

# Humor as Philosophical Subversion, Especially in the Skeptics

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## 1. Introduction

Aristotle is not exactly a comedian. He wrote about comedy in the lost second book of the *Poetics*, and, as discussed in another paper in this volume, he wrote about wittiness (εὐτραπεία) in his ethical works. But he does not exhibit much of either. What humor there is in Aristotle seems to fall into two main varieties. First, there is word-play that engages the reader's attention, which can perhaps be seen as an instance of a technique he describes in *Rhetoric* 3.10, that of saying “smart things and things that create a good impression” (τὰ ἀστεῖα καὶ τὰ εὐδοκιμοῦντα, 1410b6).<sup>1</sup> Early in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he says that in endeavoring to determine the principles (ἀρχαί) of ethics, we should begin (ἀρκτέον) with things known to us (1095b2-4). A little later, introducing the idea of the function (ἔργον) of a human being, he asks whether we can seriously consider that a human being as such (as opposed to people in various occupations) is ἀργόν (1097b28-30) – which is intentionally ambiguous between “without function” and “lazy.” In *De Caelo*, introducing the topic of minimal magnitudes, he says that positing such a minimal magnitude (τοῦλάχιστον) will make the biggest difference (τὰ μέγιστα) in mathematics (271b10-11). And in *De Interpretatione*, discussing names, he says that “non-human

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own. In the case of Timon, I sometimes draw on translations in Bett 2000 and Bett 2015. In the case of Sextus I generally draw on Bett 1997, Bett 2005, and Bett 2012.

being” (οὐκ ἄνθρωπος) is not a name, and adds that this category has no name (16a29-31).<sup>2</sup>

The other type of humor in Aristotle is critical; to put it bluntly, someone or something is made fun of. There is some overlap with the previous category in that word-play is sometimes the method. Thus, in his discussion in book 1 of *De anima* of the view that the soul is a ἁρμονία, Aristotle comments that it is difficult to “harmonize” (ἐφαρμόζειν) the data with this theory, and that it is “more harmonious” (ἀρμόζει δὲ μᾶλλον) to conceive of health, and bodily ἀρεταί in general, as harmonies than to regard the soul in this way (408a1-4). And in book 4 of the *Physics*, considering the idea of void (κενόν), he remarks that this idea is “vacuous” or “empty” (κενόν, 216a26-7). But on other occasions he drops the decorous punning and goes after an opponent more actively, and here things get more lively. A good example is in *Metaphysics* Γ, where Aristotle discusses those who claim to deny the Law of Non-Contradiction. He catalogs at considerable length the absurdities that this leads to, and in a number of places it seems pretty clear that he is making fun of the holders (or purported holders) of the view; this is perhaps most obvious in the places where he considers what the *actions* of someone who actually believed it would be like. If you really thought that nothing was of any particular character rather than its opposite, there would be no basis for choosing any one course of action over any other; you might as well walk into a well or chasm, instead of staying on level ground – which is what you obviously would do in real life (1008b15-16).<sup>3</sup> Another case appears in his survey of previous philosophers’ views on causes in the first book of the *Metaphysics*, where he says that anyone who posited νοῦς, “mind,” as a cause in

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<sup>2</sup> For drawing my attention to these examples and connecting them with the *Rhetoric* passage, I am indebted to Marko Malink.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. 1010b10-11.

nature, over and above the purely material causes recognized by the early physicists, “came across as a sober person in comparison with the random speakers [εἰκῆ ἰλέγοντας] who came before” (984b17-18).

To my mind, these cases of overt ridicule are the most appealing examples of humor in Aristotle. In any case, they point to one major function of humor in philosophy: drawing attention to where one might go wrong. This need not involve an attack on someone else’s thinking, though it very often will; it could be used to avoid the pitfalls of a view that might seem initially attractive. Sometimes it can prepare the ground for a positive treatment of the topic in question, but this is by no means always so. In what follows, I am going to explore a number of the ways in which this critical variety of humor is employed in the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition. Perhaps not surprisingly, this kind of humor is especially easy to find among the people who see something suspect in the whole enterprise of philosophy itself – or at least of philosophy as normally understood, whatever that might amount to. For this reason I will be spending most of my time on Sceptics.<sup>4</sup> But as we have already seen, it is not only Sceptics who can usefully employ such humor, and so the discussion will not be entirely restricted to them; in the final section I will illustrate its use by several other non-Sceptics (or Dogmatists, in the Sceptics’ own terminology). My sense is that this kind of humor is the dominant one in philosophy; but it would be very hard to demonstrate that, and I will not attempt to do

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<sup>4</sup> The Cynics also fit the description in the previous sentence. But philosophical humor attributed to the Cynics (of which there is plenty) is a large subject in its own right, and I have more than enough material for a single paper without them; on the Cynics, see the paper by Inger Kuin in this volume.

so. It will be sufficient for my purposes to highlight its presence across numerous different periods and schools.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Timon of Phlius

I began with Aristotle in part because he is a, perhaps the, paradigmatic philosopher, and will therefore serve as a useful foil for the more subversive figures with whom I will be largely concerned. As an example of humor in philosophy that is virtually a polar opposite of Aristotle, one might point to Timon of Phlius, Pyrrho's disciple. In contrasting the two, I do not mean to deny that Timon has a positive philosophical goal; it is to present Pyrrho's attitudes and demeanor as the ideal for humans to strive for. But his pursuit of that goal involves none of the elaborate laying out of arguments, consideration of objections and construction of theories that mark a philosopher such as Aristotle – and to which the humor that we find in Aristotle's writings is decidedly subordinate. All of that is, from Timon's perspective, pointless, indeed counter-productive. We actually have a line of Timon bemoaning "Aristotle's painful pointlessness" – or perhaps "randomness" would be better (DL 5.11); in any case the Greek word, εἰκαιοσύνη, is unparalleled, an abstract noun coined apparently for the express purpose of making a jab at Aristotle. As Dee Clayman points out in her study of Timon,<sup>6</sup> there is an exquisite twist here in that pointless or random discourse is precisely what Aristotle would have prided himself on getting beyond; as we saw earlier, Aristotle himself makes fun of "random speakers"

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<sup>5</sup> I will not have anything to say about the image of Democritus as the laughing philosopher (e.g., Seneca, *De ira* 2.10.5). Apart from its dubious historicity, it is not really a case of humor in philosophy; Democritus' laughter is supposed to have been prompted by, or directed towards, everyday human follies, and it is never connected in any significant way with his philosophical outlook. Nonetheless, it is an instance of laughter in a critical spirit – or "laughing at" – and to that extent conforms to the model I am interested in. Another case of critical humor that is surely relevant to my topic, but outside the usual confines of philosophy, is the philosophical comedy of Lucian; on this, see again the paper by Inger Kuin in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> Clayman 2009: 126, n.35. Other important works on Timon are Long 1978 and di Marco 1989.

among his predecessors. But εἰκαιοσύνη is also a characteristic Timon attributes to all those who fail to follow Pyrrho's path. We have a four-line fragment contrasting Pyrrho with these others, quoted by the Peripatetic Aristocles in his critical discussion of Pyrrhonism (preserved verbatim in Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.18.19):

But such he was – I saw him, the man without vanity and unbroken  
 By all the things [or perhaps, “all the people”] by which [or, “whom”] both the  
     unknown and the celebrated among mortals are overpowered,  
 Empty hosts of people, weighed down on this side and that  
 By the sufferings of opinion and pointless [εἰκαίης] laying-down-of-the-law.<sup>7</sup>

The “opinion” and “laying-down-of-the-law” from which Pyrrho is free no doubt include the everyday opinions and laws of society. But they probably also include the theories and postulates of philosophers who think that they have discovered the detailed workings of nature, of whom Aristotle is a prime example. In this case “laying-down-of-the-law” (νομοθήκης) has a further irony to it; these theories are mere νόμος – that is, of human devising – rather than genuinely answering to φύσις, nature. In any case, these ideas are all “empty” (κοῦφα).

The reason for thinking that philosophers (other than Pyrrho himself) are at least one major focus of Timon's attack here is that we have many other fragments of his work making fun of philosophers by name, several of them introduced by the same epic formula “such he was” (οἷον).<sup>8</sup> Although in many cases the poem from which these lines came is not named, they almost certainly all came from Timon's poem *Silloi*, *Lampoons*,

<sup>7</sup> In the last line (ἐκ παθέων δόξης τε καὶ εἰκαίης νομοθήκης) I follow Clayman 2009: 81 in taking δόξης and νομοθήκης as dependent on παθέων, rather than reading all three genitives as parallel, as do all other translators I am aware of (including myself in Bett 2000: 70).

<sup>8</sup> On the epic credentials of this formula, and more generally on the mock-Homeric set-up of the *Silloi*, see Clayman 2009: 78-82.

in which, as Diogenes Laertius tells us, Timon “mocks [σιλλαίνει] the dogmatic philosophers in the form of a parody” (9.111). As has long been recognized (though Diogenes does not tell us this), one important element of the parody is that the narrative is cast as a νέκυνια, or visit to the Underworld, where Timon encounters a number of now-dead philosophers; among the indications of this are the frequent opening phrases “And then I saw” and the like, recalling the words of Odysseus in the original Underworld visit in *Odyssey* book 11. There are other, earlier spoof Underworld visits, notably that of Aristophanes in the *Frogs* and, closer to our present theme, Plato in the *Protagoras* (314e3-316a2); the scene where Socrates and Hippocrates enter Callias’ house and find numerous Sophists, each immersed in their characteristic intellectual activities and being pandered to by rapt followers, is a beautiful piece of satire, and again we find numerous “then I saw”s and other indications (including a mention of Homer himself, 315b9) that Socrates is being cast in the role of Odysseus and the Sophists as the heroes of old. The motif itself is of course heavily ironic; Plato’s Sophists are far from heroic, as are Timon’s philosophers. But the success of the device depends at least as much on the detailed portraits of the sub-heroes depicted. Plato’s focus is mainly on pieces of behavior: Protagoras’ followers are always careful not to get in his way, Hippias is seated on a θρόνος pontificating, and Prodicus is still lounging in bed.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, as far as we can tell from the surviving fragments, Timon tends to focus more directly on aspects of the philosophers’ ideas and intellectual milieu. We have already seen a penchant for gleeful sarcasm in Timon’s approach to philosophers; but his thumbnail sketches of

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<sup>9</sup> A case can be made that all three of these illustrate something about the person’s thought; Plato depicts these Sophists in action, but thereby intends further implications. However, explaining the details would take us too far afield.

individual philosophers in the *Silloi* are very pointed and often quite savage, in the manner of some political cartoons. I will unpack a couple of examples.

Several fragments about Plato or members of Plato's Academy have fun with Plato's name and the various Greek words that sound like it. A single line, quoted by both Athenaeus (505e) and Diogenes Laertius (3.26), reads ὡς ἀνέπλασσε Πλάτων ὁ πεπλασμένα θαύματα εἰδώς, "as Plato made them up [or perhaps, "refashioned them"], he who knew fabricated wonders." Without the previous line, it is hard to be sure of the force of ἀνέπλασσε, "made up" or "refashioned;"<sup>10</sup> but at any rate we do not have a picture of Plato simply describing reality – instead of describing, something is being devised, and this already invites suspicion. In πεπλασμένα θαύματα, "fabricated wonders," this is more obvious, although what these θαύματα might be is open to conjecture. Athenaeus (505d-e) says that it was the dialogues themselves: Gorgias and Phaedo are said to have reacted to the dialogues named after them with "I never said that, nor did the other characters." Other suggestions by recent scholars are the various Platonic accounts of the ideal state, the Platonic myths,<sup>11</sup> and the puppets in the *Republic's* cave that cast the shadows on the wall (θαύματα can mean "puppets," and is so used at 514b6);<sup>12</sup> going in the opposite ontological direction, I would add that Platonic Forms could also, from the point of view of someone unimpressed with philosophical theorizing, qualify as "fabricated wonders;" the resonance with the meaning "puppets" would add an extra piquancy to this, and the next word, εἰδώς, is perhaps also a subtle

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<sup>10</sup> Clayman 2009: 103 prefers "remade" and suggests a reference to plagiarism; another fragment accuses the *Timaeus* of being plagiarized (from Pythagorean materials, according to one source, Aulus Gellius 3.17.4).

<sup>11</sup> Both these suggestions in di Marco 1989: 153.

<sup>12</sup> Clayman 2009: 103.

pun on one of Plato's usual words for the Forms, εἶδος.<sup>13</sup> In any case, Plato (along with, by extension, the Academy) emerges as a wholesale purveyor of fictions; you can even tell it from his name!<sup>14</sup>

Turning from Plato to Socrates, we find just one fragment of Timon (in DL 2.19), but it is a zinger:

But from them the stone-cutter, blatherer on the lawful, turned away,  
 Spellbinder of the Greeks, who made them nitpicking arguers,  
 Sneerer, rhetoricians' snot, sub-Attic ironist.<sup>15</sup>

From whom, or from what, did Socrates turn away? Clement (Strom 1.14.63.3) and Sextus Empiricus (*M* 7.8), both of whom quote the first line, tell us that this refers to Socrates' widely reported turn away from physics and towards ethics; "them," then, are either physicists or questions in physics. But if avoidance of physics is something Timon might have been expected to see as a positive, it is clear that engagement with ethics, at least in Socrates' fashion, is not. "Blatherer on the lawful" (ἐννομολέσχης), Sextus plausibly tells us, is a reference to Socrates' concentration on ethics, and the suffix -λέσχης shows this in a light that is anything but favorable; this ending and its cognates always seem to signify idle or trivial talk. A spellbinder or enchanter (ἐπαιιδός) might in principle be either a positive or a negative influence. But characters who deserve this label, from Homer on, are often dangerous figures, and the combination of a "blatherer" on ethical topics and a spellbinder sounds worrisome indeed. It is also, at least from a

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to Franco Trivigno for this last suggestion.

<sup>14</sup> Other fragments playing with Plato's name are at Athenaeus 610b (the individual targeted is not clear), DL 3.7 (Plato), DL 4.42 (Arcesailus), DL 4.67 (Academics in general). I have discussed the last two of these in Bett 2015: section V.

<sup>15</sup> ἐκ δ' ἄρα τῶν ἀπέκλινεν ὁ λαξόος, ἐννομολέσχης  
 Ἑλλήνων ἐπαιιδός, ἀκριβολόγους ἀποφήνας  
 μυκτὴρ ῥητορόμυκτος, ὑπαττικὸς εἰρωνευτής.



certain perspective, fiendishly apt in the case of Socrates, many of whose discussions in Plato’s dialogues are both impossible for the interlocutors to shut down and (in these hapless interlocutors’ own view) obsessed, to no good end, with mundane and uninteresting topics such as shoemaking. The latter point seems to be continued in ἀκριβολόγους, rendered above as “nitpicking arguers.” An ἀκριβολόγος is literally someone who uses λόγος in an ἀκριβής or precise way; here too, in the abstract, the word could be read favorably or unfavorably – surely precision is sometimes a good thing – but the context strongly suggests the negative reading. μυκτήρ, which I have translated “sneerer,” literally means “nostril,” and here seems to connote a person who looks down his nose at others; again, it is not hard to see this as a good fit for Socrates’ dismissive attitude towards many of the things that the average Athenian considered of the highest importance. The suffix –μυκτος in the next word, ῥητορόμυκτος (another unparalleled word) is from the same root and seems to mean “blown out of the nose;” Diogenes’ following remark shows that he takes the word to indicate a rhetorical training, and my “rhetoricians’ snot” is an attempt to capture the Greek word’s combination of the two ideas.<sup>16</sup> Finally, “stone-cutter” alludes to Socrates’ family occupation, and completes the portrait by drawing attention to his lowly social origins. A lot is packed into these three lines: personality, methodology, influence and more. As an extraordinarily subtle yet stinging critique, delivered by means of devilish humor, it would be hard to improve on.

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<sup>16</sup> Is there perhaps a sly reference here to Thrasymsachus’ outburst against Socrates in book 1 of the *Republic* – that he needs a nurse to wipe his runny nose (343a)? Thanks to Thomas Johansen for this suggestion. Note that there is also a comic reversal in the contrast between this and the previous word μυκτήρ. I am not sure what to make of the following word, “sub-Attic” (ὑπαττικός). With most other scholars, I had been inclined to regard it as a comment on Socrates’ style. But Michael Trapp pointed out that “Attic” as a stylistic term post-dates Timon by a couple of centuries. Trapp suggested that the force might be not of something inferior to Attic, as my translation implies, but something sneakily, or underhandedly, Attic. But in either case, without the stylistic connotation it is unclear to me what Timon is suggesting.

Timon’s devilish humor could easily occupy a whole paper, but I am trying to paint a broader picture. I close my discussion of Timon by noting that not all philosophers are equally worthy of ridicule in his eyes; some did manage to achieve insights that at least partially approximate the ideal attitude of Pyrrho. And it is striking that when Timon tones down the criticism, the humor recedes as well. Parmenides is described as “high-minded” (μεγαλόφρων) and “not full of opinions” – opinions being inherently suspect, as we saw in the earlier fragment on Pyrrho – and is said to have “elevated our thought-processes from the deception of appearance” (DL 9.23).<sup>17</sup> There is nothing obviously critical here, and nothing particularly funny either. Similar things could be said about another fragment on Zeno (of Elea) and Melissus (DL 9.25). Finally, Xenophanes, who seems to have played something of a leading role in the *Silloi* (and to whom a poem called *Silloi* is also attributed, though this may very well be a retrospective title), is depicted regretting his only partial attainment of the correct, Pyrrho-like mindset, saying that he failed to be ἀμφοτερόβλεπτος, “looking both ways” (Sextus, *PH* 1.224). There is room for debate about what exactly this amounts to and why, in Timon’s view, it would have been a good thing.<sup>18</sup> But the fragment continues with Xenophanes’ self-criticism, which has to do with his failure to avoid a monistic world-view; there is a certain self-deprecation here, which is perhaps a source of mild humor, but it has nothing like the sting of Timon’s lines on Plato or Socrates. The same is true of another fragment quoted immediately afterwards in Sextus, where Xenophanes is referred to as ὑπάτυφος (partly free from τῦφος – conceit or bombast) on the basis of having laudably exposed

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<sup>17</sup> Reading ἐκ (with Long & Sedley 1987: vol. 2, 16) for the mss. ἐπί.

<sup>18</sup> On this see Bett 2000: chapter 3.5.

“Homeric deception” – probably a reference to Xenophanes’ critique of the Homeric view of the gods – but then gone on to fashion a single unchanging god of his own.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. The Sceptical Academy

However, as we have seen, it is when Timon is in full critical mode that the humor is on full display. At its most intense, this brings with it a skewering of individual philosophers. But there is also at least a broad suggestion that philosophy itself – or at least, philosophy understood as the development of detailed theories explaining how the world works and accounting for the appearances – is a suspect, as well as laughable, activity that we should keep at arm’s length. We can find something of the same combination in the much more extensive surviving writings of Sextus Empiricus, in the late phase of the Pyrrhonist tradition, who will be the subject of the next section. But first, just a word about the sceptical Academy. The evidence here is both limited in scope and second-hand – often appearing, in fact, in Sextus (whose own philosophical method leads him to spend a lot of time talking about the thoughts of others). But their use of comedy as a critical tool is nonetheless easy enough to detect.

The sceptical Academics were known for generating opposing arguments on whatever topic one liked. Arcesilaus, the head of the Academy who first turned it in a sceptical direction, is said by Cicero to have invited his interlocutors to say what they thought; he would then offer arguments against these opinions, and they were invited to defend them as well as possible (*De fin.* 2.2). Now, Cicero does not say that Arcesilaus used humor in his counter-arguments. But he does say that Arcesilaus was reviving the practice of Socrates, and that Socrates’ practice, as revealed in Plato’s dialogues, was to make fun of the Sophists. Many passages of Plato do of course fit this description, and

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<sup>19</sup> Xenophanes’ critique itself has a humorous aspect; I touch on this at the opening of section 5.

Socrates himself in Plato's *Apology* is made to say that the reason why he has attracted a following is because listening to those with pretensions to wisdom being shown up as fools is fun (ἔστι γὰρ οὐκ ἀηδέες, 33c4 – elegantly translated by Hugh Tredennick as “an experience which has its amusing side”).<sup>20</sup> While we have very little detailed evidence of Arcesilaus' argumentative practice, it is natural to assume that comedic high jinx sometimes made their appearance.

A good example of comedic high jinx comes in a series of sorites arguments about the existence of god attributed by Sextus to Carneades, the second great sceptical Academic, about whom we are somewhat better informed than about Arcesilaus (*M* 9.182-90). Carneades is represented as arguing that if one accepts the existence of various standardly recognized gods, one is forced also to accept to accept the divinity of all sorts of beings that no one in their right mind would regard as such. If Poseidon, standing for the sea, is a god, then major rivers will also be gods (and a number were so regarded); but in that case, every body of water, no matter how small, will be a god. If the sun is a god, then the day is a god; but in that case, any arbitrary time-period will be a god. If Eros is a god, so is Pity (who, it is observed, was accepted as a god by some, *M* 9.187); but in that case all the emotions will be gods. If Demeter, Earth, is a god, any stone will be a god.<sup>21</sup> Without clear standards for divinity, the fun one can have making up gods is virtually unlimited, and Carneades is obviously expecting his audience to share in the enjoyment.

It is worth pointing out that sorites arguments, which can be employed in a critical spirit by many philosophers, not just sceptical ones, have an inherent potential for humor.

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<sup>20</sup> Tredennick 1969: 66.

<sup>21</sup> The one argument I have omitted exploits the practice of applying epithets to divinities; Carneades proliferates this to what we are clearly supposed to regard as an absurd degree (*M* 9.185). For details, see note *ad loc.* in Bett 2012.

The whole idea is to show that if one accepts a certain starting-point, one is forced to accept absurd consequences – and it is not hard for “absurd” to tip over into “laughable” or even “farical.” The same can be said, more generally, of *reductio ad absurdum* arguments, of which sorites arguments are one species. It is notable that the word “absurd” (ἄτοπος) is ubiquitous in Sextus Empiricus.<sup>22</sup> The absurdities he exposes do not always come with a humorous punch-line. But again, the potential for comedy is there, and the potential is not infrequently realized.

#### 4. Sextus Empiricus

Humor in Sextus comes in several forms, sometimes obvious and sometimes subtle. We can perhaps distinguish three kinds of humorous effect in his work, although these are not wholly distinct categories. First, there are cases of outright ridicule or humorous dismissiveness in the language used to describe his dogmatist opponents. Referring to their contribution to a debate on whether sense-perception and thought can function together as a criterion of truth, he says that they “run on at the mouth” (θρυλοῦσι, *M* 7.359). Discussing difficulties with Stoic theories of demonstration (ἀπόδειξις), he mentions a disagreement within the school on whether arguments with just one premise were possible, and comments that it is silly to reject one-premised arguments on the basis that Chrysippus did not accept them: “For it is not necessary ... to trust Chrysippus’ utterances like deliverances of the Delphic oracle” (*M* 8.443).<sup>23</sup> Raising difficulties for various accounts of how our conception of god originated, he mentions Democritus’ idea

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<sup>22</sup> The entry for ἄτοπος in Janáček 2000 does not attempt to catalog all the instances. Janáček tries whenever possible to give a complete list of the occurrences of significant words, but with ἄτοπος, he simply says “ub.” (i.e., *ubique*, “everywhere”) and lists some representative examples.

<sup>23</sup> The text in this sentence is corrupt, but the part that I have quoted is secure, and the general point (delivered in this comedic register) is clear: why trust Chrysippus any more than a member of the same school who maintains the opposite?

that we encounter huge human-shaped images that we interpret as divinities, and comments “as for there being huge images in the surrounding area having human form and, in general, the kinds of things Democritus wants to make up for himself (βούλεται αὐτῷ ἀναπλάττειν), that is extremely hard to accept” (*M* 9.42). And picturing the state to which his objections to their theories of whole and part have reduced the dogmatic philosophers, he describes them as “securing for themselves a little breather” (μικρὰν ἀναπνοὴν πορίζοντες αὐτοῖς, *M* 9.352) as they devise a response that will save their position – only temporarily, of course.

Second, there are cases where the consequences for the dogmatists of holding a certain view are described in sardonic or even farcical terms. This includes instances of sorites-type reasoning, as we saw in Sextus’ use of Carneades, and in another case (where no source is named) involving the gods; Sextus says that if we suppose that our conception of gods arose from things that benefited human life (a view earlier attributed to Prodicus, *M* 9.18), “we would have to think of human beings, and especially philosophers, as gods (for they benefit our life), and most of the non-rational animals (for they work alongside us), and household utensils and everything more trivial still” (*M* 9.41). Just in case we do not pick up on the tone, he adds “But this is completely laughable.” Commenting on the Stoic view that everyone other than the wise person is ignorant, and that they themselves did not measure up to the wise person’s standard, he cheerfully remarks that this puts the Stoics in the same position as they claim the skeptics are in. He does not spell out in general terms what position this is, but I take it to be one where, by one’s own admission, one does not have a argumentative leg to stand on; in the Stoics’ case, the results are as follows. “For since among the inferior, according to them,

are numbered Zeno and Cleanthes and Chrysippus and the rest of their school, and every inferior person is gripped by ignorance, then undoubtedly Zeno was ignorant as to whether he was contained in the universe or whether he himself contained the universe, and whether he was a man or a woman, and Cleanthes did not know whether he was a human being or some beast more crafty than Typhon” (*M* 7.433). The bit on Cleanthes is an allusion to Socrates’ self-description in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (230a), brought up by Sextus himself earlier in the same book (*M* 7.264). But whereas ignorance was a central and serious element in Socrates’ self-conception (at least in Plato’s version of him), the Stoics were vastly ambitious and systematic theorists; if *they* are ignorant in the same way, they can only look ridiculous. A more glancing blow, containing wry humor rather than flat-out ridicule, is directed at Aristotle. Discussing Aristotle’s view of place as the limit of the containing body, the outermost body being heaven (οὐρανός), which is therefore directly or indirectly the place of everything else, he adds that in that case the heaven itself is not in any place, “but is itself in itself and in its private ownness” (*M* 10.31). Now Aristotle is quite aware that his view leaves heaven as the ultimate place, which is not itself in any other place (*Physics*, 212b22), but he does not use any phrase resembling “private ownness” (ἰδίᾳ οικειότητι), and Sextus is surely making fun of the idea; “itself in itself” (αὐτὸς ἐν ἑαυτῷ) is also perhaps a crafty dig, the language recalling Plato’s terminology for describing separately existing Forms – items that Aristotle is relentlessly critical of Plato for positing.

My third category of humor in Sextus is a kind of exuberance or playfulness in the way an anti-dogmatic argument is developed – especially in the way an example or other detail in the argument is developed. Here it may be more debatable in any given

case whether humor is really involved, but I will offer a few cases that seem to me to qualify. In his arguments against the existence of a criterion of truth in the first book of *Against the Logicians*, he considers the idea that human beings are the criterion of truth, and with this, the definition “a human being is a rational mortal animal.” One objection to this definition is that it is not a true definition, but merely an enumeration of attributes (*M* 7.269-75). But in the case of “mortal” he goes one better, saying that “mortal” is not even an attribute, “but something that comes after the human being; for when we are human beings, we are alive and not dead” (*M* 7.272). This may seem very feeble; after all, “mortal” means “subject to death” not “actually dead,” so that unless one rejects the existence of not yet realized potentialities, someone can of course be mortal while still alive. But I suspect Sextus is playing on the etymological connection between θνητός, “mortal,” and θνήσκω, “die,” coupled with a common ambiguity in the force of the adjectival suffix –τος. Adjectives with this suffix connote either having undergone a certain process, or being in some way able or liable or suitable to undergo that process; so, for example, ἀνεπίκριτος, a word often used by Sextus in connection with words such as διαφωνία, “dispute,” can mean either “undecided” or “undecidable” – which way one reads it can sometimes make quite a difference to one’s interpretation of Sextus. θνητός is only used in the second way; it means “able to die,” “marked out for death,” or the like. But given the regular ambiguity of –τος, it might not be hard for a native Greek speaker to hear it in the first way, as “having died;” if so, Sextus’ statement becomes a piece of wit as opposed to a mere conceptual ineptitude.

Other examples involve something amusing or preposterous in the scenarios dreamed up to create objections. Near the end of his discussion of motion in the second



book of *Against the Physicists*, Sextus is considering the question whether the places through which things move, and the times during which they move, are infinitely divisible or terminate at minimal units that cannot be further divided. Among the various views on this question, he addresses the view (attributed to the Peripatetic Strato, *M* 10.155) that the distances are infinitely divisible, but the times have minimal, indivisible durations. And his response is that in that case one can construct a scenario in which a falling body would have to stop in mid-air – or else contradict the theory; for added comedic effect Sextus makes the object something heavy, a lead ball (*M* 10.160-2). Whatever distance the lead ball travels in one of these minimal units of time, one just has to add an extra distance that is a fraction of the first distance. Then either, *per impossibile*, it will cover this extra distance in less than one minimal unit of time, or it will have to stand still after covering just the original distance, which is absurd (and here is one of Sextus' frequent uses of ἄτοπος, 161). He might have added a third possibility – that it abruptly and unaccountably gets slower, so as to cover the smaller distance in the same minimal unit of time; this would only have added to the merriment. A simpler case occurs in *Against the Ethicists*, where Sextus is considering the consequences of saying that the wise person has self-control or continence (ἐγκράτεια), which the Stoics, unlike Aristotle, regarded as a virtue. The wise and self-controlled person either has impulses towards bad actions but masters them, or has no such impulses – and there are problems with either supposition. Against the latter, his response is, where is the self-control in not succumbing to an impulse one does not even have? “And just as no one would call the eunuch self-controlled about sexual intercourse, or the person with a bad stomach self-controlled about the enjoyment of food ... in the same way the sage should not be

described as self-controlled” (M 11.212). Part of the humor here is in the sheer incongruity of imagining the eunuch and the person with the queasy stomach fighting against impulses that they obviously do not have; another part is the put-down of the Stoics’ wise person implied here – if this is what the wise person is like, wisdom seems more like an impairment than a virtue.

Another example, again from Sextus’ treatment of motion in *Against the Physicists*, involves a slightly different kind of humor. He is subjecting to scrutiny the definition of motion as transition from place to place, and one of his complaints is that something can move but stay in the same place. “Imagine a ship,” he says, “running with a fair wind, and someone carrying a vertical beam from prow to stern, moving at the same speed as the ship” (M 10.56). Presumably Sextus chooses the beam as the focus, rather than the person, because the person’s legs will not stay in the same place – whereas the beam, in one sense, stays absolutely stationary, even though in another sense it is clearly moving, since it is being taken from the front of the ship to the back and the person transporting it is putting one foot in front of the other. Now here, the outlandishness of the example certainly brings a chuckle – and I cannot help thinking that this is part of the goal; however, it is not that the example makes the theory under consideration look ridiculous, as in the two cases from the previous paragraph. If anything, the lengths to which one is forced to go to find a counter-example to the theory is an indication of the theory’s plausibility, even though the counter-example does genuinely make trouble for the theory. The humorous outlandishness of the case puts both points into sharp relief. Yes, the theory was attractive, and yes, it does look vulnerable to this counter-example. The reason one has a laugh in coming to see this is, I

suggest, twofold: the example has to be a weird one in order to serve its function, and there is a comic reversal of expectations in the fact that, weird or not, it actually does so.

In both respects, this example recalls contemporary epistemology's Gettier cases, which were designed to undermine a conception of knowledge that had seemed very persuasive, namely justified true belief.<sup>24</sup> Devising Gettier cases takes real ingenuity, because most everyday cases of knowledge seem to fit that traditional conception quite well; with Gettier cases, then, one enters the realm of the outré and the absurd – and humor is often not far behind. And yet, humor included,<sup>25</sup> they do their work of showing that in order for a belief to count as knowledge (as Gettier cases, in most people's judgement, do not), its justification and its truth must be *connected* with one another in a quite particular way; and the difficulty or impossibility of spelling out that requirement has been a major driver of epistemology's agenda in the past half-century. So both Gettier cases and Sextus' example of motion that is not transition from place to place are indeed instances of humor in a critical context; but the function of the humor is somewhat less direct than in most of the cases I have considered.

I offer one more example of my third category of humor in Sextus. This is from *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, where Sextus argues that dogs are in no way inferior to humans. This is in the first of his Ten Modes, focused on differences in the way things appear to animals and to humans (*PH* 1.40-78). After many examples of such differences, it is argued that there is no non-question-begging means of showing that the way things appear to humans should be considered truer; and this is said to force us to suspend

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<sup>24</sup> The original Gettier cases were presented in Gettier 1963; many others have been offered since. A good recent discussion of Gettier cases and their influence is Hetherington 2011.

<sup>25</sup> I remember the lecturer from whom I first learned about Gettier cases apologizing for the silliness of these examples. But I now think their silliness – or, to put it less pejoratively, their amusingly bizarre character – is, if not essential to their effect, at least hardly an accident.

judgement about the way things really are (59-61). And now, to rub in the message (ἐκ περιουσίας, 62), Sextus gives numerous reasons why the dog is fully the equal of humanity – in virtue, reasoning power, ability to take care of itself, etc. (63-72). He explicitly marks this as humor (καταπαίξειν, 62) directed at the “demented and self-important” (τετυφωμένων καὶ περιαιτολογούντων) dogmatists (another instance here of my first category). The humor in Sextus’ treatment of the dog rests in part on the fact that the dogmatists are so sure that humans – and especially they themselves – are superior in their discernment of reality; another aspect is the huge gulf between the lowly status of the dog in popular culture, acknowledged by Sextus at the outset (63), and the high praise it receives in Sextus’ account; and another is that a good part of the mischief comes from Sextus’ exploitation of the dogmatists’ own ideas (especially those of the Stoics, singled out as his main opponents, 65). The Stoic Chrysippus is said to have attributed logic to the dog; in chasing another animal, sniffing down two of three possible tracks and failing to pick up the scent, and then pursuing the third track without bothering to sniff, it is employing the syllogism “A or B or C; but not A or B; therefore C,” which is a multi-pronged instance of the Stoics’ fifth indemonstrable (in other words, foundational) form of argument (69). Again, the Stoics advocate pursuing what conforms to and fosters one’s nature, and the dog does just that (65-6). And having argued that the dog has justice, Sextus then appeals to the Stoic doctrine of the unity of the virtues to argue that it must have the other virtues as well (68).

It will perhaps have been noticed that this is the only passage I have cited as a case of humor in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.<sup>26</sup> All my other examples have been from

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<sup>26</sup> I omit any treatment of Sextus’ third work, usually called *Against the Professors* (*M* 1-6), since its subject-matter is less directly philosophical. However, there is no shortage of humor in this

Sextus' longer work, the surviving portions of which (*Against the Logicians, Physicists, and Ethicists*) cover roughly the same material as the second and third books of *Outlines*.<sup>27</sup> Without having done an exhaustive analysis of the topic, I do have the sense that *Outlines* has considerably less overt humor than the other work; certainly I have found examples easier to spot in the other work. I suspect that this difference has to do precisely with the “outline” character of *Outlines*, to which Sextus frequently draws attention; he is here sticking to the bare bones. In the other longer, much more discursive work, there is an opportunity to expand on his points, and this is where humor is more likely to thrive. Nevertheless, some of the examples I have considered perhaps point to a more global propensity towards ridicule behind a great deal of Sextus' writing, and here there is not necessarily a difference between the two works. The tendency to portray the dogmatists as figures of fun implies a “what is all this nonsense?” attitude towards constructive philosophy in general; and here Sextus' language in *Outlines* – “demented and self-important” – is as stinging as any. The passage on the dog, coming as it does early in the first book of *Outlines*, also sets a tone; after this, one is led to wonder whether dogmatists are ever again to be taken seriously. I do not mean to suggest that Sextus is always on the verge of bursting out laughing. But, as I said, the potential for humor is very often present – as well it might be, given that Sextus considers the claim to have discovered the truth about the world an absurd overreach. Thus I find in Sextus at least a hint of the kind of attitude I detected in Timon: ridicule of positive philosophy as a whole, rather than simply of particular ideas and arguments.

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work, and a fuller discussion of the subject would certainly need to include some consideration of it.

<sup>27</sup> Sextus calls this work by the name Σκεπτικὰ Ὑπομνήματα, *Sceptical Treatises*; see *M* 1.29, 2.106, 6.52, which are clear back-references to passages in these surviving books.

The words “philosophical subversion” in my title are intended to capture both these ideas: subversion of particular ideas within philosophy, and subversion of philosophy itself (where the term is understood in a positive or constructive spirit). It is open to the sceptics to be humorously subversive in both these ways, and I hope to have shown that they welcome the opportunity. I will end the paper with a brief glance at critical humor in some non-sceptical philosophies; here, since they do of course have constructive ambitions, the “subversion” is only of the first kind.

### **5. Non-Sceptical Philosophies**

Having already touched on both Plato and Aristotle, I will limit myself in this last section to the Epicureans and Stoics. Still, it is worth noting that a full treatment of the subject would start considerably earlier than even Plato. There is surely an element of ridicule in Xenophanes’ critique of the traditional anthropomorphic conception of divinity. If cows had a god, it would be a cow; and different ethnic groups create gods that – surprise, surprise – look just like themselves (DK 21B 15, 16). Heraclitus’ invectives, too, contain a sizeable dose of mockery. However, constraints of space prevent me from pursuing this any further.

It is easy to suppose that the Epicurean and Stoic schools both produced plenty of works containing little or no humor, and this may be correct. This is the impression I get of the charred remains (among the Herculaneum papyruses) of Epicurus’ *On Nature*, as well as of some sentences of Chrysippus quoted in authors such as Plutarch; they seem complicated, verbose, and somewhat forbidding. But our access to these works is, to put it mildly, extremely limited, and it would no doubt be unfair to make wholesale judgements on the basis of what we have. In any case, we can certainly find examples of

humor in later writers of both schools, of whom we have complete works – Lucretius on the Epicurean side and Seneca and Epictetus on the Stoic side. However, we should not dismiss Epicurus too quickly. The letters of Epicurus preserved in Diogenes Laertius are certainly more readable than the fragments of *On Nature*. And while this is by no means frequent, one can find flashes of humor. Perhaps the reason there are not more is that these letters are basic expositions of Epicurean principles, without much concern for criticizing others; for the places where we do find humor are in the relatively rare contexts where criticism occurs.

One is in the *Letter to Menoeceus*, where Epicurus is contrasting the correct view of the pleasant life with a common, but incorrect view; the incorrect view is described as follows. “It is not continuous drinking sessions and revelry, or the enjoyment of boys and women, or of fish and the other things on an extravagant table, that produce the pleasant life” (DL 10.132). This is not laugh-out-loud humor; but there is humorous exaggeration in “continuous” (συνείροντες), and there is a quizzical perspective implied in lumping together sexual partners and fancy foods as things of which one might – indiscriminately, as it were – have “enjoyments” (ἀπολαύσεις). A slightly more outspoken case comes in the *Letter to Pythocles*, where Epicurus lays into those who explain celestial phenomena not as having multiple possible causes (all consistent with the basic atomic theory), but as having one cause – namely, divine intervention. “To offer one cause for these things,” he says, “when the phenomena call for several, is insane and done not as one should by those who eagerly pursue the empty-headed kind of astronomy and offer causes of certain things in vain, when they in no way release the divine nature from public service” (DL

10.113).<sup>28</sup> The abuse is plain, and the final word, “liturgies” (λειτουργιῶν), is a nice touch; it conjures up an image of the gods as like rich Athenians organizing dramatic festivals, embassies and the like. In addition, there is an ambiguity in εἰς τὸ κενὸν that adds to the fun. It could mean simply “in vain,” as I translated it above. But κενὸν is also Epicurus’s term for the void, the empty space in which atoms move; and so these misguided astronomers can also be thought of as sending out their explanations “into the void” – or as we might put it colloquially, into thin air, where they will be deservedly forgotten.

Lucretius goes somewhat further in making fun of the misguided. Perhaps the best examples come in book 4, which begins with the physical mechanisms of sense-perception and ends with love and sex. On the latter subject, he expands on the comic possibilities of the infatuated lover who interprets any physical feature of his beloved (no matter how objectively undesirable, as Lucretius presents it) as praiseworthy and invents endearing language to describe it (4.1160-9). The τόπος goes back to Plato’s *Republic* (474d-e), but Lucretius exploits its full potential; both constraints of space and the risk of lapsing into sexism make me hesitate to go into detail, but the satirical purpose is in no doubt. Lucretius continues in the same vein by saying that even if the beloved is really as beautiful as the lover thinks, her beautification regimes behind closed doors would drive

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<sup>28</sup> τὸ δὲ μίαν αἰτίαν τούτων ἀποδιδόναι, πλεοναχῶς τῶν φαινομένων ἐκκαλουμένων, μανικὸν καὶ οὐ καθηκόντως πραττόμενον ὑπὸ τῶν τὴν ματαιὰν ἀστρολογίαν ἐζηλωκότων καὶ εἰς τὸ κενὸν αἰτίας τινῶν ἀποδιδόντων, ὅταν τὴν θεῖαν φύσιν μηθαμῆ λειτουργιῶν ἀπολύωσι. Bywater’s conjecture πλεοναχᾶς for the mss. reading πλεοναχῶς may be correct. The language is somewhat crabbed with the text as it stands; one would have to read it as something like “when the phenomena require [them to be explained] in multiple ways.” I retain the mss. reading τινῶν, but read it as dependent on αἰτίας, rather than as the subject of a genitive absolute with ἀποδιδόντων (as Inwood and Gerson 1997 read it). Instead of τινῶν, Usener conjectured ἄστρον, “of the stars,” and Bignone conjectured τούτων, “of these things.” (Hicks’ Loeb edition prints τινῶν but translates “for the stars.”)



him away immediately if he saw them – or, more to the point, smelled them; they make her servants laugh, and we the readers are clearly meant to be in on the laugh too, though the joke is more on the deluded lover than on the scheming beloved (4.1171-84). The section ends on a more humane note: if both parties are honest and accept the truth, they can maybe make a go of it without all this pretense on both sides (4.1188-91). In this case the truth, as Lucretius sees it, is that we are bodies composed of atoms, which, in sex and maybe even in love, undergo processes that can be very pleasurable, but that do not warrant the agonies, ordeals and resort to theological explanations that they all too frequently generate. Some humor at the expense of those in the grip of such attitudes is all to the good, if it can help to bring people around to this truth.

A not altogether dissimilar kind of humorous critique occurs at the end of book 1 of Seneca's *De ira*, where the opponent is the person who thinks of anger as something noble. If this is the case, argues Seneca, then self-indulgence, avarice, lust and ambition are also to be celebrated; and the book ends with a series of parodic descriptions of each of these qualities in a mock-positive light; I quote just the first of the four, but they are all equally effective. "If anyone does think that anger makes a great mind manifest, he might think the same about self-indulgence – with its wish to be borne on ivory, dressed in purple, roofed with gold, to transfer whole plots of land, enclose whole stretches of sea, turn rivers into cascades and a woodland into hanging gardens" (1.21).<sup>29</sup> Here again, there is a common, although thoroughly misguided attitude that needs to be corrected, and comedy is one way to achieve this.

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<sup>29</sup> *Aut si uidetur alicui magnum animum ira producere, uideatur et luxuria — ebore sustineri uult, purpura uestiri, auro tegi, terras transferre, maria concludere, flumina praecipitare, nemora suspendere.* I use the translation of Cooper and Procopé 1995: 41. But the effect is more piquant in the original, with the long sequence of bare nouns and infinitives spelling out what the self-indulgent person wants.

But philosophical attitudes, as well as everyday ones, can also be the subject of critical humor in both Stoic and Epicurean texts. A common butt of Epictetus' jokes in the *Discourses* is the person who is absorbed in the book-learning of philosophy – including, interestingly, the books of the Stoics themselves – but has utterly failed in the real project of philosophy, which is to transform one's life for the better. A good example is book 2, chapter 19, entitled *To [or perhaps, Against] those who take up philosophers' business just at the level of talk*. Such a person may mouth something read in a book – a Stoic book, say, which holds that the only bad thing is vice, so that a shipwreck, for example, is indifferent rather than bad; how is this person going to do in an actual shipwreck (2.19.15-16)? This is just one of a number of humorous elements in this chapter; Epictetus' caricature of the bookish pseudo-philosopher puts the focus on one of his central themes, the need to do the hard work of self-improvement.

Another philosophical character who comes in for ridicule, both in Epictetus and in Lucretius, is the philosophical sceptic. Since much of this paper has been about humorous critique issued by sceptics, it is only fair for them to receive some comeuppance; this also allows me to end as I began, since Epicurean and Stoic humor at the expense of sceptics has much in common with Aristotle's humor against the denier of the Law of Non-Contradiction. The picture of a person who literally does not know where he is going (or would not, if he actually believed this nonsense) recurs in both authors; just as Aristotle's opponent might as well fall into a chasm, Lucretius' sceptic might as well fall over a precipice (4.507-10) and Epictetus' sceptic might as well go to the mill when he wants to go to the baths (1.27.19). Such a person (again, if anyone really existed who believed these things) would in fact be reduced to complete inaction; he

would be standing on his head according to Lucretius (4.472), and he would be “even worse than a corpse” according to Epictetus (1.5.8), just as in Aristotle the denier of the Law of Non-Contradiction would be no different from a vegetable (*Met.* 1008b11-12).

## 6. Conclusion

I hope I have done something to make plausible the idea of subversion as a major category of humor in philosophy. Obviously this need not be limited to the ancient period. I mentioned the humorous dimension to Gettier cases. I would also float the suggestion that in certain respects Nietzsche stands to Kant as Timon does to Aristotle; Kant is the rigorously serious philosopher, while Nietzsche is the trickster who makes fun of philosophy as usually practised (and a great deal besides). Some people treat Nietzsche as a systematic philosopher, but to me the anti-systematic tendencies in his thinking and writing have always loomed larger. And Nietzsche is certainly an enthusiastic exponent of humor. Just one example in closing: I invite you to consider the opening section of *Twilight of the Idols*’ “Raids of an Untimely Man,” which consists of a number of thumbnail sketches of well-known authors. Among the philosophers in this group are “Seneca: or virtue’s bullfighter ... Kant: or ‘cant’ [Nietzsche uses the English word] as intelligible character ... John Stuart Mill: or clarity as an insult.”<sup>30</sup> The family resemblance to Timon’s sketches of philosophers in the *Silloi* is almost uncanny; and like his, these ones would deserve plenty of unpacking.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> I use the translation of Polt 1997: 50-1.

<sup>31</sup> Thanks to all those who took part in the discussion at the Oslo conference, especially to my commentator on that occasion, Marko Malink; and to Franco Trivigno and Pierre Destrée for inviting me to contribute.