

Name: Niklas Plätzer

Chosen Topic: 2

“To a wise man the whole world is open. For the whole cosmos is the fatherland of a good soul.”

- Democritus of Abdera, fragment 247

Globalization – that is the magic word of our generation. As citizens of the 21st century, we are constantly made aware of the interconnectedness of the world’s cultures and economies. Our education itself is supposed to focus on internationality, with a particular emphasis on foreign languages. International congresses and competitions (e.g. the IPO itself) bring people together, who come from the other side of the globe. Although these are still perceived as special events and not as a part of everyday life, we do feel like we are on the edge of a new era, in which national origins lose their importance.

Democritus had never heard of globalization and could have only dreamt of what was going to evolve more than two millennia after his life time. His idea of an intellectual “world citizenship” has become tangible reality in the age of a global exchange of knowledge. To the “wise men” (and women) of today, the world is, in fact, “open”: In academia, studying abroad or holding a position at a foreign university is not at all uncommon anymore. But Democritus’ statement was not phrased as to express a dream or hope for the future of which one could now say that it has been fulfilled – mission accomplished. In contrast, he coined his fragment 247 in order to describe what he thought to be already the case. In ancient Greece, where the overwhelming majority of people would never leave their region of birth, Democritus stated that to a “wise man” the world “is” open, that for a “good soul” the “whole cosmos” can be considered his “fatherland”.

This global “citizenship” is not to be understood in the literal, legal sense but as an expression of to what sort of group an individual belongs. The “fatherland” is a place with which one identifies oneself particularly strong. At the heart of this identification is not the place itself but most of all a certain group of people who inhabit it. If the “whole cosmos” is congruent to one’s “fatherland”, it implies a strong connection not to a limited group of human beings (a nation) but to humanity as a whole. In order to reach this state of a non-discriminating identification of oneself with all human beings, Democritus makes two conditions: One must be “a wise man” and at the same time “a good soul”. Reason opens the world to you, being good (i.e. acting in a good, morally right way) makes it your home, your “fatherland”.

The argument that reason is the basis of universality, a universal truth that remains valid throughout the “whole cosmos”, was later picked up by Immanuel Kant. Just like Democritus distinguishes between those who are “wise” and those who are not, Kant also believed in the two antipodal forces of reason and emotion (i.e. passion, instinct). Reason must prevail over the abysmal forces of the animal in us for us to achieve freedom, to “open the world” to us to put it in Democritus’ words. It fits in this context that in German philosophy, there was not even a notional distinction between

“Menschheit” (mankind) and “Menschlichkeit” (human nature) until Hegel. In Kant’s days, one was to further humanity (“Menschheit”) in one’s self, i.e. to let reason tame one’s animalistic nature. Only if reason is the basis of decision-making, one can have a free will. However, “freedom”, in Kant’s understanding, means to be free to fulfill the duty of the laws of reason. Immorality, therefore, is not a result of a deliberate, reasonable decision but always a result of a lack of freedom and product of one’s passion. Similar to Democritus, Kant also thought that being a “wise man” and acting morally right, i.e. being a “good soul”, are two sides of the same coin. If one understands Democritus “open world” in the first part of fragment 247 as an expression of liberty, he seems to foreshadow central elements of Kant’s ethic.

For both Kant and Democritus, the laws of reason are universal. It is not possible to come to different results, if one considered an identical question in a reasonable way. The “eternal law in us” knows the answer, which always remains the same. All objects can be regarded through the lens of this law and serve a certain purpose. They are means for an end. Human beings, in contrast, are the bearers of reason and, thus, ends in themselves, which in turn justifies their dignity, their intrinsic value (“Menschenrechtsformel”, “human rights formula”). Based on this argument, Kant, again following Democritus path while taking it a step further, proposed the idea of a federally organized world state with the purpose of protecting these human rights. In his work “Zum ewigen Frieden”, he said (borrowing from Thomas Hobbes) that states, just like human beings, naturally find themselves in an antagonistic position to each other, which is caused by their self-interest. In this situation, it would only be wise to formulate a constitution that guarantees the legal protection of the laws of reason. The goal is the reconciliation between positive law and normative claims on a global level.

Since Democritus also implies the global (even “cosmic”) validity of these laws of reason, he does not seem to disagree with Kant’s idea of such a global authority on positive law either. The moral judgment of an action, i.e. deciding if one has acted like a “good soul”, is an equally universal matter for Kant and for Democritus. One practical application of this train of thought would be the institution of an international court on human rights.

The fact that there are wide-reaching congruencies between Kant and Democritus does for itself not say anything about the validity of Democritus’ fragment 247. Especially the two conditions it makes (being “wise” and acting in a morally right way are the prerequisites of identifying oneself with humanity as a whole rather than only with a certain group, e.g. a nation, as mentioned above) have been questioned by many philosophers. Most notably Arthur Schopenhauer had the audacity to introduce another universal entity beside reason: The will. No matter how “wise” a man is, how well he uses his analytical abilities, he will only analyze the surface of the world as his limited senses allow him to. What reason is not able to accomplish is to touch the very heart of existence, the metaphysical “thing in itself”.

Thus, Schopenhauer argues against Democritus’ thesis that the world would be “open” to a “wise man”. He replies: It remains closed, since the “thing in itself” is the will, which we cannot analyze but only experience “in person”, in the literal meaning, through living inside of our own body. To Schopenhauer, this experience means suffering and the confrontation with one’s own lack of a free will. But there are certain “windows” that allow us to take a look at the abysmal “thing-in-itself” out of a comfortable safety zone, e.g. music. The will, as the “thing-in-itself” is universal and part of all existence, not only of the human self. We can analyze the world around us but we are looking at it as if we were looking at a group of objects and we categorize it according to our own ideas. Art allows

us to step out of this cage of categorization to look at existence *as it is*. It is needless to say that artists can be “wise men” but that does not change anything about the fact that “opening the world” to oneself does not have a lot to do with being “wise”, i.e. the use of reason, in the eyes of Schopenhauer. Democritus and Schopenhauer, thus, look at existence from very different angles.

A “good soul”, for him, would not be someone who acts in a morally right way, since Schopenhauer does not believe in the existence of a free will. Inspired by Asian philosophy, he would rather have the image of a Buddha-like figure in mind, who tries to negate the will in himself, while looking at it (and gaining knowledge about the thing-in-itself) through meditation. But it would be unfair to present the outward-oriented perspective of Democritus and the inward-oriented one Schopenhauer had as two polar opposites. In fact, Schopenhauer’s ethic seems to be reconcilable with the second part of Democritus’ statement: Through the feeling of sympathy, the will in oneself (normally a force of self-interest) leaves the borders of the individual behind (of the “*principii individuacionis*”, the “curtain of maya” as Schopenhauer called it borrowing from ancient Indian thought) and directs itself at humanity as a whole. The suffering of the “whole cosmos” mirrors one’s own suffering. In the words of the Sanskrit Upanishads: “*Ta twam asi!*” – all this (i.e. the world around you) is also a part of you! For Schopenhauer, it is the sentiment of sympathy that makes the “whole cosmos” one’s “fatherland”. However, this “ethic of sympathy” is not truly normative and, therefore, an ethic “as if” (at the most). Sympathy simply “occurs”, like a natural phenomenon, it cannot be demanded. Based on this argument, the institution of an international authority on positive law would, in contrast to Kantian thought, not have a strong basis.

The fact that it is possible to interpret Democritus’ statement in these two very different ways shows that we live in a pluralistic world, in which even “wise men” can feel like they are not at home. There is no such thing as a “universal reason” that would give us an equally universal “fatherland”, otherwise a philosopher like Kant would have to argue that Schopenhauer was not thinking straight, that he would have to work his ideas over and afterwards, he could come to the same conclusions that Kant himself did. But a human being is not a machine and it is the task of the 21st century to understand and tolerate the coexistence of different interpretations of reality and the idea that human knowledge is limited. The “whole world”, and in so far I would have to agree with Schopenhauer, will never be completely “open”. There will always be a blind spot, an ultimate mystery: “Of which one cannot speak, one must be silent”, as Ludwig Wittgenstein had it. It is the task of philosophy to get as close as possible to the border between the two.

This, however, should not be confused with ethical relativism. Max Horkheimer pointed out that no matter what culture, time period or socio-economic structure might characterize a society, it will always accept a basic anthropological presumption: Human suffering is to be avoided. He added that ideologies, which claim to have truth for the “whole cosmos”, are always at risk to turn into an excuse not to help directly: A communist might wait for the world revolution, while denouncing charity. With such an action (or, rather, inaction), he would act against the only anthropological presumption that would justify an ethic for the “whole cosmos” (the “human” cosmos, to be more precise), which is to avoid human suffering.

Berthold Brecht once asked “If there was only one country, where could I go to exile?” With this in mind, we need to pay close attention to all “absolute” statements, to the claims of “wise men”, who think the world is open to *them* and potentially closed to others. A “world ethic” must be intuitively comprehensible to *everyone* and *everywhere*, it cannot be based on any metaphysical card-house, as

much as philosophers would like it to be. An ethic, as congruent it might be, that is only understood within a caste of philosophers, of “wise men”, will, when applied practically (through laws etc.), never reach the universal acceptance that it requires. If an ethic’s basis was reduced to Horkheimer’s pragmatist suggestion, i.e. a universally accepted and empirically observable anthropological truth (like the human urge to avoid suffering), there could still be room for human rights and even humanitarian interventions. With such a “basic”, almost empirical ethic that dispenses with any sort of theoretical superstructure, the protection of fundamental human rights would be accepted more easily, regardless of cultural backgrounds. The world could become a more homelike place, a “fatherland” for every human being – not only for the chosen few, the “wise men” and “good souls”.