



Atom (The Scientific Papers of James Clerk Maxwell) (Volume 2)

James Clerk Maxwell

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An excerpt from the author's Introductory:

ATOM is a body which cannot be cut in two. The atomic theory is a theory of the constitution of bodies, which asserts that they are made up of atoms. The opposite theory is that of the homogeneity and continuity of bodies, and asserts, at least in the case of bodies having no apparent organisation, such, for instance, as water, that as we can divide a drop of water into two parts which are each of them drops of water, so we have reason to believe that these smaller drops can be divided again, and the theory goes on to assert that there is nothing in the nature of things to hinder this process of division from being repeated over and over again, times without end. This is the doctrine of the infinite divisibility of bodies, and it is in direct contradiction with the theory of atoms.

The atomists assert that after a certain number of such divisions the parts would be no longer divisible, because each of them would be an atom. The advocates of the continuity of matter assert that the smallest conceivable body has parts, and that whatever has parts may be divided.

In ancient times Democritus was the founder of the atomic theory, while Anaxagoras propounded that of continuity, under the name of the doctrine of homœomeria , or of the similarity of the parts of a body to the whole. The arguments of the atomists, and their replies to the objections of Anaxagoras, are to be found in Lucretius.

In modern times the study of nature has brought to light many properties of bodies which appear to depend on the magnitude and motions of their ultimate constituents, and the question of the existence of atoms has once more become conspicuous among scientific inquiries.

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