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Chosen Topic: 2.

A man in the world

“To a wise man the whole world is open. For the whole cosmos is the fatherland of a good soul.” It seems strange that such words were uttered thousands of years ago, by Democritus of Abdera. While the concept of “the wise man” was quite common to Ancient philosophy, the thing that stands out, for me, is the concept of “the cosmos”. Such a concept, and such a relation between the cosmos and the wise man, as the one described by Democritus, is truly ahead of its time. In today’s time, in a time of globalization, the words of Democritus are more meaningful than ever. As coexistence and communication between various cultures is undoubtedly a fact, it is urgent that we develop such a relation between the world and the man. Not only is this so because of the needs of our era for peaceful coexistence, but because indeed, the understanding and accepting of the world is what makes us truly wise and human.

In this essay, I shall argue for the correctness of the thesis of Democritus. At first, I shall analyze how I perceive the “wise man”. Next, I shall try to describe how this man would interact with the cosmos. I will also try to make clear that the concept of the wise man is in itself presupposing his interaction with the world.

PART I: The wise man- The good soul

The first thing that one might notice is that in Democritus’ words, the expressions “the wise man” and “the good soul” are equivalent. That is, they mean the same thing. Now this might seem irrational. Besides, the concept of wisdom is quite different from that of goodness. According to Kant, the only thing that we can characterize as “good without qualification” is the good will. Wit, intelligence and other virtues are good as tools of the good will, but they are not good in themselves. That is, they can as well be used for malicious purposes, and be as effective and catastrophic. That is why humans are said to be capable of the best and worst of works. We therefore can discern between intelligence and beneficence quite clearly.

However, wisdom is in fact a concept that entails wit, knowledge, and the way in which the above virtues are used. Or, in another perspective, we could say that wisdom only includes wit and knowledge. The two statements above are not at all contradictory, if we admit that the concept of knowledge entails knowledge on the right use of all other knowledge. In another perspective, recalling Socrates’ words (“I know one thing, that is, that I know nothing”), we can say that wisdom is the knowledge of uncertainty of all knowledge, and the constant search of it, combined with an inclination to beneficence. Summing up all the above point of view, I think that wisdom is a concept that entails wit, constant search for knowledge, and beneficence, or, if we want only to use two terms, it entails wit and constant search of knowledge, including constant search of knowledge on how knowledge should be used.

Therefore, we see that the concepts of the wise man and the good soul are indeed very closely related. We now consider the wise man/the good soul –from now on I will be using these terms as equivalents- a man that searches for knowledge and searches for the right way to use it.

One more virtue that I would like to add to the idea of the wise man is that of social interaction, as presented by Aristotle. A man is not wise or good if he or she is not social. We can even say that a man cannot be conceived of without social interaction. Man is a being bound to interact with the world, and what causes the insecurity, the security, the sentiments and the excitement of the mind are these interactions. In this interaction we include both interaction between humans and interaction between men and every other aspect of the cosmos, including knowledge. This concept of interaction is what shall lead us to the next point made by Democritus, that is to the cosmos, or the “fatherland of man”.

To sum up my view of the wise man/the good soul, I think of one who pursues interaction with knowledge and people. Agreeing with Socrates, it is not the man who possesses knowledge, but one who merely pursues it. And it is not knowledge in the austere sense that shall be pursued, but knowledge of people and of life.

PART II: The wise man in the cosmos- the fatherland

It follows plainly from the explanation of the concept of the wise man given above, that this man shall interact with his environment in a lively manner. He or she shall search, find and create. But what is still quite vague is how Democritus perceives of the world as the fatherland of that man. How can one consider himself a child of the cosmos if one is still in the process of discovering the cosmos –and this process is most likely to never end-?

I think that the point that should be made here is that this search of knowledge is not a search for external knowledge, but mostly a search of internal one. That is, the wise man while interacting with his environment does not just change his perception of the world, but changes his perception of *himself* in the world. He is constantly reevaluating the meaning of his existence and his place in the world.

However, at this point we shall avoid a common misperception. While talking about this internal search and this existentialist view of knowledge, we should not think that the man thinks in a self-concerned and focused, egotistical way. Quite the opposite should be meant. The man is reevaluating his place in the world, because he is concerned with the world and not with himself. If the man were indeed egotistical, he would only try to understand the world, while holding a steady view of his own personal value. He would even try to change the world to fit his own existence. Rather, what is proposed is that the wise man changes his perception of his existence and meaning to fit in the world.

Therefore, now it can be argued that this man is indeed a “child”, whose “fatherland” is the cosmos. As the child grows and experiences new things, it reevaluates the meaning of its existence in relation to the environment, and it recognizes the common origins between himself and the other cosmos. And in this environment of commonalities and differences, he learns and he automatically adds to the cosmos, by changing his own attitude, as he is a part of it.

PART III: The subject and the object. Who accepts whom?

One thing that draws the attention of the thinker in the words of Democritus is the syntax of the sentence. It is said that “the world is open to a wise man”, showing that the world is the one that accepts the man. One would think that it would be more reasonable to say that “the wise man is open to the cosmos” and shall accept the cosmos. After all, how can we presuppose the attitude of something as vast, behemoth and complex as the world towards someone? It seems more likely that we can change the attitude of the man towards the cosmos, rather than define the attitude of the cosmos towards the man.

However, looking at the matter more closely, from the perspective that I analyzed above, that is the reevaluation of the wise man’s place in the cosmos, and the recognition of differences and common origins, it can be seen how the man is accepted by the cosmos. The crucial part of the meaning of the words of Democritus lies, for me, in this seemingly strange syntax. It is the cosmos that accepts the man, through the constant reevaluation of the place of the latter. The man is the one who is changing towards the world, not the world towards the man. Thus, the man is accepted by the cosmos.

At this point, we have to avoid a misunderstanding. That is, one might think that from the above worldview an apathetic, passive approach of the man towards the world is supported. One might think that Democritus intends the wise man to sublime to the world, and accept any situation, without fighting for promoting change. On the contrary, the meaning seems exactly the opposite for me. As the man changes his view of himself in the world, he changes the view of his duty in the world. Through experiencing the world, and accepting differences, the man reevaluates the task he possesses. Therefore, a dynamic interaction is what, to my opinion, is proposed. The wise man shall learn, experience, accept, and change his view of his own duty in the cosmos.

PART IV: Multiculturalism and the wise man

Doing some applied philosophy, it would be useful to consider how the wise man shall act, according to the above view, towards today’s multicultural world. In a world of different cultures and backgrounds, the wise man will first understand these differences. In doing so, he shall find the common nature underlying all these differences. He will therefore become a person whose fatherland is the whole cosmos, as he will find an identity separate, although not unaltered, from nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. He will be open to the world, and the world will be open to him. In this multicultural cosmos, he shall find his place, through enquiry of the cosmos, which will result in a sense of the self, inside that cosmos. In our society and in every other society, it is unacceptable to define ourselves out of context. A philosopher, a wise man, can only find the meaning of human existence and of personal existence in relation to the world surrounding him, and not in relation to part of that world, but to the whole. As we have all been created in this same world, from the same origin, we shall find the meaning of our lives inside it, in a global perspective. Through this process of self-definition through cosmic enquiry, we will also find our duty, our ethics. Such ethics shall not be national or society-based, but globe-based, and derived from each person’s view of the world. The common ratio between all the different approaches to the world shall be the common origin and nature of humanity, which will make all of us people whose fatherland is the whole cosmos.