

**DEMOCRITIAN EDUCATION:  
THE WAY TO HAPPINESS THROUGH DIFFICULTIES**

„Σοφίη ἀθαμβος ἀξίη πάντων“ (Democr. frg. 216 D-K<sup>12</sup>)

The salvaged fragments of ethical thought of Democritus are sufficient to demonstrate the topicality and the realism of his educational views. We must concentrate our attention, in our present study only on three points:

- a) the value and necessity of education
- b) the principal characteristic of it, and
- c) its basic end.

Can we say, first, of all, that Democritus recognizes any ability to be trained in man? What, however must man be taught, since in fact, as Democritus says „We know nothing and the truth is to be found in the depths of reality“? (Fr. 117).

This extract, which has much occupied the researchers of Democritus gnosiology, is now undoubtedly seen to refer to knowledge proceeding from the senses. Democritus is not unaware of the importance of the information and knowledge gained by us through the senses. However, he expresses great doubt as to whether they are wholly valid. This is because he wants to discriminate between the knowledge coming from the senses and *γνησίην γνώμην*, the „pure knowledge“ which is a product of mental process; that is, the theory of truth which can be reached clearly and completely when the interference of the senses is kept to a minimum.

We may now examine the strength and the value which he ascribes to the process of education. First he sees as the seat of Good and Evil in Man, not the body, but the soul (extr. 170, 171, 159, 187, 37).

He believes in the value of education because it can act upon the soul, on which depends the happiness or unhappiness of man on earth. Education he emphasizes, changes a man, it transforms him (ef. 33). However above all, it offers man, the most valuable gift, happiness.

The most important characteristic of Democritian education is the acceptance of difficulty as a unique and wonderful means of education. The great number of remaining fragments dealing with this subject show the importance which our philosopher gave to the education which comes after difficulties and obstructions. This importance becomes even clearer when we rea-

lize that these particular extracts are almost the only ones which refer clearly and directly to the training of young people.

Many extracts refer to the belief that wisdom and knowledge give protection against mistakes. Thus the extracts 54 and 76, ascribed to Democratis, speak of misfortune, which becomes teacher to infants and foolish men. In extracts 178, 179, 182 he speaks of the pedagogic benefit proceeding from labour and suffering, and only from these.

„Τὰ μὲν καλὰ χρήματα τοῖς πόνοις ἢ μάθησις ἐξεργάζεσθαι, τὰ δ' αἰσχρὰ ἄνευ πόνων αὐτόματα καρποῦται“ (Fr. 182)<sup>1</sup>.

Democritus has observed that

Ἐξωτικῶς μὴ πονεῖν παῖδες ἀνιέντες οὔτε γράμματ' ἄν μάθοιεν οὔτε μουσικὴν οὔτε ἀγωνίην οὐδ' ὅπερ μάλιστα τὴν ἀρετὴν συνέχει, τὸ αἰδεῖσθαι· μάλα γὰρ ἐκ τούτων φιλεῖ γίγνεσθαι ἢ αἰδῶς<sup>2</sup>

So Democritus believes in

a) The importance and ethical value of exercise generally. Exercise carried out with diligence makes up for natural lacks. He points out that more

„Πλέονες ἐξ ἀσκήσιος ἀγαθοὶ γίνονται ἢ ἀπὸ φύσιος“ (Fr. 242)<sup>3</sup>

b) The inseverable connection between education and exercise. Whatever good is attained by education, is attained with difficulty. Neither the training of the spirit, nor of the character, nor of the body can come without difficulties (cf. 179). With certainty he maintains that

„Πάντων κάκιστον ἢ εὐπετεῖη παιδεῦσαι τὴν νεότητα· αὕτη γὰρ ἔστιν ἢ τίκτει τὰς ἡδονὰς ταύτας, ἐξ ὧν ἢ κακότης γίνεσθαι“ (Fr. 178)<sup>4</sup>.

The above views present us with an opportune question: Does the modern tendency of education (to be paedocentric and attractive) serve the purpose of education and allow the creation of dynamic and good human beings?

Democritian „Doric“ paedagogy is, according to this view the forerunner of the pedagogy of the French philosopher of our century, ALAIN, the pedagogy of the joy which comes from creative labour. In „Propos sur l'éducation“ he writes: „No experience develops a hu-

<sup>1</sup> „Education attains good results through hard work, whereas ugly things grew up alone, without labours“ (182 ex) (See also Fr. 108).

<sup>2</sup> „Children who show excessive laziness and avoid hard work can learn neither reading, nor music nor athleticism, nor that which is the foundation of ἀρετή that is, the feeling of shame. Because shame is developed by exactly these practices“ (Fr. 179).

<sup>3</sup> „People become good through training, than because of natural inclination“ (Fr. 242).

<sup>4</sup> „The avoidance of facing up to difficulties is the worst way to educate young people, for this avoidance gives berth to the pleasure from which evil comes“ (Fr. 178).

man better than the discovery of the higher pleasure, of which he would always have remained ignorant if he had not first experienced a little difficulty. . . First of all, you must know boredom. That is why we cannot make the child taste science, and the arts, as he would sugared fruits. Man is formed through labour; in order to experience real pleasures, he must win them, must deserve them. That is the Law"<sup>5</sup>.

These views of Democritos and ALAIN could form the keystone of every educational effort in every age. They do not recommend the rigid rule of the teacher, but the labour and pain which are chosen and accepted by the learning subject, and which, as Eastern philosophy accepts, hold the key to all real discovery. We see, for example the youth of today as victims, (as are we all) of the western world, a developing society of plenty. They are in the greatest danger of not developing to the full their psychosomatic energies, because they are not called on, not obliged by their environment, to do so. From an early age they are affected by the modern effort to lessen work and worry, with the well-known valuable consequences, but also with many unpleasant results.

Also, young people are in danger because ease does not develop shame (modesty) as Democritos says above. The sense of shame, a necessary jewel for every man, fortifies virtue. This view of Democritos on the ethical training of the young is both vitally important and has contemporary value. It has always been known that in the ancient Greek world, Excellence in every kind of exercise was the product of hard work. Hesiodos points out that „the sweat of excellence has always been prescribed by the Gods“. And Aristotle in the hymn of ἀρετή says: „Virtue produced by much labour to human beings“.

The obtaining of excellence presupposes struggle and ambition for distinction. In the „Protagora“ Socrates teaches that virtue can be taught. But what, knowledge and education does not presuppose the subject's respectful recognition of his own ignorance? In other words, is it possible to learn truth without the reverence for truth? (In Greek mythology Αἰδώς is presented as the nurse of the Goddess of wisdom, Athena).

So in our modern age the preservation of Αἰδώς would be the only thing which could lead the liberation of contemporary youth towards Ἀρετή.

These views of Democritos should not be considered as backward-looking or against progress, or recommending an educational system which is cruel. We will see that the philosopher of Abdira is talking of labours voluntarily undertaken by the pupil. Ex. 181 is quite clear:

„Κρείσων ἐπ' ἀρετὴν φαίνεται προτροπή, χρώμενος καὶ λόγου πειθοῖ ἢπερ νόμῳ καὶ ἀνάγκῃ . . .“<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> ALAIN, Propos sur l'éducation, PUF, Paris 1961, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> „Whoever uses in teaching excellence exhortations and persuasion with logical arguments, will be shown to be a better teacher than him who uses compulsion and rules“ (Fr. 181).

In the case where an individual chooses willingly and with pleasure the way of toil to lead to his proper education; whether he succeeds, or hopes that he will succeed in gaining what he seeks, the labour is enjoyable to him.

And now what is the purpose of education according to Democritus?

We see the pedagogic credo of our philosopher directed towards the attainment of three targets:

The approach to Truth, the service of individual and community life, the attainment of happiness. Our purpose in this study is to examine the last of them.

If education does not help a man to find happiness, if it does not have this as its basic purpose, then it is not really of service to man. As we know, however, happiness for Democritus has a meaning dependent on the respect for μέτρον and the avoidance of excess.

The concept of „metron“ is especially dear to Democritus. He says:

„The animal, when it has need of something, knows how necessary this thing is. A man, however he has need of something, does not know the extent of his need“ (Fr. 198).

In spite of being adult he desires without measure a thing suited only to small children. Therefore he is unhappy and even the pleasantest things become bitter to him (Fr. 233).

The „εὐεστώ“ is a subtle state of the soul because it is supported by the human being's distinguishing of desires (In Stog, II, 7, 3).

This ability to distinguish will produce a reasoning hierarchy in the individual so that he will stay with the mean and not cling to transitory things. Thus he will preserve calmness of soul, he will enjoy what he has, and at the same time be uncorrupted by grieving for what he hasn't got.

In order for a man to be rendered happy, therefore, his education must arm him with the essential means.

a) To remove himself from transitory pleasures.

„Αριστον ἀνθρώπωνι τὸν βίον διάγειν ὡς πλεῖστα εὐθυμηθέντι καὶ ἐλάχιστα ἀνηθέντι. Τοῦτο δ' ἂν εἴη, εἴ τις μὴ ἐπὶ τοῖς θνητοῖσι τὰς ἡδονὰς ποιοῖτο“ (Fr. 189)<sup>7</sup>.

b) To occupy himself with whatever is worthwhile in life, what is most essential, and not with a great variety of things:

„Τὸν εὐθυμεῖσθαι μέλλοντα χρὴ μὴ πολλὰ πρήσσειν μήτε ἰδίῃ μήτε ξυνῆι, μηδὲ ἄσσ' ἂν πράσσει, ὑπὲρ τε δύναμιν αἰρεῖσθαι τὴν ἑαυτοῦ καὶ φύσιν· ἀλλὰ τοσαύτην ἔχειν φυλακὴν, ὥστε καὶ τῆς τύχης αἰβαλλούσης καὶ ἐς τὸ πλεόν ὑπηγεομένης τῷ δοκεῖν, κατατίθεσθαι,

<sup>7</sup> „The best thing for a man is to spend his life with the greatest possible pleasure and the least possible displeasure.

One can attain this if he does not see his pleasure in corruptible things (Fr. 189).

καὶ μὴ πλέω προσάπτεσθαι τῶν δυνατῶν. Ἡ γὰρ εὐλογίη ἀσφαλέςτερον τῆς μεγαλογίης“ (Fr. 3)<sup>8</sup>.

Thus only when someone desires without „Hybris“ does he enjoy happiness.

„Δίκαιος ἔρωσ ἀνυβρίστικως ἐφίεσθαι τῶν καλῶν“ (Fr. 73).

In connection with this, GUTHRIE notes: „The good eros“ which is „a longing for what is fine without hybris“ is twin brother to platonic eros<sup>9</sup>. For Democritus, wisdom, which exceeds the worth of all else, is that which is accompanied by spiritual calm. „Wisdom accompanied by spiritual calm is worth more than every thing else“ (Fr. 216).

Consequently, the young man should have the conviction that only by controlled use of his demands and cutting himself off from what is unnecessary, will he find the happiness described by Democritus.

„Ἀνθρώποισι γὰρ εὐθυμίη γίνεται μετριότητι τέρψιος καὶ βίου συμμετρίῃ· τὰ δ' ἐλλείποντα καὶ ὑπερβάλλοντα μεταπίπτειν τε φιλεῖ καὶ μεγάλας κινήσιας ἐμποιεῖν τῇ ψυχῇ· αἱ δ' ἐκ μεγάλων κινούμενα τῶν ψυχῶν οὔτε εὐσταθέες εἰσὶν οὔτε εὐθυμοί . . .“<sup>10</sup>.

Familiarity with the „metro“ source of happiness, is attained by behavior which is just towards all: towards himself, his fellow-men, and God. Thus conscience is satisfied and remains at ease.

„Ὁ μὲν εὐθυμος εἰς ἔργα ἐπιφερόμενος δίκαια καὶ νόμιμα καὶ ὕπαρ καὶ ὄναρ χαίρει τε καὶ ἔρωται καὶ ἀνακηδής ἐστίν· ὅς δ' ἂν καὶ δίκης ἀλογῆι καὶ τὰ χρῆ ἐόντα καὶ μὴ ἔρδῃ· τούτῳ πάντα τὰ τοιαῦτα ἀτερπεῖται ὅταν τευ ἀναμνησθῆι καὶ δέδοικε καὶ ἑωυτὸν κακίζεῖ“ (Fr. 174)<sup>11</sup>.

This small study, as the reader may already have understood, aims to present two aspects of Democritian educational theory, that is, education through difficulty and the pursuit of true happiness, both of which have a vitally important message for the educators and the society of today.

Patras.

A. Cosmopoulos

<sup>8</sup> „Whoever wants to be happy must not deal with many things, neither in the private part of life nor in the sector of government, nor should he choose (to do) acts which exceed his strength and his nature. He should be careful, so that, even when good fortune appears to lead him to the most favourable situation, he will put aside this chance, and not touch what is beyond his capabilities. What is well-filled is more certain than that which is over-filled“ (Fr. 3). This reminds of MONTAIGNE who prefers „la tête bien faite“ to „la tête bien pleine“.

<sup>9</sup> GUTHRIE (W. K.) *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. II, Cambridge University Press 1969, p. 490.

<sup>10</sup> „Men obtain happiness by moderation of pleasure and symmetry of life waste and excess tend to change and to cause great movements in the soul. And the souls which have great changes are neither peaceful, nor happy (Fr. 191).

<sup>11</sup> „He who has put his soul in order, because he directs his actions to works which are just and lawful, both waking and sleeping, knows and feels strength and is relieved of worries. However, he who does not value justice, and does not do what should be done, finds this sort of thing a source of sorrow when he remembers it and he is overwhelmed by anxiety and tortures himself“ (Fr. 174).