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Democritus, the Laughing Philosopher, and Heraclitus, the Weeping Philosopher

Monte Ransome Johnson

1 Introduction

The laughing philosopher, Democritus, and his counterpart, the weeping philosopher, Heraclitus, have had a pervasive influence on western philosophy and art in part because of the murky legend which juxtaposes them. In this chapter I enquire into the causes of their weeping and laughter, and speculate about how these reactions came to be attributed to the historical Heraclitus and Democritus, both of whom flourished in the fifth century B.C.E. The chapter is divided into three parts: in part 1, I introduce the evidence for the legend and show its *prima facie* incompatibility with positions securely attributable to Democritus. In part 2, I show how the legend can nevertheless be squared with the genuine maxims that originated in the writings of Democritus, and the philosophical content of the anecdote traced back to his own writing. In part 3, I show how the anecdote juxtaposing Democritus with Heraclitus was probably influenced by an account of melancholy attributable to Aristotle or Theophrastus.

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2 The Legend of the Laughing Philosopher

A late and hostile source contains the most extreme version of the legend of Democritus the laughing philosopher.¹ Hippolytus of Rome, after providing a summary of Democritus's cosmology, offers but a single remark on Democritus's ethics and character:

<T1> He used to laugh at everything, as if deeming worthy of his laughter all the things in human affairs. (*outos egela panta, hōs gelōtos axioōn pantōn tōn en anthrōpois*). (A40)²

According to this account, Democritus laughs at *everything* and considers *all* human affairs worthy of laughter. But this blatantly conflicts with the only surviving fragment of Democritus's writing in which he mentions laughter.

<T2> It is worthy, since we are human beings, not to laugh at the misfortunes of human beings, but to weep (*axion anthrōpous ontas ep'anthrōpōn sumphorais mē gelan, all' olophuresthai*). (B107a)

This maxim was probably originally combined with the following explanation, but became separated in the process of compression and transmission:³

<T3> Those who take pleasure at the misfortunes of their neighbors fail to notice that the results of luck are common to all and they look only for their own enjoyment (*oisin hēdonēn echousin hai tōn pelas zumphorai, ou zuniasi men hōs ta tēs tuchēs koina pasin, aporeousi de oikēiēs charas*). (B293)

Hippolytus's testimony about Democritus's behavior entails a direct performative contradiction of Democritus's maxim and its explanation. For this reason we must assume that the anecdote has been constructed, by Hippolytus or his sources, on the very basis of Democritus's maxim. Democritus deemed it "worthy" (*axion*) not to laugh, but the Democritus of the anecdote acts as if "deeming it worthy" (*axioō*) to laugh; the object of Democritus's maxim is "human" things, and its subjective basis is "because we are human beings" (*anthrōpous ontas*), but the object of the laughter in the anecdote is precisely "human" things (*anthrōpois*).

But not only has the legend of Democritus the laughing philosopher been constructed out of the raw materials of Democritus's maxim: the same materials seem also to be the source of the legend of the weeping philosopher, for what Democritus recommends is that one should not laugh but weep at human misfortune. The legend of the weeping philosopher is expressed in the form of a philosophical anecdote (*chreia*) attributed by Stobaeus to Sotion.

<T4> Sotion in his *On Anger*, Book II: "Among the sages, Heraclitus was moved to tears instead of anger, but Democritus to laughter." (Stobaeus 3.20.53)

We have no source for this philosophical anecdote earlier than Sotion, and all subsequent versions and interpretations of the anecdote (in Seneca, Juvenal, the *Greek Anthology*, and Lucian) appear to be elaborations and expansions on this same anecdote. Sotion was involved in the collection and publication of philosophical anecdotes.⁴ Elaboration and expansion on philosophical anecdotes was one of the most basic and most important techniques of imperial age rhetorical education. These techniques are described in first-century C.E. textbooks known as *Progymnasmata*,⁵ and the importance of employing anecdotes is mentioned by Seneca who, although he also bemoans their abuse (in his *Letters on Ethics to Lucillus* 31.7), frequently employs and elaborates on them throughout his dialogues and letters.

It is important to notice that Sotion restricts the object of the emotional reactions to objects that normally cause anger. Seneca, who may have been a pupil of Sotion, also employs the anecdote with reference to this limited object in his own work *On Anger*, but in *On Tranquility of the Soul* he extends the object of Democritus's laughter and Heraclitus's weeping to happenings in <T5> "public" and "all our activities" and even "human life" itself.⁶ Similarly, in a likely first-century C.E. passage in the *Greek Anthology* the object of the sages' laughter and weeping is every human life: <T6> "Weep more profusely at life, Heraclitus.... Laugh now at life, Democritus.... Now everyone's life is more ludicrous than ever."⁷ In Juvenal's version, emphasis is placed on political affairs: <T7> "one of them helpless with laughter whenever he set foot outside his house, the other a weeping fountain.... Democritus's sides were shaken with perpetual laughter, though the cities he knew had no togas, striped or bordered with purple, no sedans, no tribunal, no rods and axes" (Juvenal, *Satires* 10.28–35). It is notable that Juvenal states his preference for Democritus's reaction, which ultimately extends to all human affairs: <T8> "Democritus in his day, too, found matter for laughter in all human encounters...the cares of the crowd he derided no less than their pleasures, their griefs, too, on occasion: if Fortune was threatening, 'Up you', he'd say, and give her the vulgar finger" (Juvenal, *Satires* 10.47–53). It is also notable that Juvenal depicts Democritus's reaction to "fortune" since this echoes the focus of the original Democritean maxim about laughter and weeping on human misfortune. In Lucian the object of emotion has been extended beyond objects of anger (as in Sotion) and public affairs (as in the *Greek Anthology*) and all human affairs (as in Seneca and Juvenal) to the entire cosmos. When a "buyer" shopping for a way of life asks Democritus <T9> "What, are you laughing at us all, and do you think

nothing of our affairs?" the Abderite replies: "Even so; for there is nothing serious in them, but everything is a hollow mockery, a drift of atoms, infinitude" (Lucian, *Philosophers for Sale* 13). Thus, in the elaboration on the original anecdote that took place throughout Greco-Roman literature the first century C.E., the object of laughter and weeping was steadily extended until it became universal,⁸ eventually reaching the simple totalizing version we started with in *Hippolytus*: "Democritus used to laugh at everything."

Let us return to consider the original form of the philosophical anecdote in *Sotion*. To use the traditional terminology of rhetorical criticism in the *Progymnasmata*, the anecdote is an "actional" (as opposed to "verbal") one,⁹ meaning it depicts action or reaction (as opposed to speech) in response to some object.¹⁰ The anecdote is also a "double" one, meaning it depicts two separate personages interacting with each other or with the same object.¹¹ The Democritus/Heraclitus anecdote involves two simultaneous contrasts, one between the sages' reactions and the common or expected one (anger), and the other between Democritus's reaction (laughter) and Heraclitus's (weeping).

The first contrast serves the specific purpose of the works *On Anger* in which the anecdote first appears: the audience is encouraged to reject anger as foolish and inappropriate, and to cultivate some other reaction to the objects that normally cause anger instead, as these sages did. But, presuming that the point of the anecdote is not to prescribe schizophrenia as a remedy for anger, one must wonder which of the two reactions the audience is being encouraged to experience instead: laughter or weeping? Although some authors make their preference for Democritus's reaction clear, not all do. In Juvenal's *Satires* Democritus is preferred,¹² but this is apparently not the case in *Sotion* (although here we have only a single sentence) or Seneca,¹³ and certainly not the case in the *Greek Anthology*¹⁴ or Lucian.¹⁵ It cannot be emphasized enough that Democritus's own maxim about inappropriate laughter (B107a = <T2>) encourages weeping, the reaction associated with Heraclitus in the anecdote, and discourages laughing, the reaction associated with Democritus in the anecdote. Democritus said that "It is worthy, since we are human beings, not to laugh at the misfortunes of human beings, but to weep." Thus, the original basis for the juxtaposed reactions weeping/laughing depicted in the double actional anecdote was Democritus's own maxim.

Given his actual and apparently well-known views on inappropriate laughter, we are left wondering why, although Democritus forcefully discouraged laughter at human misfortune, he was later depicted in the anecdote as succumbing to it. And we are also left wondering why, although he actually encouraged weeping at human misfortunes, in the anecdote this role is assigned instead to Heraclitus. In parts 2 and 3 I will attempt to answer these questions.

3 Democritus's Writings as a Source for the Anecdote

We have lost all of Democritus's ethical writings, but we have almost 300 fragments on ethical subjects attributed to him (many in the form of maxims or *gnômai*) and an ancient list of no less than eight of his writings characterized (by Thrasyllus) as "ethics." Among those titles is the *peri euthumiês*, which Seneca rendered *de tranquillitate* in his own dialogue *On Tranquility of the Soul*, a work in which he repeatedly refers to and praises Democritus's work,¹⁶ and elaborates on the Democritus/Heraclitus anecdote.¹⁷

There are quite a few ancient reports which mention Democritus's use of the term *euthumiê*, and around a dozen fragments in which it appears. This is not the place to advance an interpretation of its role in Democritus's ethics,¹⁸ but it must here be explained that the diverse connotations of the term were certainly an important factor in the proliferation of the legend of Democritus the laughing philosopher (Lutz 1954, 310). Democritus himself provided several synonyms for *euthumiê*, including *eudaimonia* (prosperity or happiness), *euestô* (well-being), *ataraxia* (not being anxious), *athambei* (not being disturbed), and *athaumastia* (not admiring) (Johnson 2020, 234–5). As Laertius tells us: "his end is *euthumia*, which is not the same as pleasure, as some have falsely represented it to be. Rather it is a state in which the soul goes through life calmly and stably, not being troubled at all by any fear or superstition or any other suffering. And Democritus calls this well-being and many other names" (Laertius 9.45). Now as Laertius makes clear, Democritus's *euthumiê* became misrepresented as a kind of pleasure. In support of Laertius's claim that he was not a straightforward hedonist is the very explanation of the original anecdote which criticizes those who, looking only to their own pleasure and enjoyments, laugh at human misfortunes (B107a = <T2>): in the explanation those who "take pleasure at the misfortunes of their neighbors" and "look only for their own enjoyment" are criticized (B293 = <T3>). But although "tranquility" or "contentment" may better capture Democritus's intention in using (or coining) the term, the connotation of "cheerfulness" was increasingly associated with *euthumiê*, and then what Stephen Halliwell aptly calls "a specifically symposiac mentality of elation and mirth" which "might be thought to comport well with genial laughter" (Halliwell 2008, 353). This semantic drift no doubt encouraged or at least permitted the portrayal of Democritus the author of a whole book on *euthumia* as being himself a cheerful person given to mirth and laughter, living his life in accordance with the most vivid and fun interpretation of the title of his most famous work.

As for the deeper content of his thought, there is at least one anecdote portraying him making a joke, and some of his most famous sayings, whether or not they were part of the *peri euthumiês*, could be interpreted as jokes of a kind.¹⁹ There are also several fragments, presumably part of the *peri euthumiês*, in which Democritus rants about misguided people, “fools” and their “thoughtless” behavior which is comparable to that of “children.”²⁰ The problem with putting any stress on these fragments is that none of them explicitly mention laughter and, as we have seen, the one fragment which does explicitly mention laughter (B107a = <T2>), and in particular laughter at human affairs, is a maxim in which Democritus explicitly discourages laughter at human misfortune and encourages weeping instead. This maxim may also be presumed to have been part of the *peri euthumiês*. Thus, again, the problem is that the real Democritus seems to discourage the behavior of the Democritus in the anecdote and instead encourage the behavior of the Heraclitus of the anecdote.

This problem can be solved by taking into consideration the longest and most secure fragment attributable to Democritus’s *peri euthumiês*.

<T10> For *euthumiê* 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 *euthumiê*, and will drive away those not small defects in your life: envy, jealousy, and ill-will. (B191)²¹

This fragment contains everything needed to explain how Democritus intends to avoid pseudo-Heraclitean weeping at human misfortunes and instead enjoy what he calls *euthumiê*. He exhorts his audience to focus their attention not on those who fare better and have more possessions than they themselves do, for that will produce, through a sense of relative deprivation, painful emotions like envy, jealousy, and ill-will. Instead, they are encouraged to focus on those who fare worse and possess less than they themselves do, which will produce feelings of contentment, satisfaction with how they are faring and with what they already possess: “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.” If we consider envy, jealousy, and ill-will as kinds of anger, then we are able to connect this fragment securely to the original Democritus/Heraclitus anecdote in Sotion, according to which Democritus was moved to laughter instead of anger. Admittedly, this fragment (B191) does not explicitly mention the term anger, but we have strong evidence from another source that Democritus was indeed very concerned about anger: <T11> “often many disasters come upon friends and other relatives, and sometimes on countries and kingdoms...more or less as many bad things as one could imagine, as Democritus says, come about through excessive anger (*orgas*)” (B143).²² This entire network of passages, then, suggests not only that the contrast between laughing and weeping at human misfortunes originated in Democritus, but also that he recommended a way to avoid anger (in the forms of envy, jealousy, and ill-will) that would produce *euthumiê*, a condition that implies not only tranquility and contentment, but also mirth and laughter. In this way weeping is avoided, even if it is to be considered a better and more human reaction than laughing at human misfortune. The key point is that the cause of Democritus’s laughter or mirth is not the observation of human misfortune or affairs in general (much less the whole world or universe), but instead his own inner feeling of *euthumiê* which is produced by reflection on his relative well-being and prosperity.

If this account is right, then Democritus himself is the source of the contrast between weeping and laughing at the objects that usually cause anger and at human misfortune in general. His own philosophy offers a way to avoid anger (and envy, jealousy, and ill-will) and instead enjoy *euthumiê*, which accounts for his own depiction as the one who laughs in the Democritus/Heraclitus anecdote. It remains to be explained why Heraclitus was depicted as the one who weeps in the anecdote.

4 A Peripatetic Writing on Melancholy as a Source for the Anecdote

Like Democritus, Heraclitus was apparently very concerned about the effects of emotions like anger: <T12> “One must extinguish *hubris* more than a conflagration” (B43); “to fight against *thumos* is hard” (B85). Although we do not have any fragment that mentions anger (*orgas*) specifically, it is easy to see how Heraclitus could be portrayed as having a consistent reaction to the objects that typically produce anger.

But why the portrayal of Heraclitus as someone constantly moved to tears? It has been suggested that since tears are the opposite of laughter, and Democritus was associated with laughter, then according to Heraclitus’s doctrine of the harmony of opposites, Heraclitus himself must provide the tears (Lutz 1954, 311). But this seems unsatisfactory for a couple of reasons. First, it presupposes that there was an antecedent anecdote about Democritus the laughing philosopher to which was later added the image of Heraclitus the weeping philosopher. But there is no evidence of this: the Sotion anecdote is a double actional *chreiai* and the two images must be simultaneous; additionally, as we have seen, the anecdote is based on a single maxim of Democritus (B107a = <T2>) within which the juxtaposition between laughing and weeping is already made. More importantly, such an interpretation does not provide any ethical motivation for the depiction, or one rooted in Heraclitus’s character. Nor does the even more ludicrous suggestion that Heraclitus’s tears were an adaptation of his doctrines about “wet souls” or the meteorological cycles of evaporation and rainfall.²³

When we turn to Heraclitus’s biography, however, we can find a clue to his depiction in the anecdote in another series of anecdotes related by Laertius. (Notably, Laertius does not report the Democritus/Heraclitus anecdote, perhaps because it is obvious that it is a fictive illustration or caricature and not conceivably an actual biographical fact). Laertius begins his account of Heraclitus by pointing out his “exceptional arrogance and disdain, as is clear from his book in which he says, ‘Much learning does not teach understanding, otherwise it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, or in turn Xenophanes and Hecateus’” (Laertius 2.1). The fragment shows Heraclitus directly interacting with other philosophers in his own book. Although not chronologically impossible, there is no evidence whatsoever and it is highly unlikely that he ever interacted with Democritus, and if he had, he presumably would have showed the same kind of contempt for the Abderite as he did for the others. The Democritus/Heraclitus anecdote, like the report of his

criticisms of the others, shows Heraclitus in conflict or disagreement with another philosopher. This aspect of the anecdote, though not the literal interaction itself, is thus in accordance with the other biographical information about Heraclitus.

The arrogance displayed in the criticism of Hesiod, etc. does not, however, contain any hint of a sadness that would help explain the weeping of the Democritus/Heraclitus anecdote. But another anecdote related by Laertius is more relevant: <T13> "Withdrawing to the temple of Artemis, he would play at knucklebones with the children, and when the Ephesians stood around him, he said 'Why are you surprised, you rascals? Isn't it better to do this than take part in your civic life?' At last, having become a misanthrope, he departed for the mountains, where he lived on grass and herbs" (Laertius 9.2–3). The accusation of misanthropy relates to his having a strong opinion about human affairs, not necessarily to weeping. And the anecdote about playing dice with children rather than engaging in politics with adults seems to portray arrogance (again), not sadness. But what Laertius goes on to say about Heraclitus's staged withdrawal from society, first into a temple spending time in the company of children, and then in the mountains, living a solitary fruitarian life, is more relevant, because this kind of behavior can be interpreted as melancholic.²⁴ And indeed Laertius later reports that Theophrastus said <T14> "it was on account of melancholy that Heraclitus left some of his writing half-finished and the rest in various states" (Laertius 9.6).

One of the longest continuous surviving treatments of melancholy has been attributed to Theophrastus: the first chapter of [Aristotle], *Problems* XXX. Whether or not it was literally authored by Theophrastus is hard to say (some consider it authored by Aristotle himself),²⁵ but it may be presumed that when he diagnosed Heraclitus with the disease, Theophrastus was familiar with such an account, which was offered in response to the following problem: <T15> "Why is it that all those men who have become extraordinary in philosophy, politics, poetry, or the arts are obviously melancholic and some to such an extent that they are seized by the illnesses that come from black bile?"²⁶ As examples in earlier times, legendary heroes are cited, but in later times <T16> "of the well-known people there are Empedocles, Plato, Socrates, and many others. Further, there are most of those connected to poetry. For in many such men diseases have come from this sort of mixture in the body, whereas in others their nature clearly inclines toward these conditions" (953a26–28). The idea is that some people, people who turn out to be poets and philosophers, have natures that are melancholic, a condition that can occur in others but temporarily. The cause is in any case bodily, as [Aristotle] explains by means of an analogy to the effects of wine.

<T17> Just as an individual changes his character by drinking and using wine in a certain quantity, so there are certain people corresponding to each character. For just as one man is temporarily when he is drunk, so some other is by nature—one is talkative, another agitated, and another prone to tears; for wine produces in some people such qualities, and this is why Homer writes: “And he says that I swim in tears, being heavy with wine.” (953b8–13)

Here then we have a diagnosis for Heraclitus, the weeping philosopher. He has a melancholic nature, and thus character, the same kind of character as that into which some people are temporarily induced by heavy drinking.

But as with those who habitually drink too much, the effects of melancholy are erratic or anomalous, and some melancholic natures are affected in different or even opposite ways. [Aristotle] begins a new phase of his explanation by emphasizing this point: <T18> “in nature such a humor—the melancholic—is mixed: it is a mixture of hot and cold; for its nature consists of these two things. And this is why black bile becomes very hot and very cold” (954a12–15). Whether it is hot or cold determines its effects: <T19> “black bile, being cold by nature and not on the surface, when it is in the condition mentioned, if it abounds in the body, produces apoplexy or torpor or spiritlessness (*athumias*) or fear, but if it becomes overheated, it produces *euthumia* with song, and insanity” (954a22–26). We now have a physical explanation, in whether the black bile is hot or cold, for both Heraclitus’s weeping and Democritus’s *euthumia*. Again, in most people these affects are temporary conditions, <T20> “but those in whom such a mixture has formed by nature, these straightaway develop all sorts of characters, each difference in accordance with the different mixture” (954a28–30). Terms connected with *thumos* are prevalent in the description of affects; besides *euthumia* (this is the Attic spelling of the Ionic and Democritean term *euthumiê*) and *athumia*, [Aristotle] also mentions those “easily moved to spiritedness and desire (*eukinêtoi pros tous thumous kai tas epithumias*)” (954a33–34).

Many of the symptoms of melancholy sound positively dreadful: not just constant weeping, or being dispirited, but also things like breaking out in sores. And yet for some, melancholy can be good; for example, Maracus the Syracusan was evidently a better poet when he was insane. And in those with a “tempered” mixture of black bile, the disease can conduce to intellectual virtue: <T21> “those in whom the excessive heat is relaxed toward a mean, these people are melancholic, but they are more intelligent, and they are less eccentric, but they are superior to others in many respects, some in education, others in arts, and others in politics” (954b1–5). Presumably this is the situation with Democritus and Heraclitus. And here we can see how the arrogance

of Heraclitus, so often noted by his biographers, is connected to and explained by this theory of his melancholic nature.

The idea that both Heraclitus and Democritus are wise, though oppositely affected by the same object, is also explained by their possession of a melancholic nature, because <T22> “the melancholic mixture is itself inconsistent, just as it produces inconsistency in those with the diseases; for like water it is sometimes hot and sometimes cold” (954b8–10). It induces a “daily spiritlessness” (*kath hēmeran athumias*) in some, but in others its effects are longer-lasting, so as to affect their character.

<T23> For we are often in a condition of feeling grief (*lupeisthai*), though for what reason we are unable to say; and sometimes we are in a cheerful condition (*euthumôs*), but why is not clear. Such affections and those called superficial come to be in everyone to some small extent, for some of their capacity is mingled in everyone; but in those in whom they are deep, these people are already this type with respect to their characters. (954b16–22)

What we have here, then, is a physiological account of how two philosophers could both exceed others in intelligence, and yet be driven to completely opposite emotional reactions, weeping and laughing. We often see drink and unstable aspects of character inducing these reactions in ourselves and others, depending apparently on the mixtures of hot and cold in our bodies; but in melancholic types there is a more stable tendency in one direction or the other, due to their natures, and in those with a temperate mixture, there can also be extraordinary intelligence.

These are positions that resolve the original problem. This account of melancholy, and the diagnosis of philosophers and poets with melancholic natures, I think offers the best available explanation of why Heraclitus was associated with habitual weeping and made to play the part of the weeping philosopher by way of contrast to Democritus. As an eminent philosopher, Democritus can be automatically diagnosed with melancholy, even though his own writings provide a positive method for securing *euthumiê* and avoiding anger and its associated painful emotions like envy, jealousy, and ill-will. His melancholic symptoms must then be associated with his *euthumiê*, his habitual cheerfulness and mirth, but exaggerated into a kind of mania, and contrasted with the equally possible melancholic reaction of depressive weeping and crying.

This logic is deployed to brilliant comedic effect in an anonymous circa first-century C.E. comic epistolary novella currently located among the Hippocratic pseudepigrapha. The novel is written in the form of a series of letters addressed

to and from the famous physician Hippocrates. The author describes Hippocrates's travels to Abdera to treat Democritus for a presumed intense case of melancholy, symptomized by his constant inappropriate laughter.²⁷ The novelist, who shows great familiarity with writings of both the Hippocratic and Democritean traditions and also with the peripatetic account of melancholy just discussed,²⁸ employs elements of Democritus's own writings in portraying his response to Hippocrates.²⁹ Hippocrates, who initially considers the possibility that Democritus is mentally ill and may suffer from melancholy,³⁰ gradually comes to realize that Democritus not only does not suffer from any mental illness, but is in fact mentally healthier than all the Abderites and even healthier than Hippocrates himself; thus the physician eventually promises to promote Democritus's attitude toward life to everyone he meets.³¹ In particular, the novelist is careful to clarify that Democritus does not consider it right to laugh at human misfortunes (which he instead considers lamentable), but rather at avoidable and correctable human foolishness and short-sightedness.³²

Neither the author nor the exact century of publication of the novella is known, but most indications point to the first century C.E.³³ We thus are in or around the time in which Sotion created or conveyed the anecdote juxtaposing Heraclitus weeping and Democritus laughing. The absence of any reference to Heraclitus in the novel has suggested to some scholars that the depiction of Democritus laughing must have preceded that of Heraclitus weeping.³⁴ But although we have seen other reasons to associate the laughing caricature with Democritus, we have reached a rather different conclusion about the origin of the anecdote. We have seen that the juxtaposition of weeping and laughing originated with an important maxim of Democritus himself (B107a = <T2>). The main influence on the anecdote was Democritus's own ethics, and the casting of Heraclitus and Democritus in the opposing roles likely followed recognition of this, and not some lost independent portrayal of Democritus as a laughing philosopher for which there is no longer any evidence.³⁵

Even less likely is the suggestion that the laughing Democritus was invented as Cynic counterpart to the Stoic's use of Heraclitus as a philosophical ally. Zeph Stewart, in a seminal and mostly correct article on the influence of Democritus on the Cynics (and the subsequent influence of the Cynics on the compilation and abbreviation of the Democritean maxims that have survived), attempted to pinpoint the origin of the legend as follows. "In comparisons of the two, it should be noted, Democritus is usually preferred. Laughter at the foolishness of the world is in itself a characteristically Cynic and Sceptic trait, while the list of writers in whom the story appears suggests that someone within the general circle of Menippus created the 'Cynic' Democritus and contrasted him with the 'Stoic' Heraclitus" (Stewart 1958, 186–7). Although the

suggestion cannot be ruled out, I agree with Angel M. Garcia Gomez that it is “difficult to believe that a legend which in due course found favor among Cynic as well as Stoic writers should have begun simply as a sneering jibe at a supposedly Stoic Heraclitus” (Garcia Gomez 1984, 111). As we have seen, it is not true that Democritus is usually preferred.³⁶ In fact, Democritus’s reaction of laughter is preferred over Heraclitus’s weeping by Seneca, a card-carrying Stoic.³⁷ But most importantly, such an interpretation does not bring out the ethical significance of the juxtaposition of laughing and weeping that appears already in that important maxim of Democritus (B107a = <T2>), a maxim that is also connected to his technique of anger control and production of *euthumiê*.

5 Conclusion

With the foregoing synthesis of the available evidence, we can offer a probable conclusion. The original “double” and “actional” anecdote juxtaposing a weeping Heraclitus and laughing Democritus probably originated in the first century C.E., perhaps with Sotion himself or a little earlier, and probably in the context of a discussion of how sages react differently than the unwise to the objects that usually produce anger. The anecdote rapidly became famous, being applied by Seneca again to the case of anger, but then extended to political and even all human affairs, an extension continued in the *Greek Anthology*, Latin satire, and the comedy of Lucian. From there it became a common motif in literature and visual art.

The clearest connection of Heraclitus to weeping is through the biographical claim (attributed to Theophrastus) that Heraclitus, like other great philosophers, suffered from melancholy. Melancholy was understood to produce anomalous and contradictory effects, including symptoms of what we would call manic depression. Thus Democritus, because of the title of his main ethical work, his tendency to rant about foolish behavior, and his advice about how to replace strong emotions like anger with tranquility, could also be considered a melancholic, but at the same time was said to experience a reaction opposite to that of Heraclitus, namely *euthumia* and laughter instead of weeping and depression. But when we examine Democritus’s own writings, we find only the single fragment about laughter (B107a = <T2>), and it is a maxim that recommends not laughter but weeping in reaction to human misfortune.

The longest and most important fragment of Democritus (B191 = <T10>) explains a way to remove painful emotions (envy, jealousy, ill-will) that are typically accompanied by weeping, replacing them instead with tranquility and contentment. Democritus was thus the originator of the juxtaposition between

inappropriate laughter and inappropriate weeping, and since his own philosophy aimed to replace both reactions with contentment or tranquility, he himself became the mascot for the positive emotion, and practically the entire ancient field of positive psychology. Heraclitus was a convenient counterpart for the depiction of the opposite emotion because of his supposed melancholy, even though there is in fact vanishingly little in his own writings to associate him with weeping. Thus, Democritus's writing is the ultimate source of the ethical juxtaposition of inappropriate laughing and weeping, and later authors experimenting with biographical fiction around the first century C.E. are the ultimate sources for the rhetorical anecdote portraying the two sages laughing and weeping and thereby expressing symptoms of a kind of melancholic manic depression.³⁸

Notes

1. For the extensive influence of the legend of Democritus the laughing philosopher see, e.g., Möller (1954), Garcia Gomez (1984), and Rütten (1992).
2. Translations of Democritus are mine, cited according to Diels's 1952 edition.
3. In the evidence base for Democritus, we frequently see maxims accompanied by explanations following the formula: maxim; explanatory clause (introduced by *gar*). We also frequently see maxims without explanatory clauses, and explanatory clauses without maxims (e.g., B191, discussed below). The tendency is to successively abbreviate a longer text into shorter texts, and ultimately into single sentences, usually a single maxim that may have originally been accompanied by an elaborate explanation or by other maxims.
4. Writings entitled *Anecdotes* (*chreiai*) have been attributed to authors as early as Aristippus and Diogenes of Sinope. Both attributions, which are reported by Laertius (II.85 and VI.80), are ascribed to none other than Sotion.
5. The three most important *Progymnasmata* are attributed to Theon, pseudo-Hermogenes, and Aphthonius, translated in Kennedy (2003). The earliest surviving of those textbooks dates to the middle of the first century C.E. but must have originated earlier, since earlier works are referred to in them, and similar teaching methods are described as originating earlier by the orator Quintilian. They may have originated as early as the first century B.C.E. See Hock and O'Neil (1986, 10). On the long history going back to the Socratic circle of *chreia* in the sense of "anecdote" see Searby (2019).
6. Seneca, *On Anger* II.10.4–5 and *On Tranquility of the Soul* 15.1–3.
7. Anonymous, *Palatine Anthology* 9.148. See the translation and discussion of Halliwell (2008, 336), and see his note 8: "The metrical license in line 2 (*bre-*

vis in longo at the caesura) points to a mid-imperial date.... Rütten (1992, 23–4) speculates on the first century AD.”

8. Halliwell (2008, 363–4) discusses this tendency and the fascinating but dubious possibility of Democritus grasping “a cosmic absurdity at the heart of infinity.”
9. See, e.g., the distinction between “verbal,” “actional,” and “mixed” *chreiai* in *Preliminary Exercises attributed to Hermogenes* 6 (translated Kennedy 2003, 76).
10. Theon divides “actional” *chreiai* into “active” and “passive,” depending on whether the *chreia* describes the subject doing, or suffering, something (Theon 98–9; see Kennedy 2003, 17). Weeping and laughing would seem to be perfectly ambiguous between actions and passions, and it would be hard to say that the anecdote under consideration must be classified as either active or passive. But even if weeping and laughing are understood to be merely “passive” emotions, they would not be out of place in an “actional” *chreia*.
11. Theon says that there is a species of *chreia* called “double” which involves two different personages (Theon 98; see Kennedy 2003, 17). Such *chreiai* have not been exhaustively catalogued or studied (most are missing from Hock and O’Neill 1986, because they do not appear in existing *Progymnasmata*), but many can easily be found in Laertius, including anecdotes involving Aristippus/Antisthenes, Aristippus/Aeschines, Aristippus/Plato, Aristippus/Diogenes, Antisthenes/Socrates, Antisthenes/Plato, Antisthenes/Diogenes, Diogenes/Plato, Diogenes/Anaximenes, and Diogenes/Aristotle. Although most of these are “verbal” *chreiai*, some are “actional,” and there seems to be nothing preventing a double *chreia* being of the “actional” kind, as in the Democritus/Heraclitus anecdote.
12. In Juvenal’s adaptation of the anecdote at *Satires* 10.28–35, he wonders “where did Heraclitus find such a reserve of tears?” (translated Greene 1967) implying the impracticality of his reaction; by contrast Democritus is praised as a sage in 10.47–53.
13. In Seneca’s adaptation of the anecdote at *On Anger* 2.10–4–5 no preference is stated, but at *On Tranquility* 15.1–3. Seneca recommends that Serenus “imitate Democritus rather than Heraclitus,” giving several reasons to do so. Seneca’s apparent endorsement of Democritus over Heraclitus is striking, given the usual affiliation of the Stoics with Heraclitus. But at *On Tranquility* 15.5 Seneca partly withdraws his endorsement of Democritus’s laughter (though not his *euthumia*), saying: “But it is better to accept common behavior and human vices calmly, dissolving into neither laughter nor tears; for it is everlasting wretchedness to be tormented by the misfortunes of others, and an inhuman pleasure to delight in them” (translated Fantham 2014). See further Garcia Gomez (1984, 7–8).
14. The Anonymous at *Palatine Anthology* 9.148, after juxtaposing Democritus/Heraclitus, raises the issue of how both reactions are to be sustained simulta-

neously: "Yet when I look at both of you, I ponder with fluctuating uncertainty / How I am to weep with one of you, laugh with the other" (translated Halliwell 2008, 336). But no preference for either is stated.

15. In Lucian, *Philosophers for Sale* 13–14, no one is willing to buy the way of life on offer from either Democritus or Heraclitus, and both are treated as if insane.
16. See *On Tranquility of the Soul* 2.3; cf. 6.1–7.1, 8.1–3, and 15.2–3.
17. See note 7.
18. For an overview of this evidence, see Johnson (2020).
19. "A maiden following Hippocrates was greeted by Democritus on the first day as follows: 'Hello maiden'; but on the following day, 'Hello woman'. And indeed the maiden had been penetrated during the night" (Laertius 9.42). Democritus reportedly said that "he wishes more to discover a single causal explanation than to become the king of the Persians" (B118). The famous saying "By convention sweet, by convention bitter, in reality atoms and void" was part of a dialogue, and this saying of "The Mind" was followed by a comic reply of the "Senses": "Wretched mind! Taking your trust from us you overthrow us? The overthrow is a fall for you!" (B125; cf. A49, B117).
20. B53–54, B76, B185, B197–206. See Müller (1994, 42).
21. For a different interpretation of the significance of this fragment in the present context see Müller (1994, 41).
22. Philodemus, *On Anger* 28.17 (cf. B236–237). This work of Philodemus (circa B.C. I) is the third ancient work *On Anger* (and the earliest) that we have seen that mentions Democritus's attitude about anger: the other two are Sotion's *On Anger* (the original source of the Democritus/Heraclitus anecdote) and Seneca's *On Anger*.
23. Garcia Gomez (1984, 21–2), however, shows how such considerations could have played a part in Lucian's adaptation of the anecdote. As Garcia Gomez points out, the comedian Lucian is the first author who attempted to relate the laughing and crying directly to the writings of both Democritus and Heraclitus. But Seneca in *On Tranquility of the Soul* had earlier discussed Democritus's work *peri euthumiê* before elaborating on the anecdote, although Seneca does not try to relate anything about Heraclitus's writing to his weeping in the anecdote.
24. Compare the depiction of melancholics in the Pseudo-Hippocratic *Letter* 12 (discussed below), where Hippocrates wonders "if the man <sc. Democritus> 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" (62.2–12 translated Smith). The quote also shows how there can be doubt about whether the melancholic suffers from madness or "an overwhelming strength of soul," a point to which I will return (see note 42).
25. I will follow scholarly convention and bracket the name [Aristotle] to indicate this dubious status of the work. On the authorship of *Problems* 30.1 and its attribution to Aristotle or Theophrastus, see Eijk (2005, 139).
 26. [Aristotle], *Problems* 30.1, 953a10–14, translated Mayhew. (All translations from *Problems* 30.1 are adapted from Mayhew 2011.)
 27. The novella will be cited by letter number (and occasionally section division), followed by page and line numbers in the edition of Smith (1990). Kazantzidis (2018) and Hankinson (2019) fruitfully discuss the novella in relation to the peripatetic treatment of melancholy, but do not discuss the Democritus/Heraclitus anecdote or the implications of Theophrastus's diagnosis of Heraclitus with melancholy.
 28. Against Smith (1990, 31; cf. 20), who considers the novelist's engagement with both Hippocrates and Democritus as superficial. Kazantzidis (2018, 60; cf. 39 and 49) argues that the novelist is familiar with both the Hippocratic literature and the peripatetic account of melancholy. Eijk (2005, 155) has argued that the peripatetic account is independent of Hippocratic influences and reflects rather Aristotle's views on melancholy in the *Parva Naturalia* and *Eudemian Ethics*.
 29. Johnson 2024.
 30. At 12, 62.2–12 (Smith), Hippocrates raises the possibility that Democritus suffers from a non-pathological and even healthy kind of melancholy, as opposed to 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 (see further Kazantzidis [2018, 49–56] and Hankinson [2019, 59]). At one point, when he is laying out the concerns that have been expressed by his fellow Abderites, Hippocrates charges: "You are melancholic, then, Democritus, in danger of being a proper Abderite, and the city is wiser than you" (14, 66.18–28 Smith).
 31. The comic force of the novella reaches its climax when the tables are turned and Hippocrates admits that he will follow Democritus's therapy (instead of insisting that Democritus follow his). Hippocrates promises to carry Democritus's 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. And taking from you the therapy for my intellect I shall go away" (17.10, 92.2–4, translated Smith). For a different interpretation, see Kazantzidis (2018, 38), who has recently proposed that Democritus does prove mentally ill. I argue against this interpretation in Johnson 2024.
 32. At 17.9, Democritus says "I do not think it right to laugh (*oudamôs dokeô gelên*); I wish I could find something to make them grieve (*lupêron*)" (88.5–10

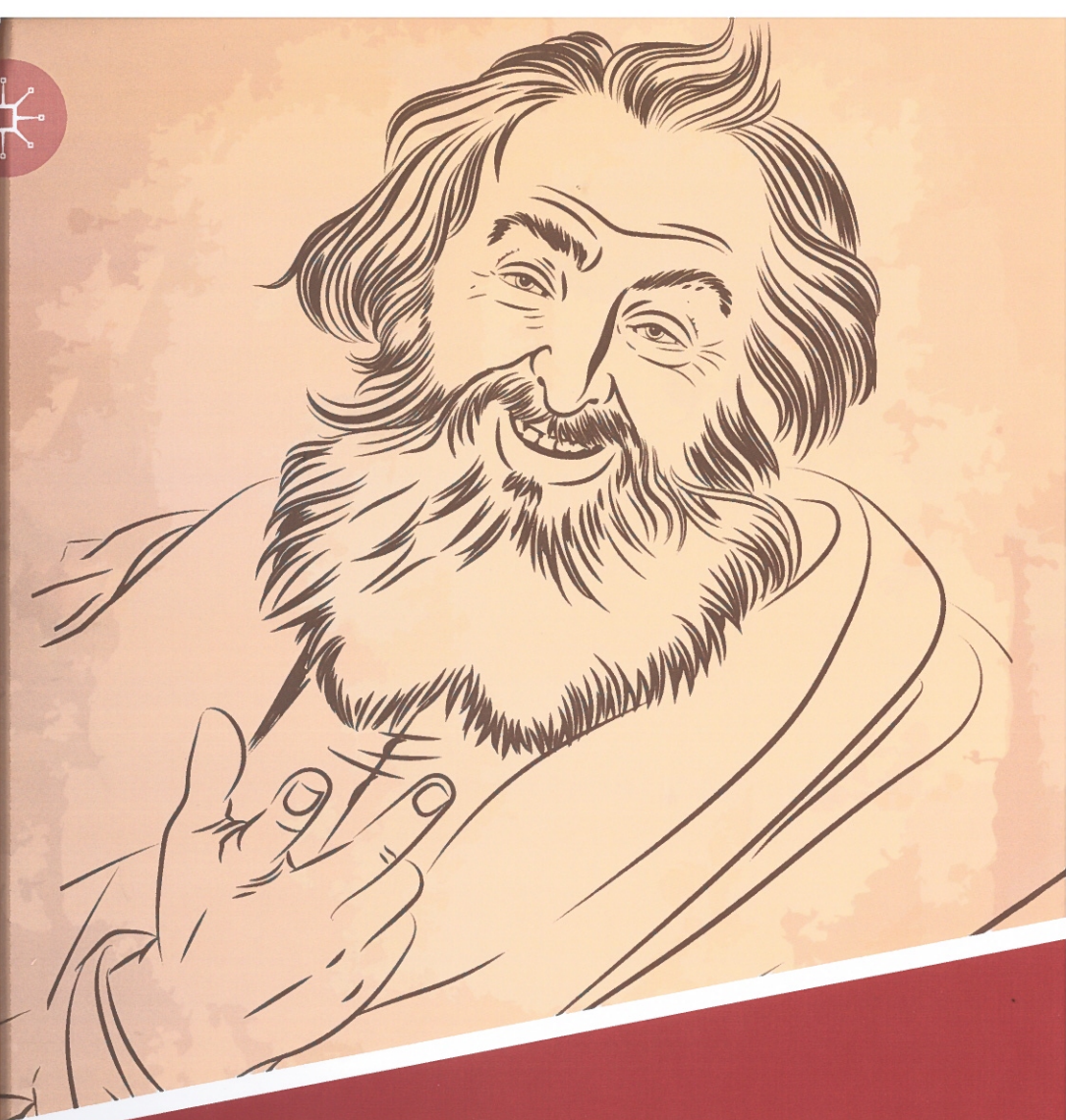
- translated Smith). Earlier at 17.4, 80.5–7 and 17.7, 84.8–18, he had clarified that the object of his laughter is not everything indiscriminately, but only culpable human folly.
33. According to Smith: “the tendency of scholars has been to date the genre as a whole to the last century B.C. and the first and second A.D.” (Smith 1990, 28). Rütten (1992, 1) and Hankinson (2019, 55) opt for the first century B.C.E.
 34. Lutz (1954, 310), followed by Garcia Gomez (1984, 1).
 35. In Cicero’s *On the Ideal Orator*, Democritus is suggested as a potential authority on laughter: “the primary question of what laughter itself is and what gives rise to it...is a question for Democritus” (Cicero, *On the Ideal Orator* II.58.235). But against Kiessling (1889, 183), there is no evidence that Democritus authored a treatise *On Laughter*, or that such a work (as opposed to the *peri euthumiês*) was a major source for the anecdote.
 36. See notes 12–15.
 37. See note 13 Against Garcia Gomez, who suggests that Democritus’s attitude was strictly speaking incompatible with “a purer form of stoicism”; thus “Seneca’s reasoning is not always entirely coherent” (1984, 8). Although Seneca ultimately rejects both laughter and weeping (*On Tranquility of the Soul* 15.5), he makes clear his preference for Democritus over Heraclitus (15.2–3). It must be noted that the Stoics recognized *euthumia* (about which Democritus had written an influential work praised by Seneca, as noted above), as one of the species of approved emotions (*eupatheiai*), according to Pseudo-Andronicus apud Laertius 7.116. The Stoic Panaetius of Rhodes wrote his own *peri euthumias* which incorporated psychagogic techniques that can be traced back to Democritus. See Gill (1994).
 38. I would like to acknowledge the extremely helpful feedback I received on earlier drafts of this chapter from Lydia Amir, Pierre Destrée, Patricia Marechal, Juan-Carlos Gonzalez, Michael Fontaine, María-Elena García-Peláez, David LévyStone, Mauricio Lecón and an audience at The Faculty of Philosophy at Universidad Panamericana, Mexico City.

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