

## Democritus and the Poetics of (N)othing

*I have nothing to say*  
*and I am saying it* *and that is*  
*poetry*  
 —JOHN CAGE

### ONTOLOGY'S SECRET STOWAWAY

In this final chapter we circle back, in good Presocratic fashion, to where we began: the aporetic relation, intrinsic to ontology, between *logos* and *to on*. Parmenides, as we saw in chapter 1, sustains a precarious unity between language and being by rigorously excluding nonbeing from both: Is Not is not and must not be (Parm. B2.5/D6.5, B6.2/D7.2, B7.1/D8.1, B8.17–18/D8.22–23); accordingly it cannot be thought or named (B8.17/D8.22), known or spoken (B2.7–8/D6.7–8). Nonbeing strains the relation between language and being to the breaking point. How does one speak of nonbeing without granting it being, rendering one's own *logos* self-negating and nonsensical? The sophist Gorgias poses this question in his treatise "On Nonbeing." What is not surely does not exist, for if it did, it would be and not be at the same time, which is absurd (Gorg. B3.67/D26b.67). To try to speak of nothing is immediately to feel the tension between *logos* and *to on*; the fundamental grammar of existentiality and predication makes it impossible to say what nothing is or even *that* nothing is. It stands to reason that "to say nothing" in ancient Greek (*ouden legein*) meant to talk nonsense. Nothing is the ultimate aporia of ontology.<sup>1</sup>

Epigraph: From "Lecture on Nothing," by John Cage. In *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage*. Middletown, Conn., Wesleyan University Press, 109. Copyright © 1961 by the John Cage Trust. Used by permission.

1. John Cage muses on this aporia in his "Lecture on Nothing." The typography is original; the line ends "and that is poetry as I need it." "Is not" is as complicated a philosophical question as "is." It is explored at length not only in Gorgias's "On Nonbeing," but also by Plato at *Prm.* 160b5–166c5; *Soph.* 237a–39c, 255e–261a. Thom (2002) examines the problem of nonbeing and how ancient philosophers

Democritus does not seek to circumvent this aporia but rather embraces it and around it constructs a novel poetics of being. He encompasses nonbeing within his *logos* while still preserving its character as unspeakable. He does not do this by making space for the void. The void figures nonbeing as a real and positive entity, the ontological equal of the atom, as Democritus makes clear in his most famous fragment: “By convention sweet and by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention color, but in reality atoms and void” (*eteēi de atoma kai kenon*, B9/D14).<sup>2</sup> Instead, Democritus incorporates nonbeing into his ontology by inventing a new lexeme, one that does not so much signify nonbeing as embody it within language. That lexeme is *den*. *Den* is a neologism formed from the Greek word *mēden* or *ouden*, “nothing,” which was itself originally a combination of the compound negative adverb (*oude* in statements of fact, *mēde* in subjective statements, both meaning “not even”) and the neuter singular adjective *hen* (“one”). *Den* is produced by a false division of *ouden* or *mēden* such that the *de*, originally part of the negation, is treated as if it were part of the adjective *hen*. That is, instead of *mēd-hen*, “nothing” is erroneously parsed as *mē-den*. Translators trying to render the term in English have proposed “othing.”<sup>3</sup>

The *den* appears only obliquely within Democritus’s discourse. Aristotle mentions it in a list of synonyms for the atom (A37/D29); likewise Galen, who in quoting B9/D14 glosses atoms and void as *den* and *ouden* (A49/D23b). Plutarch reports Democritus as saying that “the ʻothing (*den*) exists no more than the nothing (*mēden*), calling the body *den* and the void *mēden*, on the grounds that this too has a certain nature and its own existence” (*Adv. Col.* 1109A = B156/D33). Diels-Kranz consider this a verbatim quotation, but Laks-Most think that only the words *den* and *mēden* are Democritus’s own. These scanty citations point up one of the signal difficulties of working on Democritus. The text of the atomists is bedeviled, even

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addressed it, but does not discuss Democritus. On the contribution of the atomists, see Laks 2004, 14–20.

2. The fragment is quoted by Sextus Empiricus (*Math.* 7.135) and repeated in slightly abbreviated form by Galen (B125, A49/D23a, b) and Diogenes Laertius (B117/D24). Diels-Kranz’s fragment B9 combines two Democritean sentences quoted in this passage of Sextus. When I cite B9 I am referring to this sentence; I refer to the second (Laks-Most’s D15) as B9a.

3. Diels translates it *das Nichts*; Cassin (2017, 34) proposes *ien* (from *rien*) or *iun* (from *ni un*). Other translators dodge the issue: Taylor 1999b; Graham 2010: “thing”; Laks-Most: “something”; Luria 2007: “lessere.” On the etymology, see Moorhouse 1962, 236; Luria 2007, 967–68; and Cassin 2020, 102–6 (~ 2017, 29–31). That the false etymology is deliberate and designed to be noticed is suggested by the only other occurrence of the word in Greek literature, in Alcaeus fr. 320 L-P: “And nothing (*ouden*) would come from ʻothing (*den*)” (*kai k’ouden ek denos genoito*). The phrase probably means something like “anything can come to naught.” It expresses this by way of a complex linguistic joke, deriving *ouden* from *den* by addition of the negation (rather than the reverse): etymology is made to replicate semantics as something (*den*) produces nothing (*ouden*) twice over. But the “something” that produces “nothing” is itself produced from “nothing,” so in fact etymology reverses semantics. Democritus seems to have arrived at the term independently from Alcaeus (Moorhouse 1962, 238).

by the low transmission standards of early Greek philosophy. There are virtually no remaining verbatim fragments of Leucippus, the founder of atomic theory, and not much more of Democritus, who developed and disseminated the theory.<sup>4</sup> The few words of theirs we do have are buried within great masses of doxographical testimony aiming to explicate the atomists' thought. Discerning the text of the Presocratic philosophers is never straightforward, as we have seen throughout, but with Democritus the project comes up against its limits, and we are often dealing with what is not there as much as what is. The challenge is to interpret the status of this not-there: to differentiate the absence of Democritus's text from the absence within Democritus's text, the contingent void of transmission from the essential void within Democritus's own thought.

These two voids overlap in the *den*. Barbara Cassin, reading Democritus with Lacan, argues that the radical nature of the *den* has been obscured by the doxographic tradition, in particular by Aristotle.<sup>5</sup> Aristotle assimilates the *den* to the atom, which he views as a tiny fragment of Parmenidean being, glittering against the empty background of the void. Atoms and void alike have a positive being; together they constitute a physics and metaphysics of unadulterated presence. Aristotle thus treats Democritus as a material positivist, the philosopher of atomic reality. But in so doing, Cassin charges, Aristotle evades the challenge of the *den*. Cassin draws on Heinz Wismann's brilliant study of Democritus, which argues for the primacy of nonbeing in his thought: producing something by subtraction from nothing, the *den*, he proposes, renders being "a privative state of nonbeing, its positivity just a lure."<sup>6</sup> Being is literally less than nothing.

For Wismann and Cassin, the *den* thus names a fundamentally different kind of being from Parmenides's *To Eon*. Whereas the latter is eternal, ungenerated, and undying, with the *den*, being comes *into* being out of nonbeing. Dependent on and derivative of nonbeing, being is no longer autonomous and self-grounding as it was for Parmenides; nor is it pure and homogeneous, for the *d'* of *den* preserves a remnant of *mēden* within it. So *den* cannot simply be assimilated to the atom as positive body, *pace* Aristotle, Plutarch, and Galen, but instead figures the atom as a negated negativity. Nor can it be assimilated to void as the positive place of the atom's nonpresence, for *den* identifies a nonpresence (*mēden*)

4. Diels-Kranz's division of Leucippus (DK 67) from Democritus (DK 68) and the difficulty with both authors of segregating A fragments from B fragments make their edition of the atomists particularly unsatisfying. I have profited from other editions, including Taylor 1999b and Luria 2007, but especially Laks and Most 2016, vol. 7, whose judgment I generally follow as to which fragments are verbatim. I refer here to Democritus but, following current practice, I make no attempt to distinguish his thought from that of Leucippus (for such an attempt see Bailey 1964; and Graham 2008a). Diels-Kranz numbers refer to Democritus unless otherwise specified.

5. Cassin 2017, 28–29, 34–36; cf. Wismann 2010, 6–9, 28–36, 60–62.

6. Wismann 2010, 65. The key ideas were first published in "Atomos Idea," *Neue Hefte für Philosophie* 15/16 (1979), 34–52. Wismann stresses the speculative nature of the atomist's materialism. He is surprisingly uninterested in the *den*, which he mentions only in passing (48, 65, 84).

within the atom itself. Thus while void can stand alongside atoms in a positive (Parmenidean) ontology, both equally real, the *den* poses a more radical challenge to that ontology. It suggests that an account of reality is not fully exhausted by “is” and “is not.” Instead, it must be able to accommodate something that is simultaneously being and nonbeing and to conceptualize the atom (in Wismann’s apt phrase) as an “avatar of the void.”

Cassin, along with Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek, recuperates the *den* as a way of thinking beyond the binarisms that have structured Western philosophy: not only being and nonbeing, presence and absence, but *morphē* and *hulē*, idealism and materialism, male and female, sense and non-sense.<sup>7</sup> For these theorists, the *den* points not to physical reality but to the Lacanian Real, that register that exceeds the symbolic order of language and knowledge. The Real cannot be spoken or represented: it manifests in the symbolic only in the form of what Lacan terms the *objet a*. A bone of the Real that “remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier,” the *objet a*, while unpronounceable in itself, engenders the circumlocutions and displacements that constitute the syntax of the symbolic.<sup>8</sup> In this way, it shapes, even as it eludes, discourse. Lacan himself drew a connection between his *objet a* and Democritus’s *den* in his essay “L’Étourdit.” In the *den*, he proposes, Democritus smuggles the Real into discourse as “a stowaway” (*passager clandestin*).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, *den* is a stowaway twice over: as something derived from nothing it smuggles nonbeing into being; as the marker of this (non)being it smuggles the Real into language. The secret bearer of nonbeing within both *to on* and the *logos* about it, *den* is, as Dolar puts it, an “ontological scandal.”<sup>10</sup>

Cassin, Dolar, and Žižek track the trajectory of that *passager clandestin* within the history of Western philosophy, from Aristotle to Hegel to Lacan. But *den* is

7. Cassin 2017, 2020, 93–125; Dolar 2013a, 2013b; and Žižek 2012, 58–60. For Cassin, the *den* belongs to language as “ab-sense” (neither sense nor its simple negation) and to a “sophistic” tradition that rejects Aristotle’s reduction of language to univocal meaning. Dolar (2013a, 22–26, 2013b, 233–38) takes atomism’s binary of atoms and void as the ancestor of Hegel’s dialectic of being and nonbeing and sees the *den* as a (non)entity that escapes that binary. While for Dolar the *den* highlights the contrast between Hegel and Lacan, for Žižek (2012, 58–60, cf. 495, 957) it marks their convergence, prefiguring the “Hegelian-Lacanian” conception of the Real as divided and incomplete.

8. Lacan 1977, 270. Over the course of his career Lacan used different terms for this marker of the Real within the symbolic: *objet a*, the unary trait, the phallic signifier, the Thing. In the later seminars he turned to the matheme, on the theory that “mathematization alone reaches a real” (1998, 131). Formed through subtraction and governing (as we shall see) a calculus of nonequation, *den* might be considered a Democritean matheme. Badiou (2005, 9) proposes that Lacan saw in the Presocratics’ poetic form “a grandiose anticipation of the matheme” (see Conclusion, n. 15), but does not discuss the *den*. Lucid accounts of the Lacanian Real are offered by Fink (1995, 24–31); and Eyers (2012).

9. Lacan 1973, 51: “Démocrite en effet nous fit cadeau de l’ἀτομος, du réel radical, à en élider le pas (μή). . . . Moyennant quoi le δέν fut bien le passager clandestin dont le clam fait maintenant notre destin.” Lacan also links the *den* to the Real in his discussion of Aristotle’s *tukhē* and *automaton* (1977, 53–64) as the object that gives thought access to negativity.

10. Dolar 2013a, 25 (~ 2013b, 236). Žižek 2012, 60: “*Den* lies outside the scope of the unity of *logos* and being.”

also a stowaway within Democritus's own thought. Authoritative studies of Democritus by specialists such as C. C. W. Taylor or Solomon Luria generally view the atomist through the same lens as Aristotle. They interrogate every aspect of atomic theory except the *den*.<sup>11</sup> No scholar of ancient philosophy, as far as I can tell, has engaged with the readings of Cassin, Dolar, and Žižek, who in turn rarely cite these scholars and whose interest in Democritus is limited almost exclusively to the *den*.<sup>12</sup> This striking noncommunication in modern readings of Democritus produces a parallax view of his thought: look at him from one perspective and you see the reality of atoms and void; approach him from the other and you see the radical Real of the *den*.<sup>13</sup>

This chapter seeks to bring these two interpretive schools into dialogue. It does not discount or dispute the traditional (Aristotelian) view of Democritus but challenges it by juxtaposing a view from the angle of the *den*. It is, in this sense, an experiment in parallax reading. I draw on the insights of Cassin, Dolar, and Žižek, but take them back to the text of Democritus in an attempt to understand how the *den* appears—or significantly fails to appear—within the atomist's own thought. With the *den* Democritus brings nonbeing into ontology, but in a form that does not allow for explicit theoretical articulation. He invents the word but does not put it to work within his discourse. He does not offer an account of the *den*. Instead, he gives us a theory of atoms and void. If the *den* is a stowaway from the Real, atomic theory is an account of reality ("in reality atoms and void," B9/D14). Democritus presents this as "an account of all things," a *logos peri tōn xumpantōn*, and indeed it boasts a comprehensiveness and coherence unsurpassed until Aristotle. But in elaborating this totalizing theory, it is as if Democritus "forgot" that he himself had invented the *den*. The *den* thus appears within Democritus's system precisely as its exclusion, that which doesn't fit and eludes its totalizing reach. Democritus's philosophy is a theory of everything and of nothing but not of *nothing*.

And yet if the *den* does not (or cannot) receive theoretical elaboration, it does exert a latent force on Democritus's thought, like some philosophical dark matter

11. The *den* is barely mentioned in many seminal or synoptic treatments of atomism, including Bailey 1964, 118; Barnes 1982, 342–77; Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983, 402–33; Taylor 1999b; and Berryman 2023.

12. This despite the fact that Cassin is herself a scholar of ancient philosophy (and was a student of Wismann). Wismann's own status is symptomatic of the split: he is credited by Cassin and Dolar but his study of Democritus does not appear in the bibliographies of Furley 1987 or Taylor 1999b, nor in Palmer's *Oxford Bibliographies Online* entry for Democritus.

13. Dolar 2013a, 26 (~ 2013b, 238). Žižek (2006) theorizes the parallax as two closely connected perspectives between which, however, there can be no synthesis or mediation. Žižek's critical intervention is to show how the difference between the two perspectives reinscribes a difference within each perspective. Thus we will see how the divergence in the reception history reproduces a gap or void within Democritus's own theory, an opacity marked by the *den*. In a way, then, Democritus anticipates his own future reception.

that can be observed only in its distorting effects.<sup>14</sup> Noticing those effects produces a radically unfamiliar vision of ancient atomism. This chapter traces the impact of the *den* on Democritus's physics, where it renders the atom heterogeneous and unstable, destabilizing in turn the physical laws predicated on it; and on his ethics, where the self-sufficient ethical subject—the subject as atom—is shown to be structured around a psychic void. We will also trace the *den*'s effects on Democritus's *logos*. A point of opacity within a philosophical language that aims for transparency and an omission within a theoretical discourse that aims for universality, the *den* marks the limits of Democritus's discourse and the atomic reality it purports to reveal. In so doing, it sets that discourse in a particular relation to truth and knowledge that, as I will suggest at the end, characterizes it—more than any superficial similarity to modern atomic physics—as a science. In this way, *den* figures the aporia within ontology as a philosophical and discursive project that has been one of the central themes of this book. Situated at the asymptotic non-convergence between *onta* and *logos*, the *den* encapsulates both the impossibility of bringing being into language and the generative force of that impossibility.

#### ATOMS, VOID, AND THE INDIFFERENT PHYSICS OF THE *DEN*

The atomists start from a double *arkhē*, as Aristotle explains in the *Metaphysics*.

Λεύκιππος δὲ καὶ ὁ ἑταῖρος αὐτοῦ Δημόκριτος στοιχεῖα μὲν τὸ πλήρες καὶ τὸ κενὸν εἶναι φασί, λέγοντες τὸ μὲν ὄν τὸ δὲ μὴ ὄν, τούτων δὲ τὸ μὲν πλήρες καὶ στερεόν, τὸ ὄν, τὸ δὲ κενὸν καὶ μανόν, τὸ μὴ ὄν (διὸ καὶ οὐθὲν μᾶλλον τὸ ὄν τοῦ μὴ ὄντος εἶναι φασί, ὅτι οὐδὲ τὸ κενὸν (ἐλαττον) τοῦ σώματος), αἷτια δὲ τῶν ὄντων ταῦτα ὡς ὕλην. (*Metaph.* 1.4 985b4–10 < 67A6/D31 [Diels-Kranz's text])

Leucippus and his associate Democritus say that the basic elements are the full and the empty, meaning what is (*to on*) and what is not (*to mē on*). Of these the former is full and solid, what is, and the latter empty and sparse, what is not (and for this reason they also say that what is exists no more than what is not, because the void [exists] no less than the body), and these are the causes of the things that exist, comprising their material.

In the form of atoms and void, what is (*to on*) and what is not (*to mē on*) occupy the same ontological footing: nonbeing exists no less than being, and the two share top billing as the origins and primary elements (*stojikeia*) of the atomists' cosmology.<sup>15</sup>

14. This is the dynamic of the Lacanian Real, which is not some "real thing" beyond the symbolic, but, as Evers (2012, 61–93) stresses, a projection of the symbolic's lack (incompleteness, incoherence), an external cause retroactively posited on the basis of its effects within signification.

15. See further Diog. Laert. 9.44 (< A1/D13); Simpl. in *Phys.* 28.15 (< A38/D32); 67A8/D32, 67A12/≠LM, 67A14/D61, A44/≠LM, A46/≠LM.