATON


There are several fragments whose meaning is doubtful but which, perhaps, should be referred to briefly: B 30. Probably a reference to the origin of religion. The tone is respectful, not ironical, as BAILEY (op. cit. 175) was seriously misled by believing. See VLASTOS op. cit. 581. JÄGER op. cit. 183f. B 25. The significance of this fragment is doubtful. It might be a reference to the divinity of the sun (ZELLER op. cit. 251f.). B 2. Allegorising of Athene’s epithet Τοιογένες. Such allegorising was popular in the fifth century and does not imply disbelief. If we can trust Olympiodorus (Β 142) Democritus believed that popular names might give valuable insight into the divine nature.