

KNOW THYSELF AND NOTHING IN EXCESS

The existence of the *eidōla* means that the individual cannot be imagined as an atomic unit, bounded and whole; she is always surrounded by a penumbra of more-or-less selves that are a part of herself and exist “no less than” she does. This has implications for Democritus’s ethical theory. From one angle of the parallax, Democritus’s ethical prescriptions seem to follow atomic principles, aiming to maintain psychic equilibrium amid the dynamic interchange of atomic influences and effluences. But from another angle, Democritus’s ethics, like his physics, exhibit the pull of the *den*, which voids the autonomy and self-mastery of the human subject, complicating the Delphic maxim “Know Thyself” and giving new meaning to “Nothing in Excess.”

We can start with fragment B9/D14: “By convention (*nomōi*) sweet and by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention color, but in reality (*eteēi*) atoms and void.” The fragment is quoted by Sextus Empiricus along with seven others selected to show that Democritus denies the veracity of sense perceptions: “He says that none of the phenomena appears according to truth (*kat’ alētheian*) but only according to opinion (*kata doxan*).”⁴⁶ Setting faulty human perception against atomic reality, these fragments seem to define the Democritean self by way of a Parmenidean antithesis between *doxa* and *alētheia*. But for Democritus the antithesis between *nomos* and *eteos* is not as clear-cut as it initially appears, for the senses that divide us from atomic reality also participate directly in it. Perception, as we saw with the *eidōla*, is a process of material transformation. As Theophrastus explains, there is no sweet or bitter, but these are merely the changes that different shapes and configurations of atoms produce on our sense organs.⁴⁷ So sense perceptions and atomic reality are not mutually exclusive alternatives, as B9/D14 might suggest. Sweet may be sweet by convention but it is also

46. Sext. Emp. *Math.* 7.135 = B9/R108. The fragments are B6–11/D14–21. Laks–Most give the whole passage of Sextus at R108; see the detailed analysis by Sedley (1992). Cf. Gal. *Exper. Med.* 15.75 = A125/D23a; Diog. Laert. 9.72 = B117/D24. The ancient testimonia are divided over whether Democritus was a Skeptic who rejected the evidence of the senses entirely or a subjectivist who accepted nothing but that evidence. See the helpful discussion of Taylor (1999b, 216–22) and judicious review of the testimonia by Lee (2005, 181–250). The extent and nature of Democritus’s skepticism is much debated; see further Bailey 1964, 177–85; Guthrie 1965, 454–65; Taylor 1967, 16–24; Sassi 1978, 207–13, 227–36; Barnes 1982, 559–64; McKim 1984; Furley 1987, 131–35, 1993; Sedley 1992; Salem 1996, 157–70, 2007; O’Keefe 1997; Ganson 1999; Morel 2000, 93–105; Curd 2001; Wismann 2010, 36–49, 67–91; and the provocative suggestion of Hacking (1983, 140–42) that Democritus was the first to differentiate between representation and reality, thus introducing reality as we know it.

47. Sweet is produced by round atoms of moderate size and bitter by small, curved ones: Theophr. *Sens.* 63–66 < A135/D64–65. Color too is produced by atoms of specific shapes (*Sens.* 73–78 < A135/D66), as is temperature (*Sens.* 63 < A135/D64). See further A49/D63, A120/D57, A129/D160. On Democritus’s theory of perception and cognition, see Von Fritz 1946, 24–30; Bicknell 1968; Baldes 1975; Burkert 1977; Couloubaritis 1980; Taylor 1999b, 208–11; Rudolph 2016, 49–52; and especially the detailed study of Sassi (1978).

sweet “in reality,” and to taste sweetness is to experience that atomic reality directly on the tongue: *nomos* is *eteos*.⁴⁸

In perceiving we are thus enacting the reality of atoms and void. This material continuity is suggested in the very fragments Sextus cites to illustrate the opposite. Right after fragment B9/D14 he quotes another passage that he claims shows Democritus condemning the senses: “In reality (*tōi men eonti*) we know nothing accurately (*atrekes*), but something that changes (*metapipton*) according to the disposition (*diathēkēn*) of the body and of what enters and repels” (*tōn epeisontōn kai tōn antistērizontōn*, B9a/D15). Like B9/D14, this fragment seems to set our unreliable sensory experience against a stable knowledge based on ontic (*tōi eonti*) reality. But that experience is characterized in the technical terminology of atomic motion.⁴⁹ To that extent it is, in fact, accurate (*atrekes*) even if we don’t recognize it. Another fragment Sextus quotes asserts that “in reality (*eteēi*) we know nothing about anything, but opinion (*doxis*) is a rhythmic afflux (*epirhusmiē*) for each person” (B7/D18). Again we seem to have a Parmenidean antithesis between atomic *alētheia* and erroneous human *doxis*. But the *epirhusmiē* that constitutes that *doxis* refers to atomic shape.⁵⁰ The polarity between atomic truth and human beliefs again breaks down: our senses are a direct experience of the very reality of which we are ignorant, the reality of atoms and void.

This means that the split these fragments describe is in fact all in our heads. That is, the rift lies not between us and atomic reality but within ourselves. As Karl Marx observed in his dissertation on Democritus and Epicurus, “Democritus makes sensuous reality into subjective semblance; but the antinomy, banned from the world of objects, now exists in his own self-consciousness, where the concept of the atom and sensuous perception face each other as enemies.”⁵¹ This “enmity” is staged as a psychic wrestling match in a passage quoted by Galen.

τοῦτο καὶ Δ. εἰδώς, ὅποτε τὰ φαινόμενα διέβαλε, ‘νόμωι χροῖη, νόμωι γλυκύ, νόμωι πικρόν, εἰπόν, ‘ἐτεῇ δ’ ἄτομα καὶ κενόν’, ἐποίησε τὰς αἰσθήσεις λεγούσας πρὸς τὴν διάνοιαν οὕτως· ‘τάλαινα φρήν, παρ’ ἡμέων λαβοῦσα τὰς πίστεις ἡμέας καταβάλλεις; πτώμα τοι τὸ κατάβλημα’ (*Med. Exper.* 15.7.5 Schöne = B125/D23a)

48. This is how I understand Aristotle’s report that because the atomists equate thought (*phronēsis*) with sense perception (*aisthēsis*) and attribute the latter to atomic alterations, “they say that that which appears with respect to sense perception is necessarily true” (*alēthes*, *Metaph.* 4.5 1009b12–17 = A112/R53). Cf. *Metaph.* 4.5 1010b1–4, *Gen. corr.* 1.2 315b9, *De an.* 1.2 404a27–31; and the nuanced discussion of Couloubaritsis (1980).

49. For *metapiptein* see A135§63/D64, B191/D226. *Antistērizein* is cognate with *stereos*, a common qualifier of the atom. If we read *diathigē* for *diathēkē* here (as Menzel proposed) there is further resonance with 67A6/D31 and A38/D32; *diathigē* or *diathēgē* is a technical term for the disposition of an atom in relation to others. I take *tōi eonti* as equivalent to *eteēi* and a reference to atomic reality: *to on* is another synonym for the atom.

50. Taylor 1999b, 11–12n4. “Rhythmic afflux” is Laks-Most’s translation. On *rhusmos*, cf. below, n. 88.

51. Marx (2006, 98), commenting on Democritus’s views on the relation between thought and reality.

Democritus knew this [the importance of evidence] and whenever he slandered appearances, saying “by convention color, by convention sweet, by convention bitter, but in reality atoms and void,” he made the sense perceptions reply to thought as follows: “Wretched mind (*phrēn*), you get your evidence from us and then you overthrow us? That overthrow is your downfall.”

In this vivid little drama, the external division between atomic reality and sense perception becomes an internal division between thought and sensation, but an illusory one, as the senses argue. It is a matter of false consciousness on the part of the *phrēn*, since as the psychological enactment of atomic dynamics, they are the mind’s direct conduit to reality. Indeed, they might have pushed their claim further, for thought too is an atomic process for Democritus.⁵² Thus “wretched mind” has no right to vaunt over the senses: both alike operate by means of changing configurations of atoms. Our problem, this fragment implies, is not that we cannot know the reality of atoms and void, since at the most basic level “to know” (to perceive, to think) simply *is* that reality. The problem is that we do not know that we know it. Our wretched minds fail to recognize the atomic nature of our psychic makeup, sensory and cognitive alike. In other words, it is not atoms and void we do not know; it is ourselves.

The *agōn* of B125/D23a projects the possibility that mind and senses will reconcile to form a harmonious psychic whole. But another fragment quoted by Sextus suggests that the split is irreparable and, as such, basic to our identity as human beings. “There are two forms of knowledge (*gnōmēs*), one legitimate (*gnēsīē*) and the other obscure (*skotiē*). And all these things belong to the obscure one: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch. The other is legitimate and separated from this one” (B11/D20). Here the *agōn* between intellection and sensation is staged not as a wrestling match but as an inheritance dispute. The adjective *gnēsios* connotes legitimate birth or lineage; in classical Athens it is the legal term for a legitimate heir. *Skotios* is used for literal darkness but also for clandestine unions and the offspring they produce.⁵³ Knowledge is split between the two. That split is not managed by a contentious distribution of psychic capacities within a subjective whole, as in Galen’s wrestling match. As subjects of bifurcated knowledge, we are intrinsically split. We are simultaneously legitimate heir and bastard, our filiation to truth fundamentally ambiguous.

The self that emerges from these fragments is divided by its non-knowledge of the cosmos and of itself. Further, if “man is a small universe” (*tōi anthrōpōi mikrōi kosmōi onti*), as B34/D225 has it, those two ignorances are one. Since our

52. As Aristotle complains, Arist. *De an.* 1.2 404a27 < A101/D133. Cf. Theophr. *Sens.* 58 < A135/D134: “It is clear that he attributes thinking to the mixture of the body, which is consistent with his making the soul a body.” See Taylor 1999b, 200–208. Galen’s internal wrestling match is repeated in a juridical idiom in the body’s prosecution of the soul for mistreatment, in a fragment quoted by Plutarch (*Libid. et Aegrit.* 2 = B159/D233a; cf. B159/D233b).

53. *Skotios* in this sense is poetic, however, not juridical (LSJ s.v.). For discussion of this fragment, see Sassi 1978, 213–21.

bodies, senses, and thoughts are atomic through and through, to know ourselves would be to know the nature of the universe and vice versa. But we are ignorant of both, an ignorance that defines us, as we read in another fragment quoted by Sextus: “It is necessary to recognize man [or for man to recognize] by this criterion, that he is separated from reality” (*gignōskein te khrē . . . anthrōpon tōide tōi kanoni, hoti eteēs apēllaktai*, B6/D17). To know man is to recognize his non-knowledge of atomic reality, even as that reality is the material basis of his knowledge. That recognition is self-recognition if we take *anthrōpon* as the subject rather than the object of the infinitive *gignōskein*.⁵⁴ The fragment thus functions as a form of the Delphic imperative *Gnōthi Seauton*, drawing out the maxim’s implicit split in the self as both subject and object of knowledge and supplementing it with the split in knowledge itself.

Self-knowledge as the recognition of our non-knowledge installs a negativity within the human subject at the heart of our self-relation. “Indeed, this *logos* too reveals that in reality we know nothing about anything/nothing (*eteēi ouden ismen peri oudenos*), but opinion (*doxis*) is a rhythmic afflux for each person” (B7/D18). The second *ouden* in this fragment is usually translated positively (“anything”), in accordance with the normal Greek rule of negation that a compound negative (*ouden*) following another negative confirms the negative force of the former. But the sophistication of Democritus’s play with negation encourages us to read the phrase more literally: “we know nothing about ‘nothing.’” Read this way, *ouden* names the ignorance that constitutes our self-knowledge. This negativity reiterates the logic of the *den*. Our thought and sense perception connect us to atomic reality, but the nature of that connection is negative, a minus sign: we do not know our own atomic nature and we do not know that we do not know it. That double negation does not produce a positive but at best an imperfect subtraction from nothing: *ouden*. *Ich* is *Nichts*.

Democritus does not try to fill in that hole of non-knowledge; instead, he establishes it as the basis of his ethical theory. This theory is set out in more than two hundred ethical maxims preserved in two late antique anthologies, one by Stobaeus and attributed to Democritus, the other an anonymous collection of “Sayings of Democrates,” presumably a corruption of “Democritus.” These fragments present special difficulties, not only of authorship (most are assumed to be inauthentic) but also of interpretation.⁵⁵ To put it bluntly, these maxims are exceptionally banal.

54. *Kanoni* could be taken with “recognize” (Diels-Kranz, Taylor) or “separated” (Luria, Laks-Most). In the latter construction it refers to man’s ignorance; in the former, to Democritus’s *logos* about it. A third translation would take the final clause in apposition to *kanoni*, making separation from reality the criterion for recognizing man. I keep all three possibilities in play. *Kanones* is the title of a Democritean treatise (B11/D6). Luria 2007, 986: *kanōn* is “il principio metodico fondamentale.”

55. The Democrates collection is generally considered less secure than the Stobaeus collection, but Laks-Most (vol. 7, 5) may be right to consider both as part of Democritus’s reception rather than his original text. Contra, Johnson 2020. My discussion rests heavily on B191/D226, one of the few

Their cheery prescriptions for contentment were clichéd already by Democritus's day. Temperance increases satisfaction (B211/D244); justice conduces to happiness (B174/D320); ill-gotten wealth is pernicious (B78/D261, B218/D263); it is better to speak the truth (B225/D347a). The eye glazes over.

Scholars have sought a connection between Democritus's atomic physics and his ethical theory. Gregory Vlastos argues that the well-being (*euestō*) that is the goal of Democritean ethics refers to a stable condition of atoms in the body and soul that can be regulated through education.⁵⁶ He homes in on fragment B33/D403: "Nature (*phusis*) and teaching (*didakhē*) are similar. For teaching changes a man's configuration (*metarthusmoi*) and, in changing his configuration, makes his nature (*phusiopoiei*)." *Metarthusmos* is Democritus's term for atomic reconfiguration, as Vlastos notes; thus the idea that we can rearrange our atomic natures through learning builds a tight "nest of interconnections between physics and ethics."⁵⁷ Those interconnections are traced in a rich and comprehensive study by Cynthia Farrar. Building on Vlastos's insight, Farrar proposes that the novelty of Democritean ethics lies in the autonomy it grants the individual subject, who can achieve the ideal moral-material balance through his own capacity for rational self-reflection.⁵⁸ The ethical fragments, as she reads them, are "injunctions to men to understand that they are causes, that their world is to a very large extent mind-dependent."⁵⁹ The sole source of his own well-being and master of his interactions with the world, the subject is characterized by both freedom and control; he is a positive law unto himself, as she says: "Man is literally *autonomos*."⁶⁰ For Farrar, the

fragments accepted as authentic. On the authenticity of the ethical fragments, see further Leszl 2007, 64–76. Democritus's originality as an ethical thinker is defended by Annas (2002) and Johnson (2020).

56. Vlastos 1945, 582–85, 1946. Also arguing for a connection between the ethics and physics: Natort 1893, 88–121; Sassi 1978, 236–40; Curd 2001; Johnson 2009. Arguing against: Bailey 1964, 186–89; Taylor 1967 (with partial reconsideration at 1999b, 32–34); Barnes 1982, 530–35; and Salem 1996, 325–31. Kahn (1985, 11) and Warren (2002b, 58–64, 71–72) remain agnostic, though the latter proposes an intriguing physical mechanism for interpersonal harm via the *eidōla* (2007b).

57. Vlastos 1946, 56. *Metarthusmos* and related terms are found at 67A6/D31, 67A28/D132, A33X/D2bX, A38/D32, B7/D18, B51, B8a/D2bV, B139/D38, B197/D297, B266/D363.

58. Farrar 1988, 192–264. Both Vlastos and Farrar presuppose the unique nature of the human mind as irreducible to its atomic makeup and capable of reflecting critically on it. See esp. Vlastos 1946, 57; Farrar 1988, 227–29, 244–48. Farrar's use of the masculine pronoun reflects that of Democritus. There is no theoretical reason why the atomic subject should be normatively male; nonetheless, for Democritus it is, implicitly and sometimes explicitly (*anēr*, B35/≠LM, B68/≠LM, B70/≠LM, B236/D296, B247/D354). See further his maxims on the place and virtue of women (B111/D391, B273–74/D328–29).

59. Farrar 1988, 231. Johnson (2020, 230–32) also emphasizes the importance of autonomy in Democritus's ethics.

60. Farrar 1988, 238. Farrar's autonomous subject more closely resembles the modern liberal subject than the corporate subject of classical Greece (on which see Anderson 2018, 193–207). Farrar recognizes the similarity (257–58) but does not explain how it complicates the critique of the liberal democratic self that frames her study (4–5). In modern Greek *άτομο* means "individual."

ethical subject is not only composed of atoms; whole, unitary, and self-contained, he is himself a psychic and social atom.

This vision of the subject as an atomic being is compelling, and it makes good sense of the maxims' obsessive injunction to *autarkeia* (self-sufficiency) and *metriotēs* (moderation) as the goals of ethical practice and the keys to living well. Human beings possess the source of their health and happiness, as well as their misfortune, within themselves (*en heautois*, B234/D240; cf. B146/D245, B149/D267). They do not need to rely on the unstable gifts of fortune because their nature is self-sufficient: *phusis de autarkēs* (B176/D252; cf. B246/D254, B209/D255). This autarky is achieved through "moderation (*metriotēti*) of pleasure and proportion (*summetriēi*) in life" and a reduction of the changes that disturb the soul (B191/D226; cf. B210/D277). Learning to be satisfied with what one has (*arkeesthai*, the verb from which *autarkeia* is derived) instead of grasping for what one doesn't have, being contented with what is possible rather than longing for more (*mēketi pleionōn epithumeonti*), the individual will achieve the psychic and physical homeostasis that constitutes well-being (*euestō*, B191/D226; cf. B3/D228, B211/D244, B231/D253, B233/D246, B286/D278).

The ethical fragments thus seem to subscribe to a familiar Greek normativity of regulated desires and moderate self-mastery. But what if we shift our view and imagine the Democritean subject not as an atom—an autonomous positive being—but as an avatar of the *den*? This perspective reveals something beyond this homeostatic principle, or rather within it, a pervasive negativity at work within Democritus's upbeat prescriptions that hollows out their contentment.⁶¹ *Euestō*, the cheerful self-sufficiency for which Democritean ethics aims, is achieved by setting one's sights on the ever-present prospect of lack. In the fragments' ubiquitous language of measure (*metriotēs*, *summetria*), ethical moderation should be calculated according to the yardstick of lack and need.⁶² Fragment B285/D256 is typical: "It is necessary to recognize (*gignōskein*) that human life is feeble and short and mixed together with many diseases and difficulties, so that one should concern oneself with moderate (*metriēs*) possessions, and misery should be measured (*metrētai*) based on necessities." As in B6/D17, to recognize (*gignōskein*) an individual is to acknowledge a definitional negativity, but here that negativity grounds a positive regimen of the self: lack is the *kanōn* by which an ethical life is measured. Self-sufficiency accordingly means not only being satisfied with what little you

61. In labeling this principle homeostatic I am alluding to Freud's (1955) pleasure principle. Derrida (1987) shows how the death drive operates within the pleasure principle and "hollows it out" (304) from within.

62. Morel 2000, 59: "Pour Démocrite, la téléologie morale est d'abord une téléologie négative." Forms of *metrios* occur at B70/≠LM, B233/D246, B285/D256, B286/D278, A167/D231. We also might note the driving force of want and lack in Democritus's anthropology: Diod. Sic. 1.8.5–6, 1.8.9 (< B5/D202): "On the whole need (*khreian*) itself was men's teacher in all things" (1.8.9). Cole (1990) reconstructs Democritus's anthropology.

have but scaling back your desires so that little becomes enough: “If you do not desire many things, few will seem many to you, for a small appetite makes poverty equal to wealth” (B284/D259). Through one’s ethical efforts, a little becomes equal to a lot: *autarkeia* is learning to be satisfied with a loaf of barley bread and a bed of straw (B246/D254). Nothing makes something look like everything.

Hence the constant reminder to consider the suffering of others—not so as to alleviate it, but so as to use it as a benchmark against which to measure one’s own relative comfort. Fragment B191/D226, by far the longest of the ethical fragments and widely viewed as authentic, is often cited as evidence for an ethics of atomic autarky. It opens: “Contentment (*euthumiē*) comes from moderation (*metriotēti*) of pleasure and proportion (*summetriēi*) in life.” The fragment teaches a lesson in achieving this psychic measure through the reduction of stimulus (*kinēsis*) and limitation of desire (*epithumia*).⁶³ “Look at the lives of the miserable, reflecting on their great suffering in order that what is present and available to you (*ta pareonta soi kai huparkhonta*) will seem great and enviable, and you will no longer suffer in your soul because you desire more (*pleionōn epithumeonti*).” The *metriotēs* that brings happiness is here defined as a median between two lacks: desire for what one doesn’t have and the imagined loss of what one does. The former is insatiable—it produces only greater desire, suffering, and ultimately crime—and should be remembered only in order to be forgotten: “Have little memory of what you envy and admire and do not dwell on them in your thoughts.” Forget desire. Focus your attention not on your own lack but on others’: “Compare your life to that of those who are worse off and consider yourself blessed thinking about what they suffer and how much better you are faring and living than they.” By gazing at those who lack what we have, we will come to appreciate what is present for us (*tois pareousin, ta pareonta*) through visualizing its absence. The ethical subject is thus formed between two nothings: the wealth one will never obtain and should not even think about and the poverty one must hold always before one’s eyes.

In this fragment *euthumia* is achieved through an imaginative subtraction that reiterates the logic of the *den*. You think what you have is nothing; but someone else has less than that: look to that less than nothing and your nothing will look like something. Contentment with what is present (*tois pareousin arkeesthai*) is the elimination of desire for what is absent: *mēden* (cf. B231/D253). A similar psychic arithmetic is at work throughout the ethical fragments. Subtraction becomes a form of addition: “If you do not desire many things, few will seem many to you, for a small appetite makes poverty equal (*isostheneia*) to wealth” (B284/D259); “the most infrequent pleasures please the most” (*malista*, B232/D247); and temperance “makes pleasure even greater” (*epimeizona*, B211/D244). Less is always

63. For good discussion of B191/D226 see Warren 2002b, 44–64. Kahn (1985, 17–19) stresses desire as lack in Democritus. On the ethical dangers posed by desire for Democritus, see Holmes 2010, 216–22.

more. Conversely, addition produces loss: “If someone exceeds the right measure (*huperballoi to metrion*) the most pleasurable things (*epiterpestatā*) become most unpleasurable” (*aterpestatā*, B233/D246); “desire for more (*toū pleonos epithumiē*) destroys what is present” (B224/D251). Through a kind of ethical repetition compulsion, excess (*ta pleona, ta meizona, ta hyperballonta*)—desire as the desire for more (*epi-thumia*)—is conjured over and over again in order to be nullified.⁶⁴ In this way, Democritus reworks the Delphic maxim “Nothing in Excess” (*Mēden Agan*) such that excess yields nothing and nothing is the measure of *metriotēs*.⁶⁵

Subtracting lack on both sides—the excess one wants and the destitution one fears—the ethical subject is less than nothing. That subject is structured not like an autonomous atom but like the *den*. An ethics of atomic autarky (such as Farrar proposes) circles around a real void, the void of the Real. Thus we read in B176/D252: “The gift of *tukhē* is great but insecure, but nature is *autarkēs*; therefore by means of the lesser but secure, it conquers the greater thing that belongs to hope [or the thing greater than hope]” (*tukhē megalodōros, all’ abebaios, phusis de autarkēs; dioper nikāi tōi hēssoni kai bebaiōi to meizon tēs elpidos*). Man’s *autarkēs phusis* triumphs over (*nikāi*) the extravagant gift of *tukhē*. The logic of security through diminution (*hēssoni kai bebaiōi*) that enables its victory is the subtractive logic of Democritean well-being. *Tukhē* menaces this homeostatic logic with its simultaneous threat of annihilation (*abebaios*) and its hope for something more than satisfaction and more even than hope—not a stable, present contentment, but an exorbitant, inaccessible *jouissance*.⁶⁶ The object of that hope-beyond-hope is what Lacan calls the *objet a* and what Democritus labels the *den*, a something-that-is-nothing in excess of desire and its satisfaction, the fantasy that fills a subjective void that can never be filled. The autarkic subject, formed through the prohibited longing for this impossible object, carries its negated negativity in its very *phusis*.

Within this ethics of the *den*, the indifference principle of the physics is converted into a positive principle of ethical preference. Many of the ethical fragments advocate an ethical choice that could be expressed in the formula of indifference, *mē mallon ē*: desire wealth no more than poverty (B210/D277, B219/D257,

64. “Greater appetites produce greater needs” (B219/D257). A contented person should not “choose what is beyond (*huper*) his capability and nature” nor “try to grasp more (*pleō*) than what is possible” (B3/D228). Those who exceed proper measure (*hyperbeblēkotes ton kairon*) get only brief satisfaction and greater need (B235/D248). B191/D226 opens with the repudiation of both lack (*ta elleiponta*) and excess (*hyperballonta*). That fragment is structured by the move from desire (*epithumia*) via contemplation (*enthumia*) to contentment (*euthumia*), but the drive for more insists in the fragment’s repetition of *epi-* (more, addition).

65. Warren (2002b, 54) relates B235/D248 to the Delphic maxim in a more straightforward manner: “Excess leads to painful after-effects.” Likewise, Johnson 2020, 226.

66. Zupančič 2000, 242: *jouissance* is neither the satisfaction of lack nor something added to it; “instead, it is that which *subtracts itself from the lack*” (original emphasis). For Lacan (1977, 53–64), *tukhē* names the missed encounter with the Real that disrupts the pleasure principle. His discussion of *tukhē* ends with a reference to Democritus’s *den*.

B286/D278); care for body no more than for soul (B187/D236); cherish what you want no more than what you have (B191/D226, B231/D253); feel shame before others no more than before yourself (B244/D336, B264/D386).⁶⁷ This ethical indifference turns contentment into a condition of negative affect: Diogenes Laertius explains *euthumiē* as “not the same as pleasure . . . but the state in which the soul abides calmly and steadily, disturbed by no fear or superstition or any other affection” (Diog. Laert. 9.45 < A1/D229). This psychic indifference culminates in an indifference to life itself: value your life no more than death.⁶⁸ Life is to be enjoyed (B200/D283, B201/D284), but not out of a fearful preference to death: “Thoughtless people live as if hating to live through fear of Hades” (B199/D286, cf. B205/D285). The preference of life to death recoils on itself: to fear death is to pursue it (B203/D288). To truly live—to live well and wisely—is to embrace death no less than life, one’s being no more than one’s nonbeing.

In these two hundred trite maxims, Democritus erects a positive ethics of temperance, contentment, and cheerfulness upon the Real of negativity within being, lending a decidedly different tenor to the laugh of this notorious “laughing philosopher.”⁶⁹ This unspeakable Real takes the form of a psychic void within the self: the lack that structures, even as it annuls, the subject’s autarkic contentment, hollowing out its temperate pleasures with an inaccessible hope-beyond-hope; the internal schism that constitutes ethical subjects even as it alienates them from both reality and themselves, preventing them from ever fully cohering into autonomous, “atomic” individuals. Nonbeing casts a shadow over Democritus’s ethical subject, but it also gives a different shade to his entire ethical discourse, “for *logos* is a shadow of *ergon*, according to Democritus” (B145/D338). This final maxim encapsulates the parallax appearance of the *den* within the text of Democritean ethics. Read from one perspective it is a hackneyed (and hence self-confirming) adage about the primacy of deeds over words. Viewed from another, it adumbrates without being able to elucidate the Thing (*ergon*) obscured by *logos*, the very matter of the Real of which Democritus’s cheery precepts are but the shadow.⁷⁰

67. Accordingly, happiness is comparative: B191/D226 begins by promising contentment (*euthumiē*) but in the end delivers only relative contentment (“you will live more contentedly,” *euthumoteron*).

68. On the indifference to death in Democritean (and Epicurean) atomism, see Warren 2002a.

69. This moniker is often assumed to derive from Democritus’s emphasis on cheerfulness (e.g. Berryman 2023), but the ancient biographical tradition associates it rather with madness: the testimonia are gathered by Laks-Most (P46–48). See further the discussion of Luria (2007, 932–36), who believes the characterization reflects Democritus’s mockery of fools and their empty hopes.

70. That is, *das Ding* or *objet a*, material remnant of the Real within the symbolic. Lacan defines ethics as the subject’s assumption of responsibility for his or her relation to the Real, the commitment to an impossible truth that, in its impossibility, orients the subject’s fantasy, desire, and actions (1992, 11, 20, 76; cf. Župančič 2000, esp. 234–45).