Monte Ransome Johnson*

# Democritus, The Laughing Philosopher

**Abstract:** I argue that a circa first century B.C./A.D. anonymous epistolary comic novel depicting a fictional interaction between Hippocrates of Cos and Democritus of Abdera contains an insightful imitation of Democritus that can cast light on the historical Democritus's thought, including his thought on the touchy subject of appropriate and inappropriate laughter. The only thing certain about Democritus's view of laughter is that he denounced laughter at human misfortune as inappropriate. The later legend of him as laughing at everything and everyone indiscriminately is a later distortion of his view which the author of the comic novel seems concerned to counteract.

**Keywords:** Democritus, Hippocrates, laughter, melancholy, euthumia, tranquility, ataraxia, Abdera, letters, ethics

## Introduction

The legend of Democritus as the philosopher who laughs at everything in the world, or at least all human affairs, is contradicted by the sole surviving fragment attributable to Democritus that mentions laughter: "It is right, since we are human beings, not to laugh at the misfortunes of human beings, but to weep" (B107a). The legend is nevertheless used as the basis of an anonymous epistolary novella published sometime in the first century B.C. or A.D. Because of the prima facie contradiction between B107a and the characterization of Democritus in the novel, and because the speeches of Democritus in the novel resemble Cynic diatribes of the same epoch, it has generally been assumed that the novelist does not represent the historical Democritus very accurately. Against this, I will argue that the novelist was well-informed about Democritus's ethical writings. Although the novelist undoubtedly incorporated Cynic ideas, he constructed his work out many of the same maxims and arguments that we find in our own collection of fragments of Democritus's ethics (which may have been influenced by an earlier Cynic compiler). Further, I argue, the entire account of Democritus constructed by the novelist actually contradicts the legend of the laughing philosopher, and is carefully crafted to be consistent with Democritus's actual view on inappropriate laughter.

* University of California, San Diego, USA; monte@ucsd.edu

https://doi.org/10.1515/phhumyb-2024-0001

In part 1, I briefly review the evidence for the legend of the laughing philosopher. In part 2, I analyze the fragment which mentions laughter, and connect it to a network of evidence that includes the longest and most secure fragments attributable to Democritus. This will allow me to reconstruct the historical Democritus's philosophical account of inappropriate laughter. In part 3, I review the epistolary novel in detail and establish its coherence with the genuine fragments of Democritus's ethics and with the reconstruction of his view on inappropriate laughter that I have offered.

# 1 The Legend of the Laughing Philosopher

Hippolytus of Rome, after providing a moderately detailed summary of Democritus's cosmology, offers but a single remark on Democritus's ethics and character:

> He used to laugh at everything, as if all the things in human affairs were worthy of laughter (*Houtos egela panta, hôs gelôtos axiôn pantôn tôn en anthrôpois*). (A40)[1]

This is what I will call the legend of Democritus the laughing philosopher: Democritus laughs at *everything* and considers *all* human affairs worthy of laughter. Similar literary caricatures appear elsewhere in Latin literature,[2] most relevantly in Seneca's explanation of why "we should take Democritus as our model rather than Heraclitus."

> For Heraclitus, whenever he went out into public, used to weep, regarding all man's actions as misery, but Democritus would laugh, regarding them as folly. We must, therefore, take a less serious view of all things, tolerating them in a spirit of acceptance: it is more human to laugh at life than to weep tears over it. There is the further point that the human race is also more indebted to the man who laughs at it than to the one who morns for it: the first leaves some measure of optimism, while the second foolishly mourns for what he despairs of being remedied; and when he surveys the world, the man who does not hold back his laughter shows a greater mind than the one who does not hold back his tears, since he gives vent to the gentlest of emotions and thinks there is nothing important, or even miserable, in the whole great state of life. (*De tranquillitate animi* 15.2–3, tr. Davie)[3]

It is striking to read a card-carrying Stoic philosopher like Seneca not only praise Democritus (usually considered a forerunner of the Epicureans) but also criticize

1 Translations of testimonia and fragments of Democritus are mine, cited according to Diels's edition.

2 For details, see Rütten (1992), Müller (1994) and Cordero (2000).

3 See also *De ira* (II.10.5).

Heraclitus (who was adopted as a forerunner by the Stoics). For the philosophical point is plain: Democritus, who laughs at everything, enjoys the tranquility that Seneca's friend Serenus seeks, and for this reason Democritus is wise while Heraclitus is foolish.

Of course, in providing this anecdote, Seneca is not referring to any actual writing of Democritus (or Heraclitus), but rather to a caricature of uncertain origin that constructs mannequins of both sages as philosophical and emotional antitheses. But Seneca's deployment of this caricature appears in his dialogue *De tranquillitate animi*, a work which he himself describes as inspired by Democritus's most well-attested ethical writing, *peri euthumiês.*[4] As Seneca interprets it, for Democritus *euthumiê* means tranquility or contentment. Democritus is reported in many ancient sources to have extensively discussed *euthumiê* along with more conventional terms used by later Greek philosophers such as *eudaimonia.*[5] An important summary of Democritus's terminology stems from a first century B.C. account of Arius Didymus quoted in Stobaeus.

> Democritus and Plato agree in placing *eudaimonia* in the soul. Democritus writes as follows: *Eudaimonia* and *kakodaimonia* belong to the soul. *Eudaimonia* does not dwell in flocks or gold; it is the soul that is the home of a person's *daimon.* He also calls *eudaimonia euthumia*, well-being (*euestô*), harmony (*harmonian*), proportion or moderation (*summetrian*), and *ataraxia.* He says that it consists in distinguishing and discriminating pleasures, and that this is the most noble and beneficial thing for human beings. (A167)

Given Democritus's complex terminology, we should carefully attend to the nuances and connotations of this term *euthumiê*, which literally means "having good spirit" or "feeling good," and so also connotes "cheerfulness" and even "mirth." It has been proposed, partly on the basis of an ambiguous remark of Cicero discussed below, that Democritus's work *peri euthumiês* (or possibly another dedicated work) contained an elaborate philosophical discussion of laughter.[6] Now there is in fact no evidence that Democritus wrote extensively about laughter, but it is easy to see how the legend of the laughing philosopher may have been encouraged by a superficial (if not deliberately perverse) interpretation of Democritus's most famous work: "the treatise of Democritus *peri euthumias* seems the most likely

**4** "This constant state of mental composure the Greeks call *euthumia*, on which Democritus has written an outstanding treatise; I call it tranquility" (*De tranquillitate animi* 2.3, tr. Davie). Note that the term is spelled *euthumiê* in Ionic dialect but *euthumia* in Attic.

**5** See A1 (D.L. IX.45), and A166–69. See further Johnson (2020, 233–38).

**6** "It seems reasonable, then, to suppose that Democritus wrote about laughter (perhaps in his *On Cheerfulness*), its physiological causes and manifestations, its involuntary and sometimes embarrassing nature, as well as, very probably, its relation to decorum" (Hankinson 2019, 53).

source of the tradition, but with apparent distortion of cheerfulness to satirical laughter" (Hendrickson 1927, 53n1). In order to see just how this distorted the legend in fact is, let us turn to the surviving fragments attributable to that work.

## 2 Inappropriate Laughter and Democritus's *peri euthumiês*

The one and only surviving fragment of Democritus that actually mentions laughter is this one:

> Since we are human beings, it is right (*axion*) not to laugh (*mê gelan*) at the misfortunes of human beings (*ep'anthrôpôn sumphorais*), but to weep (*olophuresthai*). (B107a)

The fragment, like many others attributed to Democritus, is in the form of a maxim. It is closely parallel to another fragment, which may have originally been offered as its explanation but became separated in the process of textual selection and transmission.[7]

> Those who take pleasure (*hêdonên echousin*) at the misfortunes of their neighbors (hai *zumphorai tôn pelas*) fail to notice that the results of luck (*ta tês tuchês*) are common to all and they look only for their own enjoyment (*charas*). (B293)

Both fragments discuss appropriate attitudes that human beings should have towards other human beings. It is not right to laugh at human misfortunes, because we ourselves are humans. The second fragment explains: luck affects everyone, and so we all are (or have been or will be) in the same situation as they are. Thus, the sight of a neighbor's misfortune should not be a cause of enjoyment, and laughter, which is an expression of enjoyment, would be totally inappropriate. This point is reinforced in third highly parallel fragment:

> One must comprehend that a human life (*anthrôpinên biotên*) is powerless, of short duration, and with many defects because of being confused and helpless, in order that one may care only for moderate acquisitions, and so that the hardship may be measured with reference to the necessities. (B285)

7 On the abbreviation of Democritean maxims and loss or detachment of their explanatory clauses, see Johnson (2020, 221–22).

This maxim shifts from discussing the appropriate attitude and behavior towards others, to the proper attitude towards oneself, towards one's own desires and experience of hardship considering the ubiquity of misfortune. Through the topics of avoidance of dependence on luck, encouragement of moderation in desires, and the appropriate attitude towards hardship suffered by others, we can connect these three fragments to the two most important and secure fragments from Democritus *peri euthumiês*, the first of which was probably the work's incipit.

> The man trying to be *euthumos* needs not to do many things–whether in public or private–nor, whatever he does, to choose beyond his capabilities and nature; but he must be on guard so that when luck is striking (τῆς τύχης ἐπιβαλλούσης) and leads him to thinking about getting more, he puts it down and does not undertake more than he is capable of. For the well-balanced bulk is more secure than the huge load. (B3)

> For *euthumia* comes about for a human being with feelings of joy in moderation and in a balance of life; things that are deficient and excessive tend to fluctuate and induce great motions in the soul. And those of the souls that move over great intervals are neither well-based nor *euthumos.* Therefore one should keep in mind one's capabilities, and be content with what one has, having few memories or thoughts of those who are objects of jealousy and admiration, by not paying attention to them.
>
> And one should observe the lives of those who are enduring hardship, taking into consideration the defects they suffer from, so that the things one has and already possesses will seem great and worthy of jealousy, and no longer would you suffer badly because of having desires in your soul. For the man who in his memory at all hours dwells on those who are objects of admiration and deemed blessed by other humans is always compelled to find new opportunities and to overshoot because of a desire to do desperate things which the laws forbid. That is why by not doubting what must be, but by being *euthumos* with respect to things that must be, by comparing one's own life with those who do worse, and by deeming oneself blessed keeping in mind the things they suffer, one does and fares much better than they do. For by holding fast to this thought, you will live with more *euthumia*, and will drive away those not small defects in your life: envy, jealousy, and ill-will. (B191)

Now we may connect these five fragments into a network of evidence for the following philosophical position.

All human affairs are subject to luck, resulting in good luck for some, misfortunes for others. Those who laugh at the misfortunes of others do so wrongly—they fail to realize that they too are vulnerable to the vicissitudes of luck, towards which the proper attitude is lamentation. Everyone would do better to acknowledge this, and to adjust their own ambitions and activities accordingly. This entails reducing their desire for more possessions and being contented with moderate amounts.

Although this is undoubtedly easier said than done, Democritus offers concrete advice about how it can be achieved. The advice specifies how one should perceive and relate to other people. It is thus highly relevant for the question of appropriate

(and inappropriate) laughter. One should observe and focus upon those who are enduring greater hardships and misfortune than oneself, and who suffer from greater defects than oneself; correspondingly one should ignore those who are more successful and fortunate than oneself. Focusing on those who are better off causes feelings of relative deprivation, envy, jealousy, and ill-will; these emotions fuel greed and motivate anti-social and even criminal activity. Democritus's recommendation is to turn one's focus from them onto those who are less fortunate. This will afford greater contentment and *euthumiê* not only by reducing the painful competitive feelings, but also by making one feel better about one's own circumstances.

As Lucretius clarifies in a passage employing Democritus's insight: "it is not that anyone's distress is a cause of agreeable pleasure; but it is comforting to see from what troubles you yourself are exempt" (2001, II.3–4). Thus although the change of focus recommended by Democritus makes one feel better about oneself, so that one enjoys more *euthumiê* and in general well-being, the appropriate result is not anything like sardonic laughter. In fact, the appropriate response to the misfortunes of others is more like weeping, lamenting, or feeling pity, according to Democritus in B107a: *olophurein*, which literally means to lament, wail, or moan, but also, in an extended sense to feel pity.[8] To feel pity is in turn precisely what is meant by *oiktirein* (a word which can also mean to lament or bewail) in the following maxim.

> When those who are capable undertake to contribute to those who do not, and to assist and benefit them, herein at last is having pity (τὸ οἰκτίρειν) and not being solitary, and they become comrades and defend one another, and the citizens are of one mind; and there are other good things, so many no one could enumerate them. (B255)

Thus, Democritus does not encourage laughter at unfortunate human beings, but if anything weeps and feels pity towards them. But this must be a socially constructive reaction, which benefits both himself, by removing distressing feelings of relative deprivation and thereby affording greater *euthumiê*, and others, by motivating mutual aid towards them out of pity. This is opposed to the anti-social and generally problematic reaction of inappropriate laughter, which Democritus explicitly condemns. Now insofar as following his advice conduces a general feeling of *euthumiê*, doing so may incidentally be conducive to more laughter. Democritus himself does not seem to suggest that *euthumiê* will produce more laughter, but if it is assumed that it does (for example, based on connotation implying "mirth"), then the source of Democritus laughter will turn out not to be his obser-

8 See Liddel and Scott (s.v. *olophuromai* 2).

vations of the misfortunes of others but rather because "he is becoming accustomed to find within himself the sources of enjoyment" (B146).

Let us now turn to the novella and see whether it coheres with these views.

## 3 Democritus in the Ancient Epistolary Novel

Neither the author nor the exact century of publication of the epistolary novella is known.[9] Because it depicts Hippocrates applying his art (on his contemporary Democritus), and (mostly) maintains the pretense that Hippocrates is the author of the letters, it has been classified among the pseudepigraphic writings of Hippocrates, specifically letters 10–21. Parts of letters 17 and 18 were collected by Diels as imitations of Democritus (68C2–6). Letters 10–17 are a core to which other material, by other authors, has accreted (in letters 18–21, which I here ignore).

The relationship of the novelist to the earlier works of the Hippocratic Corpus is disputed. Recently, Kazantzidis (2018) has argued that the novelist shows considerable engagement with the Hippocratic Corpus and deliberately evokes medical writings in his novel.[10] On the other hand, the recent editor of the Hippocratic Pseudepigrapha perceives a rather superficial engagement with the earlier texts of both Hippocrates and Democritus.[11] The main reason for this in the case of Democritus is that his speeches have long been recognized as fitting the mold of Cynic diatribes, in which case it might be assumed that the author has sculpted his fiction out of contemporary Cynic materials; most scholars have declined to go very

**9** Smith summarizes the status of the question as follows: "none of the preserved letters can be dated precisely, but the tendency of scholars has been to date the genre as a whole to the last century B.C. and the first and second A.D." (1990, 28). Scholars holding first century BCE include Rütten (1992, 1) and Hankinson (2019, 55). For further details, see Kazantzidis (2018, n.2).

**10** "Although the ps.-Hippocratic collection of letters belongs to a considerably later date, the reason for underlining the points of contact with the Hippocratic tradition is that its author(s) show a clear tendency to engage with these earlier texts to draw the appropriate framework within which Hippocrates's persona is placed, historically as well as intellectually. … These and other examples indicate that while the *Epistles* come at a late stage and participate actively in the intellectual environment of the first century CE, they nonetheless remain strongly attached to the Hippocratic past and make use of a language that looks back deliberately at early medical writings" (Kazantzidis 2018, 60, cf. 39 and 49).

**11** "The author plays with known texts of Democritus and Hippocrates while dealing, in a dilettante's manner, with the technical and ethical issues that they raise. As we noticed above, 10–17, which have their own brand of moralizing, are not close to the specific work of the great men, but move in an atmosphere of commonplace and abstraction" (Smith 1990, 31; cf. 20).

far beyond that casual observation.[12] But the resonance of the depiction of Democritus with Cynic ideas has another, more likely but also more complicated explanation. Stewart has demonstrated not only the influence of Democritus on Greek Cynics, but also shown that the collection of Democritean fragments that have survived were likely collected and possibly modified by a Cynic compiler so as to show their resonance with Cynic ideas. Thus the novelist may at once be imitating genuine ideas of Democritus and yet there is an undeniable Cynic resonance of these ideas. This could be so whether the novelist depended on the same set of fragments as we possess or some other one, and possibly one closer to the original source.

The most important exceptions to the tendency to ignore the possibility of a genuine Democritean background for the novelist's depiction are the studies of Rütten and Müller. Rütten pointed out that the fictitious Democritus defends his laughter not only against Hippocrates's accusation that Democritus no longer separates good and evil in his indifferent laughter, but also with respect to the issue raised in B107a, quoted above (Rütten 1992, 131–32). According to Rütten, the novelist attempts to harmonize this discrepancy between that fragment of Democritus and the permanent laughter of the legendary Democritus by means of an argument which, in turn, is taken almost in the wording of Democritean fragments. Democritus, Rütten points out, does not laugh at rational people who understand the changeability and lability of all events, but only those who are foolish. As in the novel, Democritus refers to people as "thoughtless" (*anoêmones*), and "children" (*nepioi*), their main characteristic being boundless and unreasonable desire. I will translate here some of the most important examples.

> For children (*nêpioisin*) not reason but misfortune (*zumphorê*) becomes teacher. (B76)
>
> Those who are senseless (*hoi azunetoi*) exercise self-control after they suffer bad luck (*dustucheontes*). (B54)

---

**12** "Not only were these letters composed at just the period what renewed interest in Cynicism led to the production of faked epistles of early Cynics, but they themselves show unmistakable Cynic traits" (Stewart 1958, 186). "Democritus's speech has long been recognized as a Cynic diatribe" (Temkin 1985, 461). "Material for the expansion, as it relates to Democritus, is provided by moral philosophy, largely cynic-stoic" (Smith 1990, 20); "Democritus's … description is more analytical, employing terms developed by Cynics, Stoics, and Epicureans to signal mental and moral instability which the philosophies aim at curing, but there is apparent Democritean language also in the description of life as change" (Smith 1990, 22); "Democritus's speech belongs to a recognizable literary genre, the diatribe, which in its developed form discourses with more or less wit and indignation the follows and vices of mankind in imitation of Diogenes and the other cynics." (Smith 1990, 27). "It is interesting both as an appealing and sophisticated literary production, and for the popularized Cynic/Stoic philosophy it exemplifies" (Hankinson 2019, 55). See also Cordero (2000, 233).

> Being thoughtless (*anoêmones*) they are molded by the gains of luck, while those who are experienced in these kinds of things are molded by the gains of wisdom. (B197)
>
> Being thoughtless they yearn for what is absent but pass by what is present, even though they are wasting what is more profitable. (B202)
>
> Being thoughtless, they want to grow old because of dreading death. (B206; cf. B199, 200, 201, 203, 205)

According to Rütten, recognizing the parallels to these fragments in the novel results in the following conclusion: "all in all, the effort of the novelist is unmistakable to pretend or to evoke authenticity by citation. It is not necessary to suspect the evil machinations of a cheap counterfeiter here in the first place. In the context of the epistolary novel, such stylistic borrowings and linguistic anachronisms have the literary meaning of representing a bygone era, which the writer wants to bring to new timeliness" (1992, 132).

Müller supported this conclusion by discussing the fragments mentioned by Rütten in a little more detail, adding some other fragments in which Democritus denounces the foolish (B53, 76 and 185) and a few others that mention the opposite condition of rightness or moderation (B233, 236). Most importantly, Müller brought into consideration the crucial fragment B191, the longest and most secure fragment (Müller 1994, 41–43). For the most part, I agree with Rütten and Müller about the relevance of these parallels and what they indicate about the working methods of the novelist. But Rütten and Müller do little more than list and briefly gloss the fragments as if their implications are already clear enough. But I think more needs to be said about how Democritus's attitude about fools relates to his legendary laughter.

Neither Rütten nor Müller has commented on the fact that the first of these fragments (B76) contains the term *zumphorê* (*sumphorê,* paralleled by *dustucheontes* in B54), which is the same term that appears in the crucial fragment when Democritus says, "It is right, since we are human beings, not to laugh at the misfortunes (*sumphorais*) of human beings, but to weep" (B107a; cf. *zumphorai* (*sumphorai*) in the closely parallel B293). Taking all this literally, one might interpret Democritus as proscribing laughter at the misfortunes of fools, in which case the novelist's depiction would remain dissonant even with these Democritean fragments. Nor do Rütten or Müller provide a comprehensive analysis of the novel and its representation of Democritus's arguments.

But as we will see, what is really going on is that the novelist depicts Democritus not as laughing at the misfortunes of fools, but specifically and exclusively at their culpable intellectual failures that result in their exposure to bad luck and

lamentable misfortunes.[13] The novelist is extremely careful to maintain this important distinction. My present task, then, is to review the contents of letters 10–17, affirm the points made by Rütten and Müller, and call attention (mostly in the notes) to several more places where the novelist displays extensive, detailed, and precise awareness of Democritus's ethical writings.

In Letter 10 (the beginning of the Democritus letters), "the council and the people of Abdera" write to Hippocrates, complaining that their city is in great peril because their most famous citizen has "been made ill by the great learning that weighs him down." They are fearful and "disturbed" (*tarattometha*) because, although previously inattentive to everything, Democritus is now wakeful night and day and he:

> laughs at everything large and small, and thinks life in general is worth nothing. Someone marries, a man engages in trade, a man goes into politics, another takes an office, goes on an embassy, votes, falls ill, is wounded, dies. He laughs at every one of them, whether he sees them downcast and ill-tempered, or happy. (10, 80.5–9)[14]

With its universal scope ("laughs at everything" and "thinks life in general is worth nothing"), this description corresponds to the legend of Democritus the laughing philosopher as I defined it above—Democritus considers all things worthy of laughter. On this point, as I have already said, there is prima facie tension with at least one genuine maxim of Democritus.

Two considerations immediately relieve this tension. First, this description of Democritus is supposed to come from his Abderite countrymen and, as we will see, Hippocrates is skeptical that they perceive him rightly and eventually rejects their diagnosis. Second, Hippocrates's description of Democritus's odd activity continues in a way that shows the novelist's direct awareness of Democritus's ideas, and even of his writings, or at least to their titles: "the man is investigating things in Hades, and he writes about them,[15] and he says that the air is full of images.[16] He listens to

---

**13** Cf. Müller: "Dass es bei Demokrit nicht um ein Lachen über das Unglück anderer Menschen, sondern um eine Kritik fehlgeleiteten Strebens geht, ist aus vielen Zeugnissen erkennbar" (1994, 42). But Müller does not provide the evidence or arguments for this conclusion, or show how the novelist tracks this distinction, which has escaped the notice of so many commentators ancient and modern.

**14** I will use Smith's translations and system of reference for the novel throughout this essay, adapted where noted.

**15** Compare letter 10 (56.9, tr. Smith) with the fourth title in the first tetralogy of Democritus's writings of Thrasyllus (DL 46): *On those in Hades.*

**16** This is a reference to Democritus's doctrine of *eidola.* See A78, B166, and C5.

birds' voices. Arising often alone at night he seems to be singing softly.[17] He claims that he sometimes goes off into the boundless and that there are numberless Democrituses like himself" (10, 56.9–13).[18]

The citizens implore Hippocrates to come and treat Democritus, and they promise to pay whatever fee he requires, for "we seem to have fallen ill in our ways, Hippocrates, have gone insane in our laws", and so Hippocrates "will heal a city, not just a man" and will come as a "lawgiver," "judge," "ruler," "craftsman" and even "savior" (56.23–25). Since "wisdom is a thing akin to everyone but even more to those who have come nearest her," Hippocrates and Democritus are said to have a close kinship in sagehood. But while begging Hippocrates to treat Democritus, the Abderites lament "how even excessive good (*agatha perisseusanta*) becomes disease! Democritus, as he had strength for the heights of wisdom, is equally in danger of ruination by a stroke to his mind and by silliness" (58.4–7). Although the notion of "excessive good" and of "too much wisdom" are somewhat counterintuitive, the Abderites utilize a semi-technical terminology about "excess" that evokes similar terms used by Democritus and medical writers in other contexts (e.g. *huperballonta* in B191).[19] The Abderites, by contrast, although remaining "unlearned, keep the common mind," and presume they "now have more wit for judging the disease of a wise man." They end the letter with prayer that the land and mountaintops yield drugs that will cure what they assume is a physical disease from which Democritus suffers.

In letter 11, Hippocrates replies that he is happy the citizens recognize that "their good men are their defense, not towns and bulwarks, but rather the wise minds of wise men." Holding as he does that "men are the works of nature," he believes that "Nature herself is calling me to save her creation which is crumbling through disease … if indeed it is disease and you are not darkly deceived, as I in fact pray" (58.25–29). This hint of hesitation signals Hippocrates's healthy skepticism which will grow into a conviction that the opposite is true.

The rest of letter 11 is a digression into the biomedical ethics of private medicine. Hippocrates refuses the Aberdites' offer of money, exhorting them to "leave free the work of a free science." He explains his willingness to help them even though a much more lucrative offer from the Great King of Persia has just been

**17** This is a reference to Democritus's account of the origin of singing in imitation of birds. See B154.

**18** This is a reference to Democritus's doctrine of the infinite plurality of worlds. See A1 (DL IX.44), A37 (a report in Simplicius about Aristotle's *On Democritus*), A40 (Hippolytus, quoted in part above), and A43.

**19** For references, see Kazantzidis (2018, p.69nn.100–01), but notice also that the term *huperballonta* appears in the most important fragment of Democritus (B191).

refused (an episode depicted in the earlier "Persian" letters 1–9). Refusing the Great King and instead accepting the Aberdites' request provides a conventional backdrop for Hippocrates to rant against greed, a sickness worse than madness and more worthy of being extricated than bodily disease.

Here again there are very strong resonances with fragments from Democritus's own ethical writings. The refusal of the Great King is an unmistakable satirical echo of Democritus's famous remark that "he would rather discover a single causal explanation than become the Great King" (B118). Democritus frequently denounces the love of wealth and possessions as unhealthy or insane and encourage self-control as a remedy (A14, B40, 50, 219, and 283–86).[20] In saying "in my view all afflictions of the soul (*psuchês nosêmata*) are insanities which imprint certain extreme beliefs and fantasies on the reasoning faculty, and the man who is purged of them by means of virtue becomes sound" (11, 60.10–13, tr. Smith, adapted), Hippocrates naturally embraces a salient aspect of Democritean moral psychology. Democritus was the first writer on record to compare the power of wisdom to remove affections of the soul to the power of medicine to remove afflictions of the body: "According to Democritus, medicine heals afflictions (*nosous*) of body, but wisdom removes affections (*pathôn*) from a soul" (B31).

In letter 12, Hippocrates writes to the Abderite Philopoimen, with whom he has an ancestral guest-friendship, stating that he looks forward to the visit and mentioning his current thinking on the case, wondering

> if the man is revealing not madness but an overwhelming strength of soul, having not children nor wife nor relatives nor property, nor anything at all on his mind, but day and night staying by himself and being mostly alone in caves and the quiet covering of trees or in soft grass, or by quiet streams of water. Such things are generally characteristic of melancholics. Sometimes they are quiet, solitary, and like deserted places. … But it is not unlikely that when people are serious about learning, other concerns are put to flight by that one orientation to wisdom. (12, 62.2–12)

Hippocrates presents the hypothesis of a non-pathological and even healthy kind of melancholy, as opposed to the kind recognized as an aggressive kind of insanity; or, if melancholy can only be a psychological illness, then Hippocrates is open to the idea that its symptoms may be easily confused with the healthy habits of a superior intellect.[21]

As for his being alone, without a wife or children, this characterization is based in Democritus own ethical prescriptions: he actively discourages marriage

**20** See B77, 78, 185, 218, 222.

**21** See further Kazantzidis (2018, 49–56) and Hankinson (2019, 59).

and having children.[22] His lack of possessions must be due to the fact that the wise can be happy with few possessions because of their focus on those who have even less they do (as opposed to those who have more), and their ability to be satisfied with less due to reduced and moderated desires.[23] Considering this, might the reasons for Democritus's self-isolation not be madness but the result of reasoning and even wisdom? As Hippocrates notes, "it is not wholly madmen who want caves and quiet, but also those who scorn human affairs in their desire for freedom from perturbation (*ataraxiês epithumiê*)" (12, 62.16–18). Thus Hippocrates entertains the alternative possibility that Democritus, far from being mad, is actually achieving the very state towards which he encourages others, *ataraxiê.*[24]

In letter 13, Hippocrates writes to his friend Dionysius to ask him to supervise his house and wife while he is abroad in Abdera. The letter provides another occasion (the third in four letters) to express doubts about the Aberdites' diagnosis of Democritus: "they themselves seem to me to need treatment. And I think that his is not even an illness, but an excess of learning. No, not truly an excess, though it is thought so by many laymen, since excess of excellence is never harmful. The judgment of sickness comes from the ignorance of those judging." (13, 64.5–9). Hippocrates then makes some general points about how their misjudgment is tied to confusion about excesses and deficiencies: "Every man makes an assessment that what someone else has more of he considers excessive. … Every deficiency (*elleipsis*) thinks proportionate virtue (*to aretês summetron*) is excessive (*huperballein*)" (13, 64.5–13). This evokes Democritus's own doctrine that both excesses and deficiencies (*elleiponta kai huperballonta*) must be avoided to achieve the moderation or proportionality (*summetriê*) corresponding to *euthumiê* (B191). Thus, the letter strongly resonates with the ideas and terminology of Democritean ethics.

In letter 14, Hippocrates writes to another friend, Damagetus, captain of the ship named *Helios*, requesting that he deck out the ship for the voyage to Abdera. The letter provides yet another opportunity (the fourth) to ruminate about the eventual diagnosis: "I want to cure a city which is sick because of the sickness of a single man, Democritus. You have heard of his reputation, no doubt. His city has accused him of being undone by madness. It is my wish, rather my prayer, that he is not truly mad but seems so to them (*ekeinoisin doxan*)" (14, 66.8–11). Following this, Hippocrates reiterates the Aberdites' dubious extreme account of De-

---

**22** "Democritus advised against marriage and having children not only because of the many unpleasant things from them but also because of the many distractions from the more necessary things" (A170); see also B275–78.

**23** See B191 above and the fragments cited above in footnote 20 about greed.

**24** For *ataraxia* in Democritus see A167 (quoted above) and A168, and cf. A1 (DL IX.7.45) and B297. See further Johnson (2020, 232–35).

mocritus's laughter, but uses the occasion to advise Captain Damagetus and his Rhodian countrymen:

> He laughs continually, they say, and never stops. He laughs at everything, and that seems a sign of madness to them. So tell your friends at Rhodes to be ever moderate, never laugh much nor be stern much, but acquire moderation in both, so that you will seem very charming to some people, and to others a deep thinker meditating on virtue. (14, 66.13–16).

The advice given by Hippocrates here has been constructed out of Democritus's own ethics. In general, Democritus exhorts to moderation in all emotion—and thus in both laughter and sternness. Crucially, the advice follows Democritus's own maxim (in B107a) not to laugh at the misfortunes of others. As for and the description of Democritus laughing at everything indiscriminately, and thus showing signs of madness, it is important that this view is attributed to the opinion of the Abderites ("he laughs continually, they say" … "that seems a sign of madness to them").

Thus, when Hippocrates goes on to rehearse a speech he might give to Democritus, seeing "there is something wrong in his laughing at everything…if excess is wicked, then unremitting excess is more so" (14, 66.16–8), the whole speech is conditional upon the counterfactual claim that Democritus really is excessive in his laughter. Hippocrates's speech is again replete with Democritean terminology and ideas.

> Democritus, when people are sick, being killed, dead, besieged, subject to any evil, everything that happens to them is a matter for laughter to you. Are you not fighting the gods when, since the universe holds pain and pleasure (*lupês kai charas*), two things, you have rejected one? … people do get ill, and you laugh. They do die, and you are delighted. If you should learn something bad, you become cheerful (*euphranei*). What a vile fellow you are, Democritus, and how far from wisdom. Or do you think these things are not evils? You are melancholic, then, Democritus, in danger of being a proper Abderite, and the city is wiser than you. (14, 66.18–28, tr. Smith, adapted)

The claim that Democritus is "in danger of being a proper Abderite" is a joke based on the reputation of the Abderites for stupidity, and possibly madness (Cordero 2000, 235–36). But the simultaneous undermining of the credibility of the Abderites and distancing of Democritus from them ("you are in danger of being a proper Abderite") continue the theme of Hippocrates's misgivings about the Aberdites' diagnosis of the wise man, and foreshadow the reversals of fortune to come.

In letter 15, Hippocrates again writes to his Abderite friend Philopoimen. He reports a dream in which Asclepius appeared to him as he approaches the gates of Abdera. When Hippocrates begs him to come along in giving therapy to Democritus, "Asclepius" replies that "you have no need of me in the present case" and

offers to have a beautiful woman named *Altheia* or "Truth" guide Hippocrates into the town. But Aesclepius vanishes like a phantom after promising to return tomorrow, in the meantime leaving a rather more disheveled assistant named *Doxa* or "Opinion" who, it turns out, "lives among the Abderites."

Hippocrates gives his own analysis of the dream. Since the healing god stayed away, apparently having no grounds for giving treatment, Democritus does not need a physician. The "truth" of his being healthy stays with Democritus, but the (false) "opinion" that he is ill has made her home among the Abderites, just as he had hoped and prayed for in the previous letter: "he is not truly mad but seems so to them (*ekeinoisin doxan*)" (14, 66.11). Hippocrates states that he believes the dream, "medicine and prophesy" being closely related. This then is the fifth expression of skepticism about the diagnosis of the Abderites.

Nevertheless, in letter 16, Hippocrates instructs the pharmacist Crateuas to obtain the drugs that may after all be needed to treat Democritus. This offers an opportunity to digress into plant lore and the instructions for preparing the remedies, and to make aphoristic statements about treatment and other methodological observations dealing with patients and the importance of precision to medicine. Hippocrates asks Crateuas to prepare Hellebore, but despite the lack of precise standards and riskiness in the administration of this and other drugs. "But I hope we use none of these things on Democritus! May wisdom (so*phiê*) in the end be among the most effective and healing drugs for him" (16, 72.22–24). Here is a sixth expression of doubt about the diagnosis of the Abderites.

Letter 17, the longest and most substantial, contains most of the important action of the novel—everything up to this point has been preparation for the encounter between Hippocrates and Democritus. The framing of the letter has Hippocrates writing to Captain Damagetus with a recollection of the events that transpired on his trip to Abdera, which has already occurred.

Most of the "letter" takes the form of a reported dialogue, first, between Hippocrates and the citizens of Abdera, and then between Hippocrates and Democritus himself. In the dialogue between Hippocrates and Democritus, Democritus delivers two speeches, a short and a long one; both speeches, as I will show, include massive parallels to the surviving fragments of Democritus's ethics, and the entire letter, along with the preceding ones, should be considered imitations, and thus evidence of some kind, for Democritus's views.

Turning to the letter itself, upon arriving in Abdera, Hippocrates greets the Abderites, who "came for the sake of a maddened Democritus, while he was even at that moment doing precise higher philosophy." That description highlights the discrepancy between the Aberdites' opinion and the truth about the situation. Hippocrates refuses Philopoimen's offer first to show him his quarters since "for me nothing is more important than to see Democritus." The citizens, encouraged by

this, implore Hippocrates, “Save him, help him, heal him.” He advises them to be of good cheer “since perhaps nothing is wrong” and, if something is, perhaps it will be brief or easily mended (17.1). This is the final hint of skepticism about the Aberdites’ diagnosis before Hippocrates rejects it entirely.

Democritus is conveniently located not far from his house “sitting under a spreading low plane tree, in a course shirt, alone, not anointed with oil, on a stone seat, pale and emaciated, with untrimmed beard. Next to him on the right a small stream bubbled down the hill’s slope softly” (17.2, 74.15–9). The Abderites will point to the general tableaux as proof of their diagnosis, but the next several details added by Hippocrates go against this.

> He had a papyrus roll on his knees in a very neat manner, and some other book-rolls were laid out on both sides. And stacked around were a large number of animals, generally cut up. He sometimes bent and applied himself intensely to writing, sometimes he sat quietly attentive, pondering within himself. Then after a short time of this activity he stood up and walked around and examined the entrails of the animals, set them down and went back and sat down. (74.21–26)

Here at least, while immersed in his philosophical and zoological studies, Democritus is not laughing but takes on a very sober and serious visage. It is only later, upon hearing the Abderites confused and irrational remarks, remarks that Hippocrates has taken somewhat seriously, that Democritus laughs.

It is worth looking closely at this episode, which occurs before Hippocrates dismisses the Abderites and begins his individual consultation with Democritus. The Abderites “downcast, their eyes not far from tears, said, ‘You see Democritus’s way of life, Hippocrates, how mad he is, how he doesn’t know what he wants or what he is doing?’ One man, who wanted even more to point out his madness wailed shrilly like a woman lamenting a child’s death. Then another groaned imitating a wayfarer who had lost his belongings” (17.2, 74.28–32). Democritus’s answer to the general Abderite charge will come early in his own defense speech, but first his reaction to the wailing man and then to the groaning man is reported: a smile at the one, and out-and-out laughter at the other. But why would Democritus laugh at a man compared to a woman grieving at the loss of a child, or a traveler crying about lost belongings? Because they are caricatures of the ethical and psychological confusion that Democritus’s ethical maxims and personal example are supposed to counteract.[25] The Abderites misinterpret what Democritus is doing be-

**25** Democritus advises against having children, because of the likelihood of this eventuating in distress: A170 and B275–78; see above endnote 23. Democritus advises that living abroad prepares one for a frugal and self-sufficient life: see B246. Democritus had a reputation for wide travel and is

cause they cannot imagine how dissecting animals and inspecting their entrails could yield valuable knowledge, and so they do not even notice that he is carefully observing and writing. They see only the unconventional setting and "crazy" behavior and, because of their intellectual ignorance, react emotionally.

As Hippocrates leaves the Abderites behind and descends to Democritus's level, he does not interrupt but rather carefully observes him at work. The dialogue between Hippocrates and Democritus begins with Democritus failing to recognize Hippocrates and saying "Greetings, stranger," to which Hippocrates replies with an appropriate address "Democritus, wisest of men." This little episode transposes Democritus's own complaint that "I went to Athens but nobody recognized me" onto his equally famous interlocutor (B116).

When Democritus asks the purpose of his visit, Hippocrates informs the reader that he was "making test of the man in all ways, though it was already obvious to me that he was not really mad" (17.3, 76.22–23). For the first test, Hippocrates quizzes Democritus about his fellow citizen Philopoimen. Democritus confidently answers, supplying details about his patrilineage and the location of his house. The point is that Democritus is socially adept and not actually aloof. For the second test, Hippocrates asks what Democritus is writing and Democritus replies "a treatise on madness" (*peri maniês*, 76.28) —"what it is, how it comes on men, and how to relieve it" (78.2–3).[26]

I will digress briefly to note that this very passage seems to provide the source of a digressive remark about laughter in Cicero: "what laughter actually is, how it is excited, where it resides, how it wells up and bursts forth so suddenly that we cannot check it even if we want to, and how it takes hold of our sides, our mouth, our cheeks, our eyes, and our whole face at the same time–let Democritus see to this" (*De Orat.* II.235, tr. May and Wisse). This passage has been offered as evidence of the possibility that Democritus wrote a work on laughter, but in fact, there is no evidence that Democritus ever wrote a treatise *peri geleôs*, and what Cicero goes on to say indicates that he is not aware of anything worthwhile that has been written on the topic by Democritus or anyone else. Cicero seems to have transposed this description of Democritus's work on madness to the topic of laughter, which the novelist makes Democritus out to be an expert in, by undermining the traditional legend about the laughing philosopher and showing him to be a sober inquirer capable of fully justifying his laughter when it does occur. The fact that the novelist does not refer to the work that Democritus is writing *peri geleôs*

reported to have given up his wealth in order to travel for the sake of wisdom: see A1 (D.L. IX.35–36), A13, A16, and B299.

**26** Note that, although this exact title is not attested by Thrassylus, there are four medical writings attributed to Democritus in tetralogy XII (A330 = D.L. IX.48).

(but rather *peri maniês*) is a telling detail—surely the novelist would have mentioned it and right here had Democritus been known to have written a treatise on the very topic of the novel. As it stands, the well-informed novelist not only provides no support for the thesis that Democritus wrote about laughter, but his omission of the claim indicates that it is extremely unlikely. On the other hand, although there is no other evidence that he wrote a work *peri maniês*, it is certain that Democritus did write medical works, and he did in his ethical works compare psychological illnesses to physical diseases, and the source of their treatment (wisdom) to medicine.[27] These facts lend plausibility to the novelist's fictional account.

Returning to the novella itself, Hippocrates takes this as a definitive sign of his refutation of the claims of the Abderites. Democritus not only knows what he wants and what he is doing, but he is himself writing an account of the very illness—madness—that the Aberdites' in their ignorance misperceive him as suffering from. Democritus is making progress into the method not only of the diagnosis and causes of madness, but also of its treatment. By the time Democritus has completed his description of his research, which includes the investigation of the location of the gall and an account of the theory of "disproportion" (*ametriê*) of it as the case of disease, Hippocrates is already convinced of his sanity and replies "you speak truly and wisely. For that reason I consider you blessed to enjoy such leisure." Hippocrates is not himself able to enjoy leisure because of "travelling, children, debts, disease, death, servants, marriages: such things take up my leisure" (17.3, 78.9–14). Now this reads like a checklist of things about which Democritus offers advice in his ethical works[28] and also of the things that in the earlier letters of the novella have been preoccupying Hippocrates as he prepared for the voyage to Abdera: arranging supervision of his house, wife, and children; equipping a ship for travel, instructing the pharmacist to prepare treatments that carry an inherent risk of death for the patient, foregoing lucrative offers of employment from the Great King in favor of *pro bono* work on behalf of the wise, etc.

Once again, then, Democritus's reaction is to burst out laughing at Hippocrates's complaint. But this time Hippocrates asks, "what are you laughing at Democritus, the good things I mentioned, or the bad ones?". At this Democritus "laughed even more," causing the onlooking Abderites to pull out their hair because "he was laughing more excessively than usual" (17.4, 78.17–8). Hippocrates interrupts his laughter:

**27** On the comparison of wisdom to medicine, see the above discussion of B31. On four medical titles attributed to Democritus, see previous note.

**28** On children and marriage, see above, footnotes 23 and 26. On disease and death, see the medical works mentioned in footnote 27. On servants, see B214 and B251. On debts, see the fragments on possessions and greed, above, footnote 21.

> I want to find out the cause of your affection (*patheos*), why I or what I said seems deserve laughter (*axios … gelôtos*), so that, when I find out, I can cure my fault or you, when you are proven mistaken (*elegchtheis*), can repress your inappropriate laughter (*akairous gelôtas*). (17.4, 78.22–24)[29]

This exchange is important because it connects Hippocrates's investigation to the maxim of Democritus on inappropriate laughter (B107a). It also raises the main philosophical issue of the whole work: when is laughter deserved and hence appropriate, a sign of a healthy attitude and well-adjusted person, and when is laughter underserved and inappropriate, subject to refutation, and a sign of a moral or psychological pathology?[30]

Hippocrates's response embodies a reasonable but thoroughly conventional morality of the kind that was vehemently attacked by the Cynics and by Pyrrho and his followers, two groups of ancient philosophers heavily influenced by Democritus. The transparent purpose of his response is to provide the basis for Democritus's eventual anti-conventional response. But Hippocrates's position is not at all a strawman, but rather a well-crafted and coherent, eminently reasonable position with which the casual reader might be expected to agree:

> Don't you think you are outlandish to laugh at a man's death or illness, or delusion, or madness, or melancholy, murder, or something still worse, or again at marriages, feasts, births, initiations, offices, and honors, or anything else wholly good? Things that demand grief you laugh at, and when things should bring happiness you laugh at them. There is no distinction between good and bad with you. (17.4, 78.26–80.1)

In his reply, Democritus suggests that when he reveals to Hippocrates the real cause of his laughter, learning it will be "a therapy (*therapeiên*) for your country and yourself, and you will be able to instruct all others in virtue (*dunêsêi sôphronizein*)" (80.2–4). In so doing, Democritus reverses the roles so that the wiseman becomes the physician providing therapies, and Hippocrates the physician promises to become the ethicist exhorting to self-control. By the end of this letter, that process will be completed. At present, Democritus adds, with maximum irony, "and perhaps in turn you will teach me medicine" (80.5). But first, Democritus promises to show

---

**29** Kazantzidis (2018, 43n22) notes in connection with this passage the importance of *kairos* to Hippocratic medical literature (indicating the fitting moment at which the doctor should intervene in the illness). I should add that among Democritus's medical works is a *Causes concerning appropriate and inappropriate times* (*Aitiai peri akairiôn kai epikairiôn*) (A33 = D.L. IX.48). Thus the reference to "inappropriate" (*akairous*) laughter evokes a title of one of Democritus medical works.
**30** See further Hankinson (2019), who focuses on this philosophical issue in his useful account.

> how passionately people in general, striving for what is not worth striving for, pour out their lives on activities that are of no value, busying themselves with things that deserve laughter (*gelôtôn axia*). (17.4, 80.5–7)

The reference here in Democritus's own speech to things that deserve or are worthy of laughter (*gelôtôn axia*, 17.5, 80.7), responding to Hippocrates's earlier question about what deserves laughter (*axios … gelôtos*, 17.4, 78.22), provides the key point of attachment to fragment B107a, in which it is stated that human misfortunes are not worthy of laughter: it is right not to laugh at them (*axion … mê gelan*). The reference also contains the same language as the later legend, as in the account of Hippolytus according to which Democritus held that "all things in human affairs are worthy of laughter" (*gelôtos axiôn*, A40). But barring a blatant contradiction with B107a, it must be possible for the Democritus of the novella to distinguish the things just mentioned (irrational striving and pursuit of things with no value) from the "misfortunes of humans." But it is possible to make this distinction: misfortunes happen inevitably and to all human beings, but passionate striving, especially for wealth and other empty endeavors is caused by what people choose, not by what happens to them.

Hippocrates replies that "maybe the whole world is sick and has no place outside itself to send an embassy for therapy. For what could there be outside of itself?" To which Democritus replies that "there are many infinities of worlds, Hippocrates, and never, my friend, belittle the riches of nature" (17.4, 80.10–11).[31] Hippocrates, like the Abderites in this respect, fails to appreciate the relevance of cosmology for the problem at hand and so asks him to speak of the infinities later; afraid that Democritus will "laugh even while going through infinity," and so begs him to state plainly his reason for laughing. After this joke about Democritean physics, we arrive at the climax of the novel when Hippocrates narrates Democritus's views in two direct speeches (in 17.5 and 17.7–9) interrupted only briefly with Hippocrates' responses.

The first speech begins with Democritus offering to explain what he laughs about. It is not, as Hippocrates has just suggested, about good things and bad. That would indeed be inappropriate and might have suggested mental illness. But in fact, Democritus laughs only about one thing: humanity, *to anthropos* (17.5, 80.16). The main complaints are ignorance or mindlessness or thoughtlessness (*anoiê*, 80.16), lack of correctness in action (*keneon prêgmatôn orthôn*, 80.17), needless suffering and distress without any benefit (80.18), unmeasured desire (*ametroisin epithumiêisin*, 80.19), and unceasing acquisitiveness (*ktêsios*, 80.20).

---

**31** This is again a reference to Democritus's doctrine about the infinite plurality of worlds; see above, footnote 19.

Democritus rails against acquisitiveness by decrying that humans have no shame being called “happy” or “prosperous” (*eudaimôn*) despite putting so much effort into acquiring property and wealth, epitomized by digging deep in the earth for gold and silver and by erecting fences around land. All this is empty and irrational striving, a kind of madness. Democritus also criticizes humans for rushing into marriage, divorce, and child-rearing (17.5, 82.2–4),[32] and for waging civil war and not choosing peace.[33]

> I laugh at the things they do badly (*kakoprageousin*), I laugh long at their strokes of bad luck (*dustuchousi*), for they have transgressed the decrees of truth, trying to outdo one another (*philonikeontes*) in hatred. (17.5, 82.10–12)[34]

Again, the object of laughter is not human misfortune per se, but rather the results of bad actions caused by culpable moral and intellectual failure and rivalry. This relates to an important theme in Democritus’s ethics—his denouncement of rivalry: “All rivalry is senseless; for by dwelling on what is harmful to an enemy, it does not keep its eye on one’s own advantage” (B237). The novelist expounds on this, pointing out that rivalries and battling begin with one’s siblings and parents but extend to fellow citizens and even friends: all this for the sake of possessions (*ktêma*) that no one controls once they die (82.12–14). Their irrationality is epitomized in the way they harm the living in their pursuit of wealth so that they can raise lifeless statues that represent the living (82.15–17). They praise virtues like courage but are made vicious by their own wantonness and greed (*aselgeiês, philarguriês*), and in a word their affections (*patheôn*) (82.20–21). In all this they show a profound lack of self-awareness.

> Why did you criticize my laughter, Hippocrates? You people do not laugh at your own stupidity, but laugh at another’s, some at drunk people, thinking themselves sober, some as lovers, though they have a worse disease themselves, some at sailors and some at those who practice farming. For they do not have a harmonious relation to the crafts or to useful work. (17.5, 82.22–27)

**32** On Democritus’s discouragement of marriage and having children, see above, footnotes 22 and 25.

**33** Democritus exhibits a concern about envy and jealousy giving way to civil strife; see B245; cf. B191.

**34** This translation has been adapted from Smith, who has “the things in which they fail” for *kakoprageousin*, and “misfortunes” for *dustuchousi.* I translate *sumphorais* as misfortunes in B107a.

Here, the novelist again turns the tables and makes Democritus a critic of the others' laughter in a way that is entirely consistent with what we know of his actual views. Consistently with B107a, Democritus denounces inappropriate laughter.

Democritus, in actual fragments of his writing, points out that human life is full of unavoidable problems and difficulties—many of these come about involuntarily whether they are looked for or not (B285, B108). Such misfortunes Democritus does not laugh at, but what he does is the fact that humans bring unnecessary miseries upon themselves as a result of their ignorance, which could be avoided. So, there is an internal, "human" cause of much of human suffering, which you can easily see if you, as Democritus is famous for saying, "open yourself up from the inside" (B149). In particular, immoderate desire, appetites, urges, indulgence in harmful and addictive pleasures, and in general acquisitiveness and greed cause many unnecessary problems (B219, B223, B235, B286). Animals know the limits of their needs and thus have limited desires; but humans do not (B198). Pursuit of immoderate pleasures results in vice and greed and unpleasantness (B50, B70, B71; B72, B214). But there is an alternative to this: limitation, reduction, and elimination of desires, moderation and avoidance of excesses and deficiencies (B284, B102, B119).

The clarification about the appropriate object of laughter, and the brief mention of the intellectualist alternative constitutes the first speech of Democritus in his own defense. Hippocrates responds to this speech by praising Democritus for his depiction of human wretchedness. But he challenges him by arguing that some wretchedness is necessary, for example "in running a house, shipbuilding, or public activity in general, which men must be involved in, since nature did not beget them for inactivity" (17.6, 82.29–32). Laughter seems inappropriate at the accidents that flow from having to cope with necessities that no one could be expected to foresee and avoid.

These remarks occasion the second, much longer speech of Democritus, which begins as follows.

> Your mind is sluggish, Hippocrates. You are far away from my thoughts because in your ignorance you do not look for measures of calm and perturbation (*ataraxiês kai tarachês metra*). If they managed these things with thoughtful calculation (*dianoiêi phrenêrei*) they would easily escape and get relief from my laughter, but as things are, assuming that matters in life are fixed, they are driven crazy by them, deluded by irrational calculation about change that is irregular. They are unteachable. There is inherent instruction in the alteration of all things which falls on them in sharp swerves, which makes us aware of every kind of unanticipated revolution. They, as though it is fixed and secure, forget the sufferings that always befall them, and they desire, time after time, one way and another, things that are a source of grief. In their search for what is inappropriate they tumble about in numerous misfortunes (*zumphorêisin*). (17.7, 84.8–18)

Democritus thus begins by criticizing Hippocrates for not seeking out the psychological condition that the actual Democritus had used as one of the names for the end: *ataraxiê.* Democritus states that if they would achieve intellectual improvement, he would not laugh at them. This makes it clear once again that Democritus does not laugh at human misfortune, but at the culpable intellectual failure causing unnecessary human misfortunes. Thus, the appearance of the term *sumphoreisin*, paralleled in B107a, is significant. Being intellectually inflexible to the point of being unteachable, the laughable victims of misfortune subject themselves to the vagaries of chance and bad luck.

The solution that Democritus proposes involves realization of one's own limitations, so that one does not strive to do or acquire more than one is capable of.

> If one took thought to do everything in accord with his own capacity (*kata dunamin idiên*), he would keep his life erect, he would understand himself (*heôuton exepistamenos*) and comprehend clearly his own composition, and he would not stretch out boundlessly the eagerness of desire, for he would see that nature is rich and nurses all through her self-sufficiency. (17.7, 84.18–22)

This advice parallels the advice given in fragment B3 of Democritus's ethics (discussed above), probably the incipit of Democritus's *peri euthumiês.* Both here and there the advice is to better know thyself, and this will counteract the tendency to count on temporary good luck continuing, which is just as dangerous and unrealistic as counting on one's good health continuing indefinitely. The advice is twofold: to know thyself and appreciate one's own limitations, and to take into consideration what has happened to other people. The general human failure to perform these simple intellectual tasks is the cause of Democritus's laughter.

> And just as blooming health offers clear danger of affections, so are strokes of good luck treacherous. Very prominent men are observed to be associated with evil fortune (*kakodaimoniêisi*).[35] Other people have been ruined by their own bad luck because they have not looked into what happened to their neighbors. They investigate what is patent just as little as what is obscure, though they have as the example of things that happened and are happening a long life, from which they should figure out what will happen. That is the cause of my laughter. (17.7, 84.22–28)

According to Hippocrates, Democritus connects all the human vices (baseness, greed, insatiability, enmity, treachery, malignity, etc.) to the thoughtlessness of humans (*aphrones anthrôpoi*, 84.28–29); "what condemns them to inability to make rational choices, they use neither sight nor hearing. Perception alone is a beacon

**35** It is noted that Democritus used the term *kakodaimoniê* in A167, discussed above.

for right thinking, as it sees what is and foresees what will be" (86.2–3). As a result of their lack of perception and self-awareness, they fail to remember what has happened to others, and even to themselves, and so they return to the same things again and again, things which they have previously experienced, suffered from, and even hated.

Each man wants what another has, but when he gets it, wants something else, in an endless cycle. Thus, they fail to see the "straight path of tranquility" (*tên orthên keleuthon tês êremiês*) and instead take a crooked and twisted path on which they are constantly stumbling (17.8, 86.12–13). This path leads to vice, including shameless sexual indulgence, greed, and mindless violence; these vices then result in inconsistent and self-contradictory actions of all kinds; "of all this, greed is the cause" (86.23). Democritus compares the vice caused by their *thumos* to the behavior of children or irrational animals. But beasts like lions, bulls, leopards, and boars pursue just what they need and then are satiated and do not cause themselves any more trouble than necessary, but humans are never satiated, even with extravagant or excessive feasts (86.25–32). This argument is a direct adaptation Democritus's remark that: "The animal which needs perceives how much it needs, but the man who needs does not comprehend" (B198). Just as it is reasonable to laugh at a daredevil who crashes or a captain who overloads his own ship with cargo, so it is reasonable to laugh at these humans who bring on their own failures and miseries (86.32–88.4). And yet,

> I do not think it right to laugh (*oudamôs dokeô gelên*); I wish I could find something to make them grieve (*lupêron*). But there should be no medical art contriving healing medicines for them. … Do you not see that I, too, am a portion of the evil? In looking for the cause of madness I stretch animals out and cut them up, but I should be seeking the cause from human beings. (17.9, 88.5–10, tr. Smith, adapted)

Once again, the author reveals the true Democritean position: it is right not to laugh at the misfortunes from which men suffer, and there can be no medical treatment for these. What must be laughed at, and examined closely, is the cause of these misfortunes. That cause is not something physical, that could be treated by a drug working on the animal body (and thus the Abderites were wrong all the way back in letter 10 to pray for a drug to treat a bodily condition). Instead that cause of all these misfortunes is the human being itself, human nature, and the intellectual failure to recognize their own limitations and the results of their own ignorance. Medicine, it seems, is of no use against this psycho-social problem, and even if there were a medical solution they would despise it anyway, as they do with all forms of knowledge (90.12–15); "if they are sick as soon as they are saved they assign the cause to the gods or to fortune, and many of them fasten the cause on Nature" (90.15–17). If they were thoughtful enough to see the benefits of medi-

cine, they would resent the benefits it provides, like they resent their creditors; thus, they destroy what is beneficial to them while cultivating what harms them (90.17–20). Democritus finishes by asserting that Hippocrates already knows all of this through his own medical experience, and so should not be surprised (90.21–24).

This second speech, like the rest of the novel, is clearly adapted from the ethical writings of Democritus. Thus, Democritus criticizes humans for blaming the gods or bad luck for the things they suffer from, including ill health, when they themselves are the cause (B119, B159, B175, B234). Their problems are not simple "misfortunes" but rather the predictable result of culpable intellectual and moral failings. Thus, one is constantly reminded of Democritus's criticism of fools, of those "without sense" (*anoêmones*) and "without understanding" (*asunetôn*). Those without sense are shaped by luck instead of wisdom (B197). Democritus criticizes their "yearning for what is absent" and ignoring what is present (B202). In the fragments, this is epitomized by their desire for life itself and for longevity (B199, B200, B201, B205). The very hopes of those "without understanding" are irrational and impossible (B58, B292); even if they get wealth or fame, without understanding these cannot be secure (B77).

Democritus's own recommendation is to use exhortation, persuasion, and education to change their minds and attitudes; these measures, he argues, would be much more effective than laws and punishment (B181). With understanding and knowledge, they will become virtuous and "straight-thinking." Thus, the solution is intellectual, not medical. As Democritus points out, Medicine heals diseases of the body, but wisdom those of the soul (B31). But it is better to provide reasoning about the soul rather than the body, because treating the soul can improve the body, but the reverse is not the case (B40, B187).[36] Democritus's instruction can make people better and drive out the causes of their distress (B33, B35, B290).

We reach the conclusion of the letter, and of the novel. Hippocrates is bedazzled: by the speech "he seemed like a divine figure, and I forgot his earlier form" (17.10). He promises to carry this wisdom back to Cos.

> You have filled me with great wonder at your wisdom. I shall go away as a herald that you have tracked down and understood human nature (*anthrôpinês phuseôs*). And taking from you the therapy for my intellect I shall go away. (17.10, 92.2–4)

**36** "It is fitting for humans to produce more reasoning about the soul than about the body. For perfection of soul corrects bad condition of dwelling, but strength of dwelling without reasoning does not put the soul any better" (B36).

Democritus has thus turned the tables on both the Abderites and Hippocrates. The Abderites, like all those who display an unreformed human nature, suffer from madness, not Democritus; and the therapy for their treatment will be provided by the wise man Democritus, not the physician Hippocrates. Democritus is the hero of the work.[37]

Regarding the legend of the laughing philosopher, the novelist never describes Democritus as laughing at everything, and especially not at all human affairs. In fact, the author carefully depicts the Abderites as making this exaggerated claim, and then being refuted by the facts. The novelist depicts Democritus as conducting serious research, and only laughing when he is interrupted by the ridiculous claims of the Abderites which Hippocrates has at times taken somewhat seriously (although even Hippocrates, as we are repeatedly reminded, expresses serious misgivings about the Aberdites' diagnosis). The novelist depicts Democritus clarifying that he does not think it right to laugh at all of human affairs or at good and bad things indifferently, and that those who do so are wrong. His own laughter is directed precisely at their culpable intellectual failures to improve themselves and reduce their desires, passions, and vices.

Thus, we may conclude that the extreme version of the legend of the laughing philosopher, which reiterates the misguided complaints of the Abderites, is extremely misleading. The source of the anecdote in Seneca about Democritus the laughing philosopher is exploited by the novelist to characterize the false "Abderite" description and diagnosis of Democritus. The extreme and problematic version of the legend that we find in Hippolytus lies downstream of all this.

**37** Kazantzidis has recently proposed an alternative reading, according to which Hippocrates is right after all, and Democritus does prove mentally ill: "While Hippocrates, in other words, eventually refrains from diagnosing Democritus as a 'melancholic', the text's philosophical allusions suggest otherwise: by virtue of the fact that the philosopher has reached a state of "excessive intellectual strength" (ψυχῆς τινὰ ῥῶσιν ὑπερβάλλουσαν, *Ep.* 12, IX.330 L. = 62,3 tr. Smith), the diagnostic opposition which Hippocrates poses between insanity and wisdom falls apart: Democritus can be both, for the simple reason that both can be neatly accommodated within a melancholic nature." (Kazantzidis 2018, 38). Against this, the other evidence in favor of the interpretation that Democritus is not sick at all needs to be discussed, including: (1) The departure of Asclepius in Hippocrates's prophetic dream indicates that there is no cause for treatment; (2) in the same dream, the personification of Truth is associated with Democritus, who rejects the claim that he is ill, while mere Opinion resides with the Aberdites' perception that he is ill; (3) Democritus's passing of Hippocrates's "examinations" and his social interaction with the secretary at the end show that even the apparent symptoms of melancholy are not actually present; and (4) Hippocrates's final remarks show not only his acceptance of Democritus's wisdom, but also the intention to apply that wisdom as a "therapy" for his own intellect.

But it is important to note that the novelist is not responsible for this distorted impression, and a careful reading of the novel shows that Democritus's sobriety and seriousness is intended to be vindicated. A crucial detail coming at the very end of letter 17 confirms this interpretation. The letter ends with someone else, a previously unmentioned and unnamed assistant of Democritus, coming forward and receiving book-rolls from Democritus. The misperception of Democritus as a deranged melancholic loner is thus replaced by an image of an extremely wise writer and philosopher, who interacts with people like his assistant and his fellow wiseman Hippocrates on a practical basis even while he confirms a global theory of human nature and folly.

The novel corrects the misrepresentation of Democritus as maniacally laughing at everything and restores him to the position of a wise man almost without equal. Upon seeing this and realizing the truth of the situation, Hippocrates departs and bids farewell to the Abderites, saying "Men many thanks for your embassy to me. For I have seen Democritus, wisest of men, alone most capable of teaching mankind virtue" (17.10).

## Conclusion

As I have tried to show, this fictional account of the interaction between Hippocrates and Democritus shows so many parallels to the surviving fragments of Democritus's ethics that the novelist must have been at least as well informed about Democritus's ethical writings as we are. In fact, given such an extremely careful and nuanced account, I think that it is safe to assume that the few parts of it for which no parallel can be found among our fragments were probably also originally based on parts of Democritean writings now lost, and so it may be possible to use this work of historical fiction as a basis for reasonable speculation about Democritus's own ethical views. The synthetic account of Democritus's ethics that this imitation provides may indeed offer a glimpse of what Democritus's own works, which were longer and more integral than the surviving fragments, may have been like. Certainly, the account of the novelist offers a more charitable, realistic, and philosophically satisfying portrait of Democritus than does any later version of the legend of the laughing philosopher.[38]

**38** The author would like to thank Liba Taub and Dustin Peone for extensive and timely editorial help with this paper, and Pierre Destrée for helpful philosophical criticisms.

# References

Cicero. 2001. *On the Ideal Orator (De Oratore)*, translated by James M. May and Jakob Wisse. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cordero, Nestor-Luis. 2000. "Démocrite riait-il?" In *Le rire chez les Grecs: Anthropologie du rire en Grèce ancienne*, edited by M. L. Desclos, 227–39. Grenoble: Editions Jérôme Millon.

Diels, H. 1956. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker: zweiter band.* Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagbuchhandlung.

Hankinson, Robert J. 2019. "The Laughing Philosopher and the Physician: Laughter, Diagnosis, and Therapy in Greek Medicine." In *Laughter, Humor, and Comedy in Ancient Philosophy*, edited by P. Destree and F. V. Trivigno, 52–79. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hendrickson, George L. 1927. "Satura Tota Nostra Est." *Classical Philology* 22: 46–60.

Johnson, Monte R. 2020. "The Ethical Maxims of Democritus of Abdera." In *Early Greek Ethics*, edited by D. Wolfsdorf, 211–42. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kazantzidis, George. 2018. "Between Insanity and Wisdom: Perceptions of Melancholy in the Ps.-Hippocratic *Letters* 10–17." In *Mental Illness in Ancient Medicine*, edited by C. Thumiger and P. Singer, 35–78. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Liddell, Henri G., and Robert Scott. 1996. *Greek-English Lexicon.* Revised by H. S. Jones, 9th edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Lucretius. 2001. *Lucretius: On the Nature of Things*, translated by Martin Ferguson Smith. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.

Müller, Reimar. 1994. "'Democrit–der "Lachende Philosoph."' In *Laughter down the Centuries*, volume 1, edited by Siegfried Jäkel and Asko Timonen, 39–51. Turku: Turun Yliopisto.

Rütten, Thomas. 1992. *Demokrit, lachender Philosoph und sanguinischer Melancholiker. Eine pseudohippokratische Geschichte.* Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Seneca. 2007. *Seneca: Dialogues and Essays*, translated by John Davie. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Smith, Wesley D. 1990. *Hippocrates: Pseudoepigraphic Writings. Letters, Embassy, Speech from the Altar, Decree.* Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Stewart, Zeph 1958. "Democritus and the Cynics." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 63: 179–91.

Temkin, Owsei. 1985. "Hippocrates as a Physician of Democritus." *Gesnerus: Swiss Journal of the History of Medicine and Sciences* 42: 455–78.