

Cynicism in the Pseudo-Hippocratic Letters

Among the corpus of letters purported to be written by Hippocrates, but probably written in the 1st century BCE or CE (Lewin 1968), one series stands out for its complexity and literary sophistication. Letters 10-17 form a single narrative arc describing an imagined meeting between Hippocrates and the philosopher Democritus, and have been called “a kind of epistolary novel”, or a “novella in letters” (Stewart 1958: 186; Smith 1990: 20).

Since Heinze 1889 the Cynic elements in the final letter, letter 17, have been acknowledged (see also Diels 1918; Stewart 1958; Lewin 1968; Smith 1990). Democritus’ two long speeches in this letter take a fundamentally Cynic moral-philosophical stance: they are concerned with the foolishness of accepted social practices, they preach a message of *apatheia*, and they compare humans unfavourably to animals. They also exhibit many of the stylistic features associated with Cynic diatribe: these speeches are an attack on vice, they are morally exhortatory rather than theoretical, they rely upon everyday examples, and they employ colloquial language and an aggressive tone (Sayre 1958: 1-24 and Dudley 1937: 35-7). The status of this final, Cynic letter as the culmination of a wider narrative sequence has, however, often been ignored. The purpose of this paper will, then, be to consider how these letters work together to bring the reader to a favourable view of Cynic philosophy.

It will consider firstly how the earlier letters introduce key themes of *ataraxia* and the damaging effect of social and familial ties. It will also consider why the characters of Hippocrates and Democritus – both of whom are connected with natural science in the doxographic tradition – are employed in the support of a philosophy that eschews the study of logic and physics. Finally, it will consider the use of the imagery of the *suntomos hodos* of

“shortcut” to virtue, and show how these letters work to reframe this standard criticism of Cynicism (found in e.g. Plutarch, Apollodorus, and Lucian) as a positive.

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