

Cynicism in the Pseudo-Hippocratic Letters

A. Outline of letters under discussion (Letters 10-17; probable date 1st C BCE)

Letter 10:¹ The Council and the People of Abdera to Hippocrates

- o Democritus has fallen ill; Abderites beg Hippocrates to come and cure him
- o Symptoms described: “he is constantly wakeful night and day, laughs at everything large and small, and thinks life in general is worth nothing” (ἐγρηγορῶς καὶ νύκτα καὶ ἡμέρην, γελοῶν ἕκαστα μικρὰ καὶ μεγάλα, καὶ μηδὲν οἰόμενος εἶναι τὸν βίον ὅλον διατελεῖ. 10.9-10)²

Letter 11: Hippocrates to the Council and People of Abdera

- o Hippocrates will come and cure Democritus (if he is ill)
- o H. will not accept payment

Letter 12: Hippocrates to Philopoimen (his guest friend in Abdera)

- o Hippocrates accepts Philopoimen’s invitation to stay with him when he comes to Abdera
- o H. praises those who seek solitude for the purpose of philosophy/the intellect

Letter 13: Hippocrates to Dionysius (a friend who will be staying at his house while he is in Abdera)

- o H. thinks Democritus is not ill; it is the Abderites who need treatment, as they have fallen sick with worry
- o While H. is away, Dionysius asked to discipline H’s wife: “a woman always needs someone to discipline her, for by nature she has the untameable within herself; wherefore, if she is not pruned every day, she runs to wood [i.e. goes wild], just like trees.” (...αἰεὶ χρήζει γυνὴ σωφρονίζοντος, ἔχει γὰρ φύσει τὸ ἀκόλαστον ἐν ἐωυτέῃ, ὅπερ, εἰ μὴ καθ’ ἡμέρην ἐπικόπτοιο, ὡς τὰ δένδρα καθυλομανέει. 13.26-28)

Letter 14: Hippocrates to Damagetus (ship-owner)

- o H. asks Damagetus to send the ship, Helios, so he can sail to Abdera

Letter 15: Hippocrates to Philopoimen (his guest friend in Abdera)

- o H. recounts dream he had about Democritus; gives an allegorical interpretation

Letter 16: Hippocrates to Crateuas (herbalist)

- o H. asks for purgative for Democritus, though hopes he won’t have to use it
- o Wishes that Crateuas could instead cut out the root of the love of money: thus “we would purge the diseased minds of men along with their bodies.” (...ἐκαθήραμεν ἂν τῶν ἀνθρώπων μετὰ τῶν σωμάτων καὶ τὰς ψυχὰς νοσεούσας. 16.16-17)

Letter 17: Hippocrates to Damagetus (ship owner)

- o H. has met Democritus; Democritus was not mad; H. recognizes that Democritus is the man most capable of giving prudence to (σωφρονίζειν) mankind; H. will be his herald
- o Reports LONG Cynic diatribe he heard from Democritus

¹ Possibly a later addition, as letter 11 is found in the papyrus tradition without 10 preceding it (Smith 1990: 24)

² Translations throughout adapted from Smith 1990.

B. Cynic Elements in Letter 17

1. **Rejection of accepted social practices:** “[Men] rush to marry women whom they cast out shortly later; they love, then they hate; they beget children in desire, then they cast them out when they are grown. What is this empty and irrational passion, no different from madness?” (γαμείν σπεύδουσιν, ἄς μετ' ὀλίγον ἐκβάλλουσιν, ἐρῶσιν, εἶτα μισέουσι, μετ' ἐπιθυμίας γεννῶσιν, εἶτ' ἐκβάλλουσι τελείους. Τίς ἢ κενὴ σπουδὴ καὶ ἀλόγιστος, μηδὲν μανίης διαφέρουσα; 17.141-3)
2. **Self-sufficiency:** “In their passions what excess have [men] left for irrational beasts – except that beasts retain self-sufficiency” (Ἐν δὲ τοῖσι θυμοῖσι τί περισσὸν ζῴοισιν ἀλόγοισι παραλελοίπασι; πλὴν ὅτι ἐν αὐταρκείῃ μένουσιν οἱ θῆρες. 17.232-3)
3. **Unfavourable comparison of humans to animals:** “What lion ever hid gold in the ground? What bull butted out of greed? What leopard overfilled himself insatiately? A wild boar feels thirst for as much water as he takes, a wolf devours what he gets for needed nourishment and stops. But, days and nights strung together, man is never glutted with a banquet.” (Τίς γὰρ λέων ἐς γῆν κατέκρυψε χρυσόν; τίς ταῦρος πλεονεξίην ἐκορύσατο; τίς πάρδαλις ἀπληστίην κεχώρηκε; διψῆ μὲν ἄργιος σῶς, ὅσον ὕδατος ὠρέθη; λύκος δὲ δαρδάψας τὸ προσπεσὸν τῆς ἀναγκαίης τροφῆς ἀναπέπαιται ἡμέρησι δὲ καὶ νυξὶ ξυναπτομένησιν οὐκ ἔχει θοίνης κόρον ὠνθροπος. 17.233-7)
4. **Laughter as therapy:** “when you learn it [i.e. the cause of my laughter], I know that you will take on a better cargo than you brought on your embassy, and carry back my laughter as therapy for your country and yourself, and you will be able to instruct all others in prudence.” (μαθὼν δ' εὖ οἶδ' ὅτι κρέσσονα τῆς πρεσβείης ἀντιφορτισάμενος ἀποίσεις θεραπείην τὸν ἐμὸν γέλωτα τῇ πατρίδι καὶ ἑωυτέῳ, καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους δυνήσῃ σωφρονίζειν. 17.110-2)
5. **Contempt for/mockery of the rest of humanity.** Long list of vices/irrationality we succumb to unnecessarily. “When we see these wretched, unworthy pursuits, so many of them, how can we fail to mock a life that cleaves at such wantonness?” (Τὰς ἀναξίους οὖν καὶ δυστήνους ψυχὰς ὀρεῦντες καὶ τοςαύτας, πῶς μὴ χλευάσωμεν τὸν τοιγῆδε ἀκρασίην ἔχοντα βίον αὐτέων; 17.281-3)
6. **Foolishness of avoiding the “shortcut to virtue”:** “They do not see the straight path of virtue, clear and smooth and free of harm... They are borne along struggling on a treacherous and twisted path, burdened and stumbling” (Τὴν γὰρ ὀρθὴν κέλευθον τῆς ἀρετῆς οὐ θεωρεῦσι καθαρὴν καὶ λείην καὶ ἀπρόσπαιστον... φέρονται δὲ ἐπὶ τὴν ἀπειθῆ καὶ σκολιήν, τρηχυβατέοντες, καταφερόμενοι καὶ προσκόπτοντες... 17.218-221).

C. Hippocrates as Internal Audience

1. And I said, “Oh great Democritus, I shall carry the great gifts of your friendship back to Cos. You have filled me with great wonder at your wisdom. I shall go away as herald that you have tracked down and understood the truth of human nature. And taking from you the therapy for my intellect I shall go away...” “For I have seen Democritus, wisest of men, alone most capable of teaching mankind virtue” (17.298-310)

καὶ φημὶ, ὦ Δημόκριτε μεγαλόδοξε, μεγάλας γε τῶν σῶν ξενίων δωρεὰς εἰς Κῶ ἀποίσομαι· πολλοῦ γάρ με τῆς σῆς σοφίης θαυμασμοῦ πεπλήρωκας· ἀπονοστέω δέ σου κῆρυξ ἀληθεῖν ἀνθρωπίνης φύσιος ἐξιχνεύσαντος καὶ νοήσαντος. Θεραπείην δὲ λαβὼν παρὰ σεῦ τῆς ἐμῆς διανοίης, ἀπαλλάσσομαι... Δημόκριτον γὰρ εἶδον, ἄνδρα σοφώτατον, σωφρονίζειν ἀνθρώπους μόνον δυνατώτατον.

2. Man’s life is pitiable: through the whole of it, like a winter wind, the unbearable love of money has slipped in. If only all doctors would come together to cure a sickness which is worse than madness... (11.26-29)

Οἰκτρός γε ὁ τῶν ἀνθρώπων βίος, ὅτι δι’ ὅλου αὐτοῦ ὡς πνεῦμα χειμέριον ἢ ἀφόρητος φιλαργυρία διαδέδουκεν, ἐφ’ ἣν εἶθε μᾶλλον ἅπαντες ἰητροὶ ζυγήεσαν ἐλθόντες ἀποθεραπεῦσαι χαλεπωτέραν μανίης νοῦσον...

3. When the intellect wants to stop being battered by tumult it takes the body quickly then to quiet. Then it stands upright in itself and looks round in a circle at the place of truth, **where there is no father, no wife, no children, mother, sibling, relatives, menials, no chance, in sum, none of the things that will make tumult.** (12.23-28)

ὁκόταν γὰρ ὁ νοῦς ὑπὸ τῶν ἔξω φροντίδων κοπτόμενος ἀναπαῦσαι θελήσῃ τὸ σῶμα, τότε ταχέως ἐς ἡσυχίην μετήλλαξεν, εἶτα ἀναστὰς ὀρθριος ἐν ἑωυτῷ περιεσκόπει κύκλῳ χωρίον ἀληθείης, ἐν ᾧ οὐ πατήρ, οὐ μήτηρ, οὐ γυνή, οὐ τέκνα, οὐ κασίγνητος, οὐ ξυγγενέες, οὐ δμῶες, οὐ τύχη, οὐχ ὄλως οὐδὲν τῶν θόρυβον ἐμποιοσάντων·

D. Cynicism as the shortcut to virtue

1. **Polemical Use:** Julian, *Πρὸς Ἡράκλειον κοινικὸν* 7.225

[The Cynics] say that they are traveling the short and ready road to virtue. I would that they were going by the longer, for they would more readily arrive by that road than by this of theirs.

Τὴν σύντομον φασὶν ὁδὸν καὶ σύντονον ἐπὶ τὴν ἀρετὴν <πορεύεσθαι>· ὄφελον καὶ ὑμεῖς τὴν μακρὰν ἐπορεύεσθε·

2. **Democritus’ claim:**

They do not see the straight path of virtue, clear and smooth and free of harm... They are borne along struggling on a treacherous and twisted path, burdened and stumbling... (17.218-221)

Τὴν γὰρ ὀρθὴν κέλευθον τῆς ἀρετῆς οὐ θεωρεῦσι καθαρὴν καὶ λείην καὶ ἀπρόσπταιστον... φέρονται δὲ ἐπὶ τὴν ἀπειθὴ καὶ σκολίην, τρηχυβατέοντες, καταφερόμενοι καὶ προσκόπτοντες...

E. Hippocrates' Activities as Wasted Time

And I said “By Zeus, Democritus, you speak truly and wisely. For that reason I consider you blessed to enjoy such leisure. It has not fallen to be to share in it.” And when he asked “Why, Hippocrates, has it not so fallen?” “Because,” I said, “traveling, children, debts, disease, death, servants, marriages: such things whittle away my leisure.” Thereupon the man was swept back to his usual manner. He burst out laughing; he scoffed and then remained silent. (17.85-92)

Κἀγὼ, νῆ Δία, ἔφην, ὃ Δημόκριτε, ἀληθέως γε καὶ φρονίμως λέγεις, ὅθεν εὐδαίμονά σε κρίνω τοσαύτης ἀπολαύοντα ἡσυχίης· ἡμῖν δὲ μετέχειν ταύτης οὐκ ἐπιτέτραπται. Ἐρεομένου δὲ διὰ τί, ὃ Ἴππόκρατες, οὐκ ἐπιτέτραπται, ὅτι, ἔφην, ἢ ἀγροὶ ἢ οἰκίῃ ἢ τέκνα ἢ δάνεια ἢ νοῦσοι ἢ θάνατοι ἢ δμῶες ἢ γάμοι ἢ τοιαῦτά τινα τὴν εὐκαιρίην ὑποτάμνεται. Ἐνταῦθα δὴ ὁ ἀνὴρ εἰς τὸ εἰωθὸς πάθος κατηνέχθη, καὶ μάλα ἀθρόον τι ἀνεκάγχασε, καὶ ἐπετώθασε, καὶ τὸ λοιπὸν ἡσυχίην ἤγεν.

F. Democritus and the Therapeutic Power of Laughter

1. The Abderites, standing about me downcast, their eyes not far from tears, said “You see Democritus’ 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. The another groaned imitating a wayfarer who had lost his belongings. When Democritus heard the first, he smiled, on hearing the second, he laughed. (17.37-45)

Οἱ δὲ Ἀβδηρίται περιεστῶτές με κατηφές καὶ οὐ πόρρω τὰς ὄψιας δακρύντων ἔχοντες φασίν, ὁρῆς μέντοι τὸν Δημοκρίτου βίον, ὃ Ἴππόκρατες, ὡς μέμνη, καὶ οὔτε ὅ τι θέλει οἶδεν οὔτε ὅ τι ἔρδει. Καί τις αὐτέων ἔτι μᾶλλον ἐνδείξασθαι βουλόμενος τὴν μανίην αὐτοῦ, ὁξὺ ἀνεκάκυσεν εἶκελον γυναικὶ ἐπὶ θανάτῳ τέκνου ὀδυρομένη, εἶτ’ ἀνώμωξε πάλιν ἄλλος ὑποκρινόμενος παροδίτην ἀπολέσαντά τι ὧν διεκόμιζε· καὶ ὁ Δημόκριτος ὑπακούων τὰ μὲν ἐμειδία, τὰ δὲ ἐξεγέλα...

2. Aristotle, *De generatione et corruptione* 315b15 (attributed to Democritus)
From the same letters, tragedy and comedy arise.

ἐκ τῶν αὐτῶν γὰρ τραγῳδία καὶ κωμῳδία γίνεται γραμμάτων.

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