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**Manfred Geier**  
**What Makes Intelligent People Laugh**

**Translated by Michael Ritterson**

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**Brief Prelude, or: “Philosophy is when people laugh.”**

*It is professed  
that thinking is superior  
to irony and humor, and this is professed by  
a thinker utterly lacking any sense of  
the comic. How comic.<sup>1</sup>*

SÖREN KIERKEGAARD, February 27, 1846

It all began in The Hague. Seeking shelter from increasingly heavy rain showers, I took refuge in the Mauritshuis, a building of whose significance I was completely unaware at the time. Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen had built it in the neo-classical style in 1634–44, so as to have a suitable residence in The Hague after his return as Governor-General of Dutch Brazil. Since 1822 it has been a museum housing the Royal Gallery of the House of Orange — not a particularly large collection, but a wealth of masterpieces. There you can see the renowned works of the “Golden Age” of Dutch and Flemish painting, pictures by Jan Brueghel the Elder, Hans Holbein the Younger, Peter Paul Rubens, and Frans Hals. There hangs Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lecture of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632), that somber painting of a public autopsy in which the doctor dissects the left arm of the naked cadaver, exposing the muscles and sinews. And there too you can admire the *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, that enigmatic creation by Jan Vermeer.

But all of those paled alongside a picture that instantly drew me under its spell. It shows a young man bent over a globe and laughing. With a slightly obscene gesture of the extended index and little fingers, he appears to be cuckolding the earth. His laughter is bright, happy, almost jubilant, but it also has a mocking character. The world is an object of ridicule, roguish laughter with a slightly diabolical expression.

I thought I detected in this laughter something of that earthy medieval and Renaissance culture of ridicule that found raucous expression at carnival time and All Fools’ Day, turning social values and hierarchies on their head.<sup>2</sup> But it went further than that. It seemed to be a philosophical laughter, not arising from a particular situation or aimed at some particular object. It was directed at the entire world, in any age. It was a universal laughter, portrayed in a figure whose brightly mocking expression infected the beholder. The longer I looked at it, the less I could refrain from laughing myself.

In the museum shop of the Mauritshuis I bought myself a reproduction of this laughing youth, but it was only years later that I took a greater interest in the artist and his model. The painting, which measures 84.5 x 73 cm, bears the monogram “JoM,” and number 705 in the catalogue indicates that the artist’s name is Johannes Moreelse. The search for him was more difficult than I had expected. In the pertinent multi-volume encyclopedias of art history he was not to be found, and even an extended Google search on the Internet produced no clear information. Only Paulus Moreelse kept turning up, a Utrecht painter (1571–1638); and the matter was not made simpler by the fact that these data often appeared in captions to reproductions of the laughing philosopher.<sup>3</sup> Could it be that the artist “JoM” got his own first name wrong?

But there was a Johannes who eventually made himself known as the son of Paulus, born in Utrecht sometime after 1602 and died in 1634, before his father, in whose shadow he stands to this day. He can be found by way of *Heraclitus*, a painting of a sorrowing old man bending grief-stricken over the globe with furrowed brow and hands clenched together. For this Greek philosopher, the world seemed to be a vale of tears where there could be only weeping.

Johannes Moreelse painted his laughing *Democritus* as a companion piece to the grieving *Heraclitus*. For in the guise of the youthful Renaissance figure and his manifest pleasure was none other than the old scholar Democritus, known not only as a *philosophos*, or lover of wisdom, but also as a *philo-gelos*, a friend of laughter and humor. The patron of his thought was the divine Gelos — laughter at the folly of the human race. For him, human nature was not merely distinguished by its ability to laugh. It was also condemned to ridiculousness. And only this interplay can shed light on the strange charm of the laughing *Democritus*, whose laughter is at once lighthearted and scornfully superior.

Just as Johannes Moreelse was overshadowed by his father, so too Democritus stood in the shadow of an oversized figure. At least that is how the history of philosophy portrays them, and that is what prompted Friedrich Nietzsche’s indignant reaction. For while Democritus had set western philosophy well on the path to “render a proper assessment” of human existence, it never reached its goal, “thanks to Socrates”<sup>4</sup> and his pupil, Plato. It was they who introduced moral solemnity and epistemological rigor and

thus banished laughter from philosophy. Philosophers do not laugh, at least not in the tradition founded on Plato's works.

Democritus came from Abdera, a Greek town on the northern Aegean coast. It was the Thracians' country, and perhaps they were the ones who originated that laughter so rarely found in philosophy — or even *because of* philosophy. For a Thracian servant girl's laughter has become proverbial: She laughed at wise Thales of Milet when he fell down a well gazing at the starry heavens above rather than on the ground in front of him. Plato described this scene, this meeting of the solemn proto-philosopher and the first Thracian comedienne, who is said to have been "witty" and "attractive."<sup>5</sup> But he censured her mocking laughter, claiming that it could only be a sign of her stupidity. Thus the Platonic anecdote became the prime example of uneducated dull-wittedness as opposed to philosophy.

"Philosophy is when people laugh. And people laugh for want of understanding."<sup>6</sup> Thus Hans Blumenberg summed up this long history which began with Plato's rejection of laughter at the stumbling philosopher and which continues to the present day. After all, only stupid persons can laugh at philosophy and its specialized practitioners.

Then does laughter have no place in philosophy? Are there no intelligent people with a taste for philosophy but who will not be denied their right to laugh? Of course there are, but they must be sought out, and the search sometimes takes us into the undercurrents of the history of philosophy. For alongside somber Plato and his countless successors in the field of academic philosophy, there is also laughing Democritus, who led off a tradition and a succession of his own. In this book we shall trace that tradition over more than two thousand years, from Democritus and Diogenes to Kant and Kierkegaard, all the way to Karl Valentin, who elevated philosophical amazement over language to a comic level where we can know the pure joy of laughter.

But the Thracian servant girl has attracted her devotees, too. In her laughter they discovered an intelligence of which "serious" philosophers have no idea. It is the liberating laughter of a woman who in one brief moment sees through the fundamental lie of European philosophy: that the love of wisdom comes at the price of our detachment from the real world. "Even though the Thracian girl is a slave, in this instance she does not represent the suffering endured or the silent obedience practiced by an oppressed

woman; rather, the character stands for an outburst of laughter that delivers terse, sharp-edged words of wisdom: The things of the world remain hidden from the philosophy that began its business of unreality with Thales.’<sup>7</sup>

One of the loveliest things of the world, from the perspective of practical living, is human laughter. That and the reasons behind it is the subject of this *Concise Philosophy of Humor* — in both senses of that grammatical possessive: The object is to clarify, in philosophical terms, why and about what people laugh. But it is also to illustrate that there were laughing philosophers, too, and that in their lives and works an important role is played by humor, that “rare and delectable gift”<sup>8</sup> whose source was discovered by Sigmund Freud. It goes without saying that my sympathies lie with the latter group.

Hamburg, St. Pauli, November 11, 2005

pp. 59 – 67 (extract from chapter 2: The Tale of the Laughing Philosopher):

Two theories of *Pseudo-Hippocrates* subsequently met with great approval: that of the healing power of laughter, and the wise Abderite’s philosophy of laughter. The fictitious *Epistles* of Hippocrates,<sup>46</sup> Part II, tell of a strange journey the physician made to Abdera, home of the Sophist Protagoras and the philosopher Democritus. In fact, this town must have been familiar to Hippocrates, for it was there that he diagnosed frequently occurring illnesses brought on by the poor climate and causing mental derangement. Even in his day, the inhabitants of Abdera, once a powerful trading city, struggled with their bad reputation for being intellectually somewhat limited. “Abderite” had already become a proverbial name and had found its way into the ancient compendium of jokes, *Philogelos* (*The Friend of Laughter*), which contained eighteen jokes about these dull-witted citizens. Here are three:

- The town of Abdera was divided into two parts, an eastern and a western half. When enemies suddenly attacked and all the citizens began to panic, the residents of the eastern part said to each other, “We have nothing to fear — the enemy is coming in through the west gate!”

- An Abderite was going to hang himself, but the rope broke and he fell to the ground, striking his head. He went to the doctor, got a bandage, and placed it on the wound. Then he went back and hanged himself.
- An Abderite had heard it said that certain types of onions would “produce wind.” One time on a sea voyage his ship was becalmed, so he hoisted up a sackful over the rear deck.<sup>47</sup>

The author of the pseudo-Hippocratic *Epistles*, intrigued by Abdera’s rather unflattering reputation, came up with the following plot for a sequel: The Abderites appealed to Hippocrates, the renowned physician from the island of Kos, seeking help for their fellow citizen Democritus, whose sheer wisdom had made him gravely ill. “Forgetting everything and himself most of all, he sits awake night and day, laughing at everything, important and insignificant things alike, considers them meaningless, and passes all his time in this way.” (31) He appeared to be suffering from a detached mental condition that could threaten the health of the Abderites themselves. Laughter was contagious, after all. They were at their wits’ end and feared they could go mad. Hippocrates consented to their plea and promised to help. He was already disturbed to hear that the famous naturalist and keen observer of humankind might be mentally deranged, but it caused him great concern that Democritus was constantly laughing. “It is certainly not a good sign that he laughs about everything; and if excessive laughter is bad by itself, it will be far worse if it spreads to everyone.” (38) So he resolved to see what he could do. The meeting of the physician and the philosopher is a memorable one. At the end of the story, the seemingly ailing philosopher proves to be wise and experienced, if perhaps a bit “overly rational.” (43) The Abderites, on the other hand, are exposed as foolish people and are prescribed a generous dose of hellebore, the root extract of *radix hellebori albi*, which was prized by the Hippocratic School as an effective purgative for insanity and whose known risks and side effects are expertly described in the twenty-first *Epistle*.

The meeting of physician and philosopher was depicted in the seventeenth *Epistle*, a document since consigned to the realm of fiction, its philosophical content rejected. It had represented an exchange of roles: The physician diagnosed the philosopher and endorsed his wisdom as the best therapy; and the philosopher analyzed



human folly and performed examinations whose findings took their place in medical and pharmaceutical research.

In this thorough interlacing of the roles, laughter played a central part, and this is the timeless lesson of the wise man of Abdera. It is the healing laughter of a philosopher-physician directed at philosophical solemnity, including that of its chief proponent. Not the weeping Heraclitus but humorless Plato was Democritus's real adversary, even if his name did not appear in the following story.

When several Abderites led Hippocrates to where Democritus was staying, on the other side of a hill a little way outside the city, he found the learned man intently occupied with his research. He was sitting under a plane tree, glancing from time to time at a book, pausing to think and make notes. Before him lay several slaughtered animals, whose internal structures and physiology he kept examining attentively. This odd behavior only confirmed the Abderites' prejudice: "You see now, Hippocrates, how Democritus is living, and that his mind is disturbed and he knows not neither what he is doing nor what he intends." (44) When Democritus heard this he smiled and shook his head. These Abderites! They just didn't know what study and research was. The unknown fellow just now approaching, on the other hand, looked to be an intelligent man. Democritus greeted him as "stranger," but once he had learned his name the "stranger" became "friend." There seemed to be a kind of cosmopolitan bond between the two scholars, and each quickly won the other's respect. "What desire has brought you here, friend?" (45) Hippocrates did not state the real reason so as not to invalidate his medical diagnosis. He said he had simply come "to meet with a wise man." (45)

To start off their conversation, the visitor asked what he was busy doing just now and Democritus told him he meant to investigate the physiological causes of mental disturbance. He said he was working on his book, *Peri manies*, and that was why he had dissected the animals, because he suspected that bile was most likely to play an important part in the origins of insanity. The physician considered this etiology an eminently reasonable hypothesis and praised his work. Democritus must truly be a happy man, he said, "Because you enjoy such leisure. It is not granted to us because farming, children, money, illness, servants, marrying, and the like leave us insufficient time." (46) Democritus had to laugh over this peculiar commendation, though his laughter sounded a

bit strained at first. But why was he laughing at all, apparently without good reason and so immoderately? Challenging him, Hippocrates added: “I should like to know the reason for your malady, what laughter this is which either I or my words have provoked, so that I may learn and remove the cause or that you, if you cannot answer, give up inappropriate laughing.” (47)

*Illustration:*

*Jacob Backer (1608–1651) Democritus and Hippocrates*

*c. 1630*

*Oil on canvas, 94 x 64 cm*

*Dr. Alfred Bader Collection, Milwaukee*

Democritus accepted the challenge, and so there ensued a lengthy yet very entertaining dialogue in which the philosopher not only justified his laughter as an individual trait of character, but also defended it as a fitting response to life. With sharp clarity he pointed out to his guest the crises in which most people are involved and from which they cannot escape by themselves.

In his view, the ecological crisis resulted from the boundless disregard with which people devastated the earth, especially in their search for silver and gold. “They cut open the veins of the earth, piling up heaps of her nurturing soil to extract the gold. But this same earth, a source of wonder for them, they trample underfoot. How ridiculous: They are hopelessly in love with the unyielding, hidden earth while they mistreat the visible one before their eyes!” (48)

The economic crisis had its source in avarice, a craving for more and more. It could not be controlled by the sense of sufficiency that we can observe in supposedly “irrational animals” (52), which stop feeding when their needs are satisfied. “What bull ever satisfied its hunger with greed? What panther ever reached the point of insatiability? The wild boar’s thirst is no greater than the drink of water it demands; the wolf stops eating when it has consumed the quantity it needs from the food it gets.” (52) But humankind was pursuing ever more money and possessions, and from that arose a dynamics of economy that was diminishing the people more and more. They were

laboring under the yoke of money and were caught in a process they could no longer control. “They mark off the boundaries of a broad plot of ground and designate it their property, desiring to be the unlimited masters of wide expanses, yet they are not masters of themselves.” (48)

But worst of all was the intellectual crisis, the fact that people no longer knew themselves. They did not know what they were doing or what they wanted. They fought over their possessions, none of which they could take with them when they died. They strove greedily for what they could not attain, yet were not happy about what they had. They revered lifeless statues and prayed to mute images but hated their neighbors who were capable of speech. They despised life but wanted to live for fear of death, or they wished for long life, only to complain bitterly once they had grown old. “They twist everything to accord with their own cravings.” (49) “No matter in what situation, they do not hold to their opinions.” (51) Without sense or comprehension, with no plan, they were drifting through life, lurching first one way then another, “mentally deficient, arrogant, and — with their illogical way of thinking — slow to comprehend their own dissolute life.” (50) The ability to understand the world and to know oneself well was madness in their view, while they believed their own stupidity to be absolutely normal.

But all this foolishness caused Democritus to laugh, not to cry. He considered his laughter appropriate as the better means to avoid plunging into despair, but also to make the Abderites aware of their own ludicrous lack of good sense. “My laughter condemns their lack of any plan, oblivious as they are.” (51) He did not entertain great hopes of being able to enlighten his fellow citizens about themselves and their doings. He had no illusions, but with his laughter he also showed that he was not prepared to sacrifice the human right of the joy of living.

Something of this wise serenity seemed to infect the physician who had been so earnest at the start. “With the greatest pleasure” he announced the results of his examination to the Abderites who were waiting apprehensively for him on the hill. “You men, I thank you very much for the invitation to visit you here. For I have met Democritus, the wisest of men, who alone is most capable of teaching people good sense.” (55)

The record does not show whether Hippocrates incorporated the laughter of Democritus into his stock of medicines and therapeutic procedures. More likely he continued to rely on hellebore. But there was probably an amused thought in the back of his mind when he prescribed it, too. For ever since Hippocrates, the medicinal herb hellebore, together with laughter, was considered the most effective antidote for melancholy. The two have similar effects. Hellebore induces uncontrolled sneezing and spasms in the body, by means of which the captive stiffness of melancholy can be released. But this also occurs with hearty laughter, which cannot be suppressed because its spasms so convulse the body that the person trembles uncontrollably. Thus it was only logical that the meeting of the two scholars should end with the Hippocratic promise: “Coincidence having brought us together, I urge you to write to us often with report of your scholarly work. I for my part am sending you a paper on the applications of hellebore. Farewell!” (67)

## Notes:

### Brief Prelude

1. Sören Kierkegaard, *Abschließende unwissenschaftliche Nachschrift, Zweiter Teil, Gesammelte Werke* (Jena, 1910) vol. 7, p. 3.
2. Cf. Michael Bachtin [Mikhail Bakhtin], *Rabelais und seine Welt: Volkskultur als Gegenkultur* (Frankfurt a.M., 1995).
3. Cf. Thomas Rütten, *Demokrit: Lachender Philosoph und sanguinischer Melancholiker* (Leiden, New York, Copenhagen, Cologne, 1992) Illustrations.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke, III*, ed. Karl Schlechta (Frankfurt a.M., Berlin, Vienna, 1972) p. 1047.
5. Plato, *Theaitetos*, 174 a, b. “Witzig” and “hübsch” describe the Thracian servant girl in the Martin Heidegger translation, *Die Frage nach dem Ding* (Tübingen, 1962) p. 2.
6. Hans Blumenberg, *Das Lachen der Thrakerin* (Frankfurt a.M., 1987) p. 149. Cf. H. Blumenberg, “Der Sturz des Protophilosophen: Zur Komik der reinen Theorie,” *Das Komische* (Poetik und Hermeneutik 7), ed. Wolfgang Preisendanz and Rainer Warning (Munich, 1976) pp. 11–64.

7. Adriana Cavarero, *Platons Töchter: Frauengestalten der antiken Philosophie* (Hamburg, 1997) p. 86.

8. Sigmund Freud, "Der Humor," *Gesammelte Werke, XIV*, pp. 382–89; 389.

### **Extract from Chapter 2**

46. *Die Werke des Hippokrates / Corpus Hippocraticum*, Supplement: Letters of Hippocrates (Stuttgart, 1938).

47. *Philogelos: Der Lachfreund*, Greek and German with introductions and commentary, ed. Andreas Thierfelder (Munich, 1968). Jokes quoted are nos. 110, 112, and 120.