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## The Image of Woman in Democritus

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**Abstract:** In this study, I will attempt to present Democritus's perception of women through the surviving fragments. We will see that Democritus presents a negative to derogatory perspective on the female gender. However, perhaps things are not so simple. The philosopher's criticism of women has two parameters that should not escape us. First, the woman as a basic part of the family symbolizes the lack of free time, which is a necessary condition for the development of high human pursuits, such as philosophy and science. Second, the woman as an object of erotic desire constitutes the greatest expression of the dominance of the humblest passions over rationality. From these findings, perhaps female nature receives Democritus' philosophical attack not for its own essential characteristics, but on a symbolic level as the personification of the departure from philosophy and right reason.

**Keywords:** *Democritus, woman, gender, ethics, politics, eudaimonism, human nature*

## Introduction

Democritus is known as the philosopher of the atomic theory that characterizes modern physics. However, few know and even fewer have researched the other important aspects of his work, such as ethics or politics. Within the scattered ethical or political passages of his work<sup>1</sup>, we can discern his perspective on women on a realistic and symbolic level. In order to be able to draw safe conclusions, we must look back at the text and proceed with a demanding interpretative project, as from minimal information we must construct a valid argument. The purpose of this study is to present Democritus's perception of the female gender, to develop a critique of whether his positions are derogatory or progressive, but also to integrate the extracted material into a broad philosophical system. Do Democritus' views on women conceal a symbolic character that deciphers the basic axes of his ethics? Does woman constitute a philosophical tool for constructing broader arguments of a eudaimonistic character?

## The etymology of the term woman

ΜΕΓΑ ΕΤΥΜΟΛΟΓΙΚΟΝ, s.v. γυνή·

... ἥ, ὡς Δημόκριτος, γονή τις οὔσα, ἣ γονῆς δεκτική.

“ “Woman” ... or as Democritus claims, is called so, because she is someone who can give birth, that is, she is receptive of sperm”.

DK68B122a

In the passage DK68B122a there is an etymology of the term “woman” attributed to Democritus. According to this interpretation, woman has received her name from her ability to

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Aalders G. J. D., ‘The Political Faith of Democritus’ *Mnemosyne* 3, 1950, pp. 302-313, at p. 302; Natorp P., *Die Ethika des Demokritos*, Marburg, 1893), p. 53; Nestle W., *Vom Mythos zum Logos*, Stuttgart, 1940, p. 203.

be fertilized and give birth to offspring<sup>2</sup>. Also, the term *γονή* from which the term *γυνή* etymologically derives indicates that the woman is receptive to sperm (*γόνῃς δεκτικῇ*), that is, she is a female womb for fertilization by male sperm (*γόνῃ τις οὔσα*). Regardless of whether the etymology given by the ancient dictionary is correct or whether it was actually formulated by Democritus, the interpretative rendering of the term *γυνή* leads us to conclude that the woman takes her name from her reproductive capacity. If indeed this etymological interpretation belongs to Democritus, this perhaps means that the philosopher attributed to the woman some specific characteristics that constitute her definition, her form, her species. Therefore, woman cannot be defined under any other condition than by her organic capacity to accept sperm and give birth to offspring. The definition of woman in the philosophical sense indicates what we should expect from the being woman, in order to complete her form, her essence. Consequently, no other property structures the form of woman, except for the natural

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. LSJ *γονή*, ἡ, (γενέσθαι)

A offspring, οἱ οὐ τι παίδων γ. γένετο κρειόντων II. 24.539; γ.

Ἀρχεισιάδαο *Od.*4.755; τέκνων δίπτυχος γ. two children, *E.Med.* 1136:

pl., εἰσι χάτέροις γοναὶ κακαὶ *S.OCl*192; γ. κατηκρούς φύσαντες

*Id.Ant.*641; of animals, ταύρων γοναὶ *A.Fr.*194; ἐν... τετρασκελεῖ γ., i.e.

among quadrupeds, *S.Fr.*941.10; fruits of the earth, *Pl.Ax.*371c.

2 race, stock, family, *A.Ag.*1565 (lyr.); ὧ γονῇ γενναῖε *S.OCl*1469, cf. *El.*156

(lyr.); ἅ Δαρδάνου γ. *E.Tr.*1290: pl., μηδὲν ὦν γοναῖσι *S.Aj.*1094; parent-

age, ἐξευρεῖν γονάς *E.Ion*328.

3 generation, τρίταισιν ἐν γ. *Pi.P.*4.143; τρίτος... πρὸς δέκ' ἄλλαισιν γ.

*A.Pr.*774; τριτοσπόρῳ γονῇ *Id.Pers.*818.

II that which engenders, seed, *Hes.Op.*733, *Hdt.*3.101, 109, *Hp.Genit.*3,

*Arist.GA*726a18, etc.: pl., *Pi.N.*7.84, *S.Ant.*950 (lyr.).

2 organs of generation, generally, *Hp.Art.*45, *Mochl.*1 (also restricted to

the womb, *Ruf.Onom.*193, *Gal.*2.889); πρὶν... μητρὸς ἐκ γονῆς μολεῖν

*E.Ph.*1597.

III act of generation, *Pi.I.*7(6).7; κατὰ φύσιν γονὰς ποιεῖσθαι *Aeschin.*3.111.

2 of the mother, child-birth, *E.Ph.*355, *Theoc.*17.44.

3 of the child, birth, ἐκ γονῆς *Hp.Epid.*4.31; γονῇ φῶναι γεραιτέρῳ *S.*

*OCl*1294; γοναὶ ζῶων *Arist.Mu.*399a28.

4 cure for sterility, *Paul. Aeg.*3.74.

IV Pythagorean name for unity, *Theol.Ar.*6.

<https://lsj.gr/wiki/%CE%B3%CE%BF%CE%BD%CE%AE>

property of reproduction and fertilization. Therefore, the natural completion of woman or the philosophical definition of her form also indicates what a woman must do above all in the development of her life, that is, to give birth and be fertilized. One could say that a woman can certainly do many things in her living existence, however, if she does not fulfill the reproductive and fertilization requirements of her philosophical definition, she is not a woman in the full meaning of the term. If this etymological definition belonged to Democritus and was invested with philosophical significance, then his perception of the female form should be approximately this.

### **The image of woman: appearance and speech**

*Δημοκρίτου. κόσμος ὀλιγομυθίῃ γυναικί·  
καλὸν δὲ καὶ κόσμου λιτότης.*

“Democritus: Few words are an ornament for a woman,  
while beauty is also imparted by the simplicity of her adornment”.  
DK68B274

Regarding women’s external appearance, Democritus supports the expression of simplicity in the passage DK68B274. A woman should not exceed the measure in terms of her adornment, her clothes and jewelry should express a decency. Beauty is identified with simplicity and simple adornment (*κόσμου λιτότης*). Female beautification is in no way rejected, on the contrary it is considered as a necessary complement to the female form, what is rejected is the excess of measure, the excessive adornment that falsifies the authenticity of the female image.

From the same perspective, a woman’s verbal expression must be measured, few words are an ornament for a woman (*κόσμος ὀλιγομυθίῃ*). Beauty is identified with measured speech. One could say that Democritus notes that a woman must remain in the obscurity of socio-political developments and not intervene in things through words. However, Democritus views rhetoric with great suspicion as the utterance of false

speech that is inconsistent with actions, whether it concerns women but mainly male political orators and demagogues<sup>3</sup>. Rhetorical persuasion - as a characteristic feature of democracy - is a deliberate distortion of the truth and a tool for promoting political self-interest under the manipulation of the majority. Rhetoric, as used in democratic regimes, is opposed to virtue, in the sense that it distances people from the truth or the common good and confuses the relationship between thought and action. Therefore, the few words in connection with right actions is Democritus's admonition for both men and women in terms of achieving virtue and, by extension, happiness.

However, the passage DK68B110 shows that Democritus does not in any way approve of women's practice in the art of rhetoric (*γυνή μὴ ἀσκέιτω λόγον*), because such a thing would have destructive results (*δεινὸν γάρ*)<sup>4</sup>. This, in conjunction with the previous data, perhaps confirms that Democritus places women in the background of socio-political life away from political participation and important decision-making. But again, if this passage is combined with DK68B273, it is likely to refer to the evil nature of women who are more prone than men (*γυνή πολλὰ ἀνδρὸς ὀξυτέρη*) to evil thoughts (*πρὸς κακοφραδοσύνην*). Therefore, women should not practice the art of rhetoric, because having a greater tendency towards evil, they could cause more negative results with the weapon of persuasion than men. But why are women prone to evil, what is the substance of this evil that women embody?

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. DK68B44: *ἀληθόμυθον χρὴ εἶναι, οὐ πολὺλόγον*. "It is right to speak the truth and not many words."; B48; B53a; B55; B63; B67; B82; B85; B86; B113B115; B115c; B145; B150; B153; B153a; B177; B192; B225; B302,33.

<sup>4</sup> DK68B110: *γυνή μὴ ἀσκέιτω λόγον· δεινὸν γάρ*. "A woman should not practice speaking; for that is destructive". Cf. Thuc. 2. 45: *εἰ δέ με δεῖ καὶ γυναικειάς τι ἀρετῆς, ὅσαι νῦν ἐν χηρείᾳ ἔσσονται, μνησθῆναι, βραχείᾳ παραινέσει ἅπαν σημανῶ. τῆς τε γὰρ ὑπαρχούσης φύσεως μὴ χείροσι γενέσθαι ὑμῖν μεγάλη ἢ δόξα καὶ ἥς ἂν ἐπ' ἐλάχιστον ἀρετῆς πέρι ἢ φόγου ἐν τοῖς ἄρσεσι κλέος ᾗ*. "If I must also speak of female virtue, in relation to those who will henceforth live as widows, I will include all that I have to say in a brief exhortation: your glory will be great if you do not appear inferior to your natural character, and especially if as little as possible is said about each of you among men, whether for praise or for blame". Cf. Sophoc. *Antig.* 61-62.

## Democritus blinds himself so as not to look at women?

*Democritus excaecando semetipsum,  
quod muli concupiscentia aspicere non posset et doleret,  
si non esset potitus, incontinentiam emendatione profitetur.*

“Democritus, by partially blinding himself, admits with this corrective action his lack of restraint, because he could not look at women without desiring them, and because he was filled with sorrow because he could not exploit them erotically.”  
DK68A26 (Tert. Apolog. 46)

To delimit female vice, we must also refer to other textual data that can clarify it. According to an anecdotal report, Democritus blinded himself, or rather, he deliberately limited his visual capacity (DK68A27: *έκουσίως σβέσαι τὰς ὄψεις*) through bronze mirrors or shields that directed the reflection of the sun's incandescent rays into his eyes<sup>5</sup>. This admittedly

<sup>5</sup> Plutarch interestingly relays the information about Democritus' self-blinding, but then directly disputes this fact. Cf. DK68A27 (Plut. *De curios.* 12 p. 521D): *έκεινο μὲν ψευδός ἐστι τὸ Δημόκριτον έκουσίως σβέσαι τὰς ὄψεις ἀπερεισάμενον εἰς ἔσοπτρα πυρωθέντα καὶ τὴν ἀπ' αὐτῶν ἀνάκλασιν δεξάμενον, ὅπως μὴ παρέχῃσι θόρυβον τὴν διάνοιαν ἔξω καλοῦσαι πολλάκις, ἀλλ' ἔῳσιν ἔνδον οἰκουρεῖν καὶ διατρίβειν πρὸς τοῖς νοητοῖς ὥσπερ παρόδιοι θυρίδες ἐμφραγεῖσαι.* "This information is false, namely that Democritus blinded himself of his own will, after turning his eyes to incandescent bronze mirrors and receiving the reflection of heat from them, so that his intellect would not be disoriented by external representations, but would allow the intellect to dwell within him and concentrate on rational activity: it is like the windows facing the street are closed with shutters." Cf. DK68A22 (Cic. *Tusc.* v 39, 114): Democritus luminibus amissis alba scilicet discernere et atra non poterat at vero bona mala, aequa iniqua, honesta turpia, utilia inutilia, magna parva poterat, et sine varietate colorum licebat vivere beate, sine notione rerum non licebat. atque hic vir impediri etiam animi aciem aspectu oculorum arbitrabatur, et cum alii saepe quod ante pedes esset non viderent, ille <in> infinitatem omnem peregrinabatur, ut nulla in extremitate consisteret" Democritus, after losing his sight, truly could not distinguish white from black. However, he could distinguish good from evil, just from unjust, honest from shameful, beneficial from harmful, great from small. Without the variety of colors, he could live happily, while without the knowledge of things he could not. This man maintained that the vision of the spirit is obstructed by the vision of the eyes and, while

strange action was intended to prevent him from being diverted by the pleasures, activated by the sense of sight, from the search for theoretical truth. From this perspective, Democritus favors the rational path to science and rejects the uncertain knowledge of sensory data, which distorts the truth and disorients the wise man from his goal. One of the references (DK68A23) says that Democritus' act of limiting his visual acuity (*ita radiis solis aciem effodit luminis*) had political motives, as he no longer wanted to see bad citizens having a good time (*malis bene esse ne videret civibus*)<sup>6</sup>. This is not incompatible with his political theory which suggests the extension of ethics to politics and the assumption of governance of the political community by wise or virtuous citizens over selfish and unwise ones.

However, the deliberate limitation of vision, if it really occurred, seems to have had as its cause the limitation of visual images that disorient the wise and disrupt the intellectual process. The fragment DK68A26 adds the information that the main visual data that Democritus wanted to limit were women (*mulieres concupiscentia aspicere*), who aroused his erotic

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others did not see what was before their feet, he wandered with the power of the mind to the ends of the world”.

<sup>6</sup> DK68A23 (Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*, X 17): *luminibus oculorum sua sponte se privasse, quia existimaret cogitationes commentationesque animi sui in contemplantis naturae rationibus vegetiores et exactiores fore, si eas videndi inlecebris et oculorum impedimentis liberasset [...]*

*Democritus Abderites physicus philosophus  
clipeum constituit contra exortum Hyperionis,  
oculos effodere ut posset splendore aereo.  
ita radiis solis aciem effodit luminis,  
malis bene esse ne videret civibus.*

“Democritus [...] of his own accord deprived himself of eye-sight, because he believed that the thoughts and meditations of his mind in examining nature's laws would be more vivid and exact, if he should free them from the allurements of sight and the distractions offered by the eyes [...]

Democritus, Abdera's scientist,  
Set up a shield to face Hyperion's rise,  
That sight he might destroy by blaze of brass,  
Thus, by the sun's rays he destroyed his eyes,  
Lest he should see bad citizens' good luck;“

Trnsl. [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Gellius/10\\*.html#1](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Gellius/10*.html#1)



passion and led him to mental unrest and inability to control himself (*incontinentiam emendatione profitetur*)<sup>7</sup>. Here there is an identification of woman with the greatest human passion, erotic attraction and desire. This passion is so great that it forces Democritus to limit it drastically through the loss of vision, because he was not able to impose restraint within himself and let rationality dominate the passions. What can all this mean? First, that Democritus puts erotic pleasure with the other sex in the place of the powerful human passion. Erotic passion is stronger than the pleasures of the belly or the other senses. Secondly, that he confesses his own inclination towards erotic pleasure with women, his sensual nature cannot resist the female form. The woman constitutes the sensual stimulus that can cause great disturbance in the movement of the atoms of the soul and loss of restraint and self-control. Either the desire for the female form or the inability to fulfill this desire disrupts the order in the movement of the atoms of the soul and this in turn reduces the full development of phronesis. The undertaking of self-blinding constitutes an admission of the wise man's defeat by erotic passion and a corrective movement towards regaining the control of rationality over the passions.

### Democritus as an experienced lover?

ἀλλὰ καὶ κόρης ἀκολουθούσης τῷ Ἱπποκράτει  
τῇ μὲν πρώτῃ ἡμέρᾳ ἀσπάσασθαι οὕτω «χαῖρε κόρη»,  
τῇ δ' ἐχομένῃ «χαῖρε γύναι». καὶ ἦν ἡ κόρη τῆς νυκτὸς  
διεφθαρμένη.

“But also, the girl who followed Hippocrates on the first day he greeted her thus “hello, girl”, while on the next day “hello, woman”; the girl had lost her virginity during the night”.  
DK68A1.81-83

Nowhere in the available fragments is there a recorded love affair between Democritus and a woman either as a momentary pleasure or as a conjugal relationship. As far as we know, he

<sup>7</sup> DK68A26 (Tert. *Apolog.* 46).

never married, nor did he have children. However, there is one point where Democritus seems to recognize a woman's erotic experience at a glance<sup>8</sup>. In one of his meetings with the father of medical science, Hippocrates, Democritus turned his gaze to one of the doctor's followers and greeted her as "girl" (*χαῖρε κόρη*), that is, as a chaste girl who has not had sexual intercourse with a man. The next day, as soon as he saw the girl again, he addressed her as "woman" (*χαῖρε γυναῖ*), that is, as someone who has completed sexual intercourse and has lost her virginity. This incident shows, first of all, Democritus' experience with sexual relations with women. The wise man is so experienced in this field that he can diagnose the erotic "corruption" of a woman after the first sexual intercourse. Secondly, it confirms the special relationship that Democritus has with the female sex as something that attracts his undivided attention. It is a powerful passion that is observed throughout the entire spectrum of fragments and defines his character. Democritus, although he does not have a formal relationship with a woman, is undoubtedly a womanizer, a man who usually flirts and seduces or tries to seduce women with the aim of sexual intercourse. Also, regardless of whether this results in sexual intercourse, he is seen, as we saw earlier, by female figures, he likes to see beautiful women. The image of a woman as something inescapably attractive creates various mental, intellectual and corporal reactions in him.

### Admiration of women and erotic disappointment

*Δημοκρίτου ... εἶδωλα ἐσθῆτι καὶ κόσμῳ  
διαπρεπέα πρὸς θεωρίην, ἀλλὰ καρδίας κενεά.*

"Democritus: Women are attractive figures who attract attention thanks to their clothes and jewelry, but they have no heart."

DK68B195

The attractive influence of women on Democritus continues in DK68B195, where the philosopher confesses once again the

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<sup>8</sup> DK68A1.81-83.

admiration that the female form arouses in him. It is true that the first term of the sentence is missing, so we can make many assumptions about it<sup>9</sup>, however the reference to clothes (ἐσθῆτι) and jewelry (κόσμῳ) but also to the lack of a heart (καρδίας κενεά), one of the centers of all human activity along with the brain, has a rather literal meaning and is addressed to women. Women, then, are attractive idols (εἰδωλα), visual forms that come into sensory contact with the eyes and cause admiration because of the beautiful clothes and jewelry that adorn them. But, unfortunately, this amazing external appearance of the woman is not in harmony with her inner emptiness, as she has no heart, that is, she lacks high emotions or otherwise does not have the same depth of feelings of love, as a man. The depiction of the female form by Democritus through a few words is truly amazing. The woman is a shining idol, a magnificent visual form, perhaps real, but at the same time false; as all idols, partake of reality and illusion. This beautiful form forces you to see her, to admire her, the clothes and jewelry she wears intensify this visual effect (διαπρεπέα πρὸς θεωρίην). But in the end, it has the fate of all idols, that is, it lacks real substance, real feelings.

Furthermore, the references in the text lead us to the indication that Democritus has experienced some erotic disappointment with a woman. There is at the same time an obvious admiration for female beauty and a disappointment that this beauty does not transform into feelings of love. The heart is the center that maintains the flame of life<sup>10</sup> and the point of concentration of emotions<sup>11</sup>, a cornerstone for the functioning

<sup>9</sup> There is also the view that DK68B195 is not about women, but about human forms in the visual arts, painting, sculpture, and it suggests a view that parallels the Platonic (and Socratic?) view of art as being three degrees from truth. However, this view does not seem to have strong support in the specific passage where the reference to clothing, jewelry and heartlessness seems more appropriate for women. Zuckerman V. G., “Mimesis and the bodily sign in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* 3. 10” in Marsico C. (ed.) *Socrates and the Socratic Philosophies, Selected Papers from SOCRATICA IV*, Nomos, Baden-Baden, 2022, pp. 296-297.

<sup>10</sup> DK68B1: ἡ καρδία τὸ ἐμπύρευμα τῆς ζωῆς εἶχεν ἐγκείμενον τῷ βάθει. Cf. DK68A105.

<sup>11</sup> DK68B262: ἐγκάρδιον.

of the human organism. The statement about the absence of a heart in female figures undoubtedly shows a very great bitterness on Democritus' part, stemming from a relationship with a woman. The philosopher was hurt or betrayed erotically so much that he now distrusts the existence of true feelings on the part of women. His individual bad experience now acquires a universal connotation. It is a very harsh, universal statement about women, namely that they are internally empty. Not only do they have limited feelings, but the center of feelings, the heart, is completely absent from them. They are completely empty, heartless, beautiful images without any essential substance and emotional value, just like any image, of course, which if we stay only in the phenomenon and not in the essence that lies within it or in the symbolism that it exudes, is simply an idol, an optical illusion of truth.

### Woman and children as a bulwark in philosophical life

*Δημόκριτος δὲ γάμον καὶ παιδοποιίαν παραιτεῖται  
διὰ τὰς πολλὰς ἐξ αὐτῶν ἀηδίας τε  
καὶ ἀφολλκὰς ἀπὸ τῶν ἀναγκαιοτέρων*

"Democritus renounces marriage and childbearing, because these are causes of unpleasant events and create needs that keep people away from the most important issues".

DK68A170

But again, is only an isolated love disappointment enough for the universal condemnation of woman as a heartless illusion? Is there something more structural in the philosophical pessimism about woman? DK68A170 perhaps gives us a possible answer. Democritus renounces family life because he considers it an obstacle to achieving a more important goal. This goal is the discovery and knowledge of the causes of things<sup>12</sup>,

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<sup>12</sup> DK68A170: *Δημόκριτος γοῦν αὐτός, ὥς φασιν, ἔλεγε βούλεσθαι μᾶλλον μίαν εὐρεῖν αἰτιολογίαν ἢ τὴν Περσῶν οἱ βασιλείαν γενέσθαι*. "So Democritus, according to tradition, said that he wanted more to discover a causality for something than to become the king of the Persians."

that is, science or better, philosophy. The wise man needs free time to engage in the highest things and married family life filled with constant cares and suffering negates this perspective.

Having children is a result of the primordial natural process of reproduction and perpetuation of the species. All living beings participate in the reproductive process and take care as best they can for the upbringing of their offspring. In fact, in order for their offspring to develop properly, all living beings make great sacrifices and run great risks or sorrows if their children suffer any harm. All species raise their offspring selflessly without expecting any benefit from them. The same is true for human reproduction, but people have the illusion that they will derive some benefit from their offspring, which is why they are often dissatisfied with the possible ingratitude that they will show to their parents, but this is not normal for Democritus<sup>13</sup>.

Democritus renounces marriage and having children, because he considers that these manifestations of human social life constitute insurmountable obstacles to the realization of the free life of the wise man. Children and marriage create needs, which lead man away from the goal of tranquil bliss. Finding the truth of things requires dedication and tranquility, and the prospect of married life nullifies the ultimate goal of scientific research free from conventional bonds<sup>14</sup>. Democritus represents the ideal of the scientist-philosopher, who focuses undividedly on research and "worldly" life (women, children, marriage) constitutes an obstacle - as a deprivation of free time - to scientific activity.

Raising children is a matter of great uncertainty. In order to achieve the proper upbringing of a child, one goes through great anguish and care, which almost never cease. Also, the failure of upbringing is identified with the greatest failure in one's life. The pain of improper upbringing is incomparable to any other and leads parents to constant unhappiness<sup>15</sup>. Democritus even goes so far as to directly urge us not to have children, because their acquisition is equivalent to labor,

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<sup>13</sup> DK68B278.

<sup>14</sup> DK68A170.

<sup>15</sup> DK68B275.

danger, misery and sorrow. On the contrary, the benefits of child-rearing are meager and meaningless<sup>16</sup>.

Raising children is so difficult that the wise man urges adoption as an ideal solution. In the case of adoption, the person concerned does not risk as much as in natural reproduction, because in this way he chooses any child that corresponds to his constitution and his expectations, so that he will not be disappointed later. Adoption ensures right choice and certainty, while natural reproduction involves chance and the possibility of failure-disappointment<sup>17</sup>.

Under these circumstances, the woman as a permanent companion and pillar of family life is rejected by Democritus. At this point, the female gender is disapproved of as part of the family reality, which diverts the wise man or scientist from the continuous investigation of the nature of beings. The same image is present in other anecdotal stories about other wise men of antiquity, such as e.g., Thales of Miletus<sup>18</sup>, who also comically rejected married life and children, apparently having behind his funny sayings the idea that the activity of wisdom is disturbed by the arduous and time-consuming family environment. In fact, in Thales' excerpt, the motif of adoption appears again, as in the case of Democritus. Of course, under this reasoning, perhaps, the reverse could also be true, that is, a female philosopher or scientist rejected the family, the male husband, the children, etc. in order to dedicate herself to the contemplation of knowledge. Democritus should not have disagreed with this reverse case, if of course there were women with this

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<sup>16</sup> DK68B276.

<sup>17</sup> DK68B277. Vavouras E., *Democritus, Ethics – Politics: atoms - nature – city*, Zitros: Thessaloniki, 2020, pp. 309-311.

<sup>18</sup> Diog. Laert. 1.26: οἱ δὲ ἄγαμον μείναι, τῆς δὲ ἀδελφῆς τὸν υἱὸν θέσθαι. ὅτε καὶ ἐρωτηθέντα διὰ τί οὐ τεκνοποιεῖ, διὰ φιλοτεκνίαν εἰπεῖν. καὶ λέγουσι ὅτι τῆς μητρὸς ἀναγκαζούσης αὐτὸν γῆμαι ἔλεγεν, «οὐδέπω καιρός». εἶτα, ἐπειδὴ παρήβησεν ἐγκειμένης, εἰπεῖν, «οὐκέτι καιρός». "Some say that he remained unmarried and that he adopted his sister's son. When asked why he did not have children, he said that he did so because he loved children. And they say that when his mother pressured him to marry, he said, 'It is not yet time for me to do so'; later, when his adolescence passed and she insisted on marrying, he told her, 'There is no longer time for me to do so'."

philosophical or scientific profile, which was extremely rare in his time.

### Woman and human nature

But, if we focus on the Democritean view of human nature<sup>19</sup>, nowhere is there a separation of the two sexes, male and female, in terms of its structure and function. Everywhere Democritus speaks of human as a single entity<sup>20</sup> and not of man or woman. Human nature is structured by atoms and void, like every living or inanimate being in the natural world. Each part of the body consists of atoms of different texture and shape<sup>21</sup> and performs a different function within the overall human organism. The atoms of the material soul<sup>22</sup> are qualitatively superior to the atoms of the body, because firstly they have the ability of self-motion and secondly due to their smooth, very small and spherical size they can penetrate every part of the body and move it<sup>23</sup>. The atoms of the soul constitute

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Naddaf G., *The Greek Concept of Nature*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), pp. 152-161; Davison J. A., 'Protagoras, Democritus, and Anaxagoras', *The Classical Quarterly* 3, 1953, pp. 33-45.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. DK68B165; B124; B34.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Balme D., 'Greek Science and Mechanism II. The Atomists,' *Classical Quarterly*, 35, 1941), pp. 23-8; D. Furley, *The Greek Cosmologists vol 1: The Formation of the Atomic Theory and its Earliest Critics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 155-156; A. Gregory, 'Early ancient atomism: Similarities and differences' in Zilioli U., (ed.) *Atomism in philosophy: a history from antiquity to the present*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. pp.23-38.

<sup>22</sup> Warren J., 'Democritus, the Epicureans, Death, and Dying', *The Classical Quarterly* 52, 2002, pp. 193-206; C. C. W. Taylor, 'Democritus and Lucretius on death and dying' in A. Brancacci, and P. M. Morel (eds.), *Democritus: Science, The Arts, and the Care of the Soul*. (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2007), pp. 77-86; Piergiacomini E., 'Conflicts of Atomisms. Some Major Differences between Democritus and Colotes', *Elenchos* 37, 2016, pp. 147-180.

<sup>23</sup> Edmunds L., 'Necessity, Chance, and Freedom in the Early Atomists,' *Phoenix*, 26, 1972, pp. 342-57; Hasper P., 'Aristotle's Diagnosis of Atomism,' *Apeiron*, 39, 2006., pp. 121-155.

the motive cause<sup>24</sup> of every part and process within the material body.

Furthermore, for Democritus, the soul is identified with the mind (DK68A101: *ταῦτόν ψυχὴν καὶ νοῦν*. Cf. A101; A101a; A105a; A106; A107; A113). The movement of the soul produces intellectual process and the intellectual process in turn affects the movement of the soul (DK68A135, 70-71: *περὶ δὲ τοῦ φρονεῖν ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον εἴρηκεν ὅτι γίνεται συμμετρῶς ἐχούσης τῆς ψυχῆς κατὰ τὴν κοῖσιν*. Cf. A135, 73; B160). The right movement of the atoms of the soul is established when there is phronesis and rational thought, while in turn rationality is impossible without the harmonious movement of the atoms of the soul at the right intervals<sup>25</sup>. Intellect presupposes a calmness and symmetry in the material structure of the soul, while irrationality is a product of material disorder and turmoil (DK68B191: *ἐκ μεγάλων διαστημάτων κινούμεναι*). Every sensory data is received by the sensory organs of the body, but then comes into contact with the atoms of the soul that are scattered in every part of the human organism. The senses receive the data, but the soul, as identical with the rational mental process, decodes them and gives them meaning. The knowledge of the senses is a dark and uncertain knowledge (Cf. DK68A22; A23; A26; A27; B9; B11), because it cannot by itself produce safe and substantial conclusions, while the knowledge of the mind is a genuine knowledge, because through the rational critical ability it evaluates the cognitive data and gives them meaning appropriately<sup>26</sup>. The mind therefore has primacy in cognitive function, but without the data of

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<sup>24</sup> Barnes J., 1984. 'Reason and Necessity in Leucippus' in L. (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus* Benakis, Xanthi, 1984, pp. 141-158; Berryman S., 'Democritus and the explanatory power of the void,' in Caston V. and Graham D. (eds.), *Presocratic Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Alexander Mourelatos*, London: Ashgate, 2002, pp. 183-194; Taylor C. C. W., 'Democritus', in Rowe C. & Schofield M. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 122-129; Luchte J., *Early Greek thought: before the dawn* (London: Continuum, 2011, pp. 163-168.

<sup>25</sup> Warren J., *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics: An Archaeology of Ataraxia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2002, pp. 44-58.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor C. C. W., 'Pleasure, Knowledge and Sensation in Democritus', *Phronesis* 12, 1967, pp. 6-27.



the senses there could be no possibility of knowledge and rational thought<sup>27</sup>.

None of this excludes the female hypostasis. Woman and man have a common human nature and can understand and perceive the data of reality in the same way. Under the common term man or human nature, man and woman are exactly the same anthropologically, they have no difference in terms of cognitive ability and the movement of their soul that leads to happiness<sup>28</sup>. Democritus does not naturally degrade woman, but endows her with the same human abilities and elevates her to a level of absolute natural equality.

### Woman and virtue

Under the same terms, the equality of women is also signaled in terms of the prerequisites and conditions for achieving virtue. Democritus does not exclude female nature from the aretaic perspective, but includes it on an equal footing with man as a human being. The Democritean conception of virtue is directly related to the movement of the atoms of the soul and the intellectual process. The virtuous human, whether male or female, can form a proper order in the movement of the atoms of his soul and a rationality that stems from it. But how is this material order created within the soul? Avoiding excess and deficiency in the choice of pleasures (DK68B207)<sup>29</sup> is the first element of virtue. Excess and deficiency oppose the right measure<sup>30</sup> and this creates internal unrest in human

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Ganson T., 'Democritus against Reducing Sensible Qualities,' *Ancient Philosophy*, 19, 1999, pp. 201–15; Baldes R. W., 'Democritus on Visual Perception: Two Theories or One?' *Phronesis*, 20, 1975, pp. 93–105; Kahn C., 'Democritus on Moral Psychology' in Benakis L. (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus* (Xanthi, 1984), pp. 309–316

<sup>28</sup> Kahn C., 'Democritus and the Origins of Moral Psychology Source' *The American Journal of Philology*, 106, 1985, pp. 1–31.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Casertano G., 'Pleasure, desire and happiness in Democritus' in L. Benakis (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus*, Xanthi, 1984, pp. 347–352; Mejer J., 'Democritus and Democracy', *Apeiron* 37, 2004, pp. 1–10, at p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Dudley J., 'The ethics of Democritus and Aristotle' in Benakis L. (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus*, Xanthi, 1984,

nature. Every pleasure must be enjoyed in the right degree (DK68B191: *μετριοτήτι τέρψιος*)<sup>31</sup>, because any deviation from the right measure can be destructive. Also, pleasures are separated by Democritus into corporal and intellectual, of which the latter are more qualitative than the former. The superiority of intellectual pleasures consists in the direct relationship that they have with the formation of the right movement of the soul and in their long-term power (DK68B211: *ἡδονὴν ἐπιμείζονα*). The pleasures of the mind create symmetry in the movement of the soul, but also last longer than the corporal ones. On the contrary, corporal pleasures create disorder and unrest in the structure of the soul and are transitory, as soon as the pleasure passes, their potential benefit also passes (DK68B235: *ἡδοναὶ βραχεῖαι, τέρψις βραχεῖα*)<sup>32</sup>.

The virtuous man has reached a level of natural completion that allows him to choose the right measure between excess and deficiency, but also intellectual pleasures over corporal ones. However, this aretaic development has another structural precondition. No choice can be made without a rational process about good and evil<sup>33</sup>. Man is free to choose both good and evil, he is absolutely free and at the same time responsible for his well-being and destruction. However, only choosing the right leads to happiness (DK68B191: *βίου συμμετρίῃ*)<sup>34</sup>, one

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pp. 371-384; Stewart Z., 'Democritus and the Cynics' *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 63, 1958, pp. 179-191, at. 183.

<sup>31</sup> DK68B70; B71; B72; B191; B233; D. Wolfsdorf, *Pleasure in ancient Greek philosophy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 13-17.

<sup>32</sup> DK68B37; B129; B189; B146; DK68B211; DK68B235.

<sup>33</sup> Gosling J. C. B., Taylor C.C.W., *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1982), pp. 27-37; D. Wolfsdorf, *Pleasure in ancient Greek philosophy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 13-17; McGibbon D., 'Pleasure as the "Criterion" in Democritus', *Phronesis*, 5, 1960, pp. 75-77.

<sup>34</sup> Guseinov A. A., 'The Ethics of Democritus' *Soviet Studies in Philosophy* 26, 1987, pp. 53-65; Kourtoglou O., Vavouras E., & Sariannidis N., "The Stoic Paradigm of Ethics as a Philosophical Tool for Objectifying the Concepts of Organizational Ethics, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Corporate Governance", *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 9 (2), 2024, pp. 119-143.

cannot be happy by making wrong choices<sup>35</sup>. The right reason is the one that judges and weighs the data and ensures the right decision. Happiness without rationality cannot exist. Happiness presupposes the dominance of reason over the passions and the senses, just as the animate material mind dominates and controls the irrational body<sup>36</sup> (DK168B31: σοφίη δὲ ψυχὴν παθῶν ἀφαιρεῖται).

Feminine nature is not treated as something different from the totality of human nature. Woman can become as virtuous as man, because she shares the same degree of rationality as him. If she perceives the right measure between excess and deficiency and if she proceeds to choose what is good for human nature, she can reach the goal<sup>37</sup> of happiness. Virtue does not depend on physical strength or physique, where women differ from men, but on the ability of rationality and phronesis, where there is absolutely no difference between the two sexes. Both women and men can develop phronesis to the maximum extent and become wise, so that they make right choices and transmit symmetrical movement to the atoms of their soul, which is equivalent to a condition of happiness<sup>38</sup>. Conversely, both sexes can equally make incorrect choices under the dominance of irrationality and fall into the kinetic turmoil of the

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Berryman S., 'Democritus', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2023 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democritus/>; Vlastos G., 'Ethics and physics in Democritus' in Furley D. J., and Allen R. E., (eds.), *Studies in Presocratic Philosophy*. Volume 2: *Eleatics and Pluralists*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975, pp. 381–408; Guthrie W. K. C., *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962, pp. 496–497; Michaelidis K. P., 'Human, a small world. The nexus between human and world in Democritus', in Benakis L. (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus*, Xanthi, 1984, pp. 127–136; Taylor C. C. W., *The Atomists Leucippus and Democritus: fragments: a text and translation with a commentary*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press., 1999, p. 227.

<sup>36</sup> Vavouras E., 'Hobbes' hedonism in front of classical hedonism and the free market 's way out', *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 13, 2022, pp. 85–114.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Hirsch U., 'War Demokrits Weltbild mechanistisch und antiteologisch?' *Phronesis*, 35, 1990, pp. 225–244.

<sup>38</sup> Michaelidis K. P., 'Human, a small world. The nexus between human and world in Democritus', in Benakis L. (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus*, Xanthi, 1984, pp. 127–136, at p. 132.

atoms of the soul, but at the same time into unhappiness<sup>39</sup>. According to Democritus, women and men are absolutely equal in both happiness and unhappiness. Democritean ethics does not recognize any distinction between the two sexes in its application.

### Woman and political governance

*Δημοκρίτου. ἀνδρεῖος οὐχ ὁ τῶν πολεμίων μόνον,  
ἀλλὰ καὶ ὁ τῶν ἡδονῶν κρέσσων.*

*ἔνιοι δὲ πολίων μὲν δεσπόζουσι, γυναῖξι δὲ δουλεύουσιν.*

“Democritus: Brave human is not only one who is more powerful than his enemies but also one who is more powerful than pleasures. But there are some men who, while governing cities, are slaves to women”.

DK68B214

The pattern of Democritean ethics is also transferred to politics, as these two philosophical areas are communicating vessels. The political governor must have all those ethical resources that will allow him to make right decisions. Before one deals with the happiness of the political community, one must first of all become happy himself. Being happy means first of all that rationality governs the passions and pleasures, which allows the choice of what is good for human nature. Politics cannot be defined otherwise than as relations of dominance and subordination of the parts of the state with the aim of the happiness of the political whole<sup>40</sup>. According to Democritean ethics, as we have seen, people are not equal in terms of aretaic integration. There are humans who are distinguished by their wisdom (DK68B197: *δαήμονες*, B236: *ἀνδρὸς εὐλογίστου*) and the rightness of their choices, and others who are unwise<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Nill M., *Morality and self-interest in Protagoras, Antiphon and Democritus*, Netherlands: Brill, 1985, p. 79.

<sup>40</sup> Procopé J. F., ‘Democritus on Politics and the Care of the Soul’, *The Classical Quarterly*, 39, 1989, pp. 307-331, at 310-311.

<sup>41</sup> *ἀνόητοι, ἄξύνετοι, ἀνοήμονες, νηπίοισιν*, DK68B235; B54; B58; B76; B98; B71; B73; B75; B76; B78; B79; B113; B292. Cf. Zatta C., ‘Democritus

and have wrong decisions. At the political level, those who decide wrongly cannot govern those who decide rightly, and it is not possible for the unwise to govern the wise<sup>42</sup>. The different level of phronesis and virtue of citizens also determines their political position. The virtuous should be in positions of political governance and the non-virtuous should accept their guidelines<sup>43</sup>.

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and folly: The two wise Fools' *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme Et Renaissance*, 63, 2001, pp. 533-549.

<sup>42</sup> Ferwerda R., 'Democritus and Plato' *Mnemosyne* 25, 1972, pp. 337-378, at p. 371.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. DK68B47: νόμῳ καὶ ἄρχοντι καὶ τῷ σοφωτέρῳ εἵκειν κόσμιον. "It is proper to submit to the law, to the political governor, and to the wisest."

DK68B49: χαλεπὸν ἄρχεσθαι ὑπὸ χειρότερου. "It is unbearable to be ruled by someone worse than you."

DK68B56: τὰ καλὰ γνωρίζουσι καὶ ζηλοῦσιν οἱ εὐφύεες πρὸς αὐτά. "Those who have the appropriate nature for achieving good things know and pursue them."

DK68B58: ἐλπίδες αἱ τῶν ὀρθὰ φρονεόντων ἐφικταί, αἱ δὲ τῶν ἄξυνέτων ἀδύνατοι. "The hopes of those who think rightly are achievable, while those of unwise men cannot be realized." Cf. B292.

DK68B75: κρέσσον ἄρχεσθαι τοῖς ἀνοήτοισιν ἢ ἄρχειν. "It is better for unwise men to be governed than to govern."

DK68B214: ἀνδρείος οὐχ ὁ τῶν πολέμων μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὁ τῶν ἡδονῶν κρέσσων. ἔνιοι δὲ πολλῶν μὲν δεσπόζουσι, γυναιξὶ δὲ δουλεύουσιν. "Brave is not only he who is more powerful than his enemies, but also, he who is more powerful than pleasures. But there are some who, while ruling cities, are slaves to women."

DK68B254: οἱ κακοὶ ἰόντες ἐς τὰς τιμὰς ὀκόσωι ἂν μᾶλλον ἀνάξιοι ἐόντες ἴωσι, τοσοῦτωι μᾶλλον ἀνακηδέες γίνονται καὶ ἀφροσύνης καὶ θράσεος πίμπλονται. "When non-integrated by nature citizens assume political offices, the more unworthy they are of it, the more impious they become, full of recklessness and impudence."

DK68B263: δίκης καὶ ἀρετῆς μεγίστην μετέχει μοῖραν ὁ (τιμὰς) ἀξίας τὰς μεγίστας τάμων [τοῖς ἀξιώτατοις] (?). "In justice and virtue, the one who bestows the most important and greatest political offices on worthy citizens, has the greatest share."

DK68B265: οὕτω καὶ τὸν ἄρχοντα. οὐ γὰρ ἐπὶ τούτῳι ἡρέθη ὡς κακῶς ποιῶν, ἀλλ' ὡς εὖ. "The same applies to the political governor. That is, he was not elected to wrong the political body, but to benefit it."

DK68B267: φύσει τὸ ἄρχειν οἰκίμον τῷ κρέσσονι. "By nature, political governance belongs to the superior."

DK68B302,21: δεῖ δὲ τὸν ἑτέρων μέλλοντα ἄρξειν αὐτὸν ἑαυτοῦ πρῶτον ἄρχειν. "He who is going to rule others must first rule himself."

In this equation of virtue-political governance, women are not left out, as they are also rational beings to the same extent as men. Therefore, political ability does not represent only one gender, but extends to every virtuous human. If the prerequisite for right political governance is ethical integration, a woman as a virtuous human, who subordinates passions to rationality and chooses rightly between good and evil, can undoubtedly politically direct a civil society as a virtuous politician<sup>44</sup>. The principles of Democritus' political philosophy unequivocally anoint women as potential political agents and make them absolutely equal to men on statesmanship.

However, there are some passages that show that perhaps Democritus demeans women in terms of political governance. DK68B214 mentions that there are some politicians who, while we see them governing cities (*ἐνιοι δὲ πόλιν μὲν δεσπόζουσι*), are slaves to women (*γυναιξὶ δὲ δουλεύουσιν*). This reference shows that Democritus probably considers women to be destined for the home and that only men can engage in the greatest undertaking of politics (DK68B157: *πολιτικὴν τέχνην μεγίστην οὔσαν*). Also, for a woman to govern a man seems to be extremely demeaning to him in the eyes of many who make up the political community. However, things are not so simple, the first part of the passage refers to the necessary precondition for assuming political governance, which is bravery against enemies (*ἀνδρείος οὐχ ὁ τῶν πολέμων μόνον*). However, as Democritus informs us, bravery consists primarily in the inner rational dominance of man over his pleasures (*ἀλλὰ καὶ ὁ τῶν ἡδονῶν κρέσσων*)<sup>45</sup>. The virtue of bravery is not separated for

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DK68B302,21: *ὁ ἀρετὴν τιμῶν πρῶτην ἀλήθειαν τιμᾷ καὶ μάλιστα ὡς ἀγαθοῦ παντὸς ἡγεμόνα οὔσαν*. "He who appreciates virtue appreciates truth above all else, with the idea that it is the governor of every good thing."

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Warren J., 'Democritus on social and psychological harm', in A. Brancacci, and P. M. Morel (eds.), *Democritus: Science, The Arts, and the Care of the Soul*, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2007, pp. 87-104.

<sup>45</sup> *ὁ τῶν ἡδονῶν κρέσσων*: Cf., Plat., *Gorg.*, 491d-e: *ΣΩ. Τί δέ; αὐτῶν ὧς ἐταῖρε, τί; ἢ τι ἄρχοντα; ἢ ἄρχομένους; ΚΑΛ. Πῶς λέγεις; ΣΩ. Ἐνα ἕκαστον λέγω αὐτὸν ἑαυτοῦ ἄρχοντα· ἢ τοῦτο μὲν οὐδὲν δεῖ αὐτὸν ἑαυτοῦ ἄρχειν, τῶν δὲ ἄλλων; ΚΑΛ. Πῶς ἑαυτοῦ ἄρχοντα λέγεις; ΣΩ. Οὐδὲν ποικίλον ἀλλ' ὥσπερ οἱ πολλοί, σώφρονα ὄντα καὶ ἐγκρατῆ αὐτὸν ἑαυτοῦ, τῶν ἡδονῶν καὶ ἐπιθυμιῶν ἄρχοντα τῶν ἐν ἑαυτῷ. "So.: Do they govern*

men and women, but applies to both sexes as a common denominator. Women as human beings can think rationally and dominate over their pleasures. Therefore, they can be brave and, consequently, govern cities. The reference to some politicians being enslaved to women is probably related to their enslavement to aphrodisiac pleasures, which include desire and lust for the female sex and not to women as political governors. The vast majority of politicians in Democritus' time were men, so the enslavement to pleasures mentioned in the passage is personified as enslavement to women<sup>46</sup>.

Also, the passage DK68B111 moves along the same interpretative line. Democritus said that the greatest dishonor (*ὑβρις εἶη ἂν ἀνδρὶ ἐσχάτη*) for a man is to be ruled by a woman (*ὑπὸ γυναικὸς ἄρχεσθαι*)<sup>47</sup>. If we take the meaning of the sentence literally, the conclusion will be drawn that a man should never be subject to a woman and that, when this happens, it is tantamount to the greatest shame or dishonor. Therefore, political governance must be a matter for men and women are not only incompetent for such a thing, but completely unsuitable, to the point that, if they were to find themselves in a position of political power, it would arouse feelings of shame. But here too we should not choose such an obvious

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*themselves, my friend, what do you think? Are they rulers or ruled? Cal.: What do you mean by that? So.: I mean that each one should be the ruler of himself; or is that not proper, that one should govern himself, but should be the ruler of others? Kal.: What do you mean, govern himself? S.: Nothing complicated, but exactly what is recorded as the opinion of many, that one should be prudent and temperate with regard to oneself, absolute master of one's pleasures and desires". Cf. Gorg. DK82B11a (Pal. 13): οἱ κρείττονες τῶν τῆς φύσεως ἡδονῶν.*

<sup>46</sup> Cf. *De Pac.* 103, where Isocrates identifies the passion for power (*ἡδεσαν τὴν ἐξουσίαν*) with beautiful courtesans (*τὴν φύσιν ὁμοίαν ἔχει ταῖς ἐταίραις*), who make men desire them erotically and thus fall into destructive irrationality (*ὥς παραφρονεῖν ποιεῖ τοὺς ἀγαπῶντας αὐτὴν*), that is, the subordination of reason to passions. The identification of pleasures and more generally of passions with women, who dominate humans (*ἀπατηλαί τινες δέσποιναι προσποιούμεναι ἡδοναὶ εἶναι*), just as beautiful women seduce men erotically and prevent them from doing useful works, is also found in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* (1.20-21).

<sup>47</sup> DK68B111: *ὑπὸ γυναικὸς ἄρχεσθαι ὑβρις εἶη ἂν ἀνδρὶ ἐσχάτη*. "The ultimate dishonor for a man is to be ruled by a woman". Cf. Soph. *Antig.* 677-680; Plat. *Men.* 71e.

and hasty interpretation. The word *hubris* undoubtedly has an ethical content and is related to the transcendence of natural limits, of the right measure. Hubris is opposed to phronesis as a moment of irrationality, as a moment of the domination of passions over rationality<sup>48</sup>. Therefore, the meaning of the term is not political in the literal sense, that is, that it is a dishonor for a man to be politically governed by a woman or conversely that it is improper for a woman to take a political position within a civil society, even if she is wise or virtuous. On the contrary, the meaning of the fragment is ethical in the sense that it is the utmost excess of natural rightness or natural measure for reason to be governed by the humblest aphrodisiac passions, which are personified in woman. Therefore, it is an excess of the right measure for a man to subordinate the rational element of his nature to the humblest erotic passions of desire for a woman. This position is consistent with previous interpretative attempts on the relationship of the term woman with the tendency towards erotic pleasures and the circumvention of rational process of phronesis.

### Woman as the personification of the strongest human passion

κάκ τῆς χρήσεως τοῦ πυρὸς αἱ τέχναι προσφευρέθησαν, δι' ὧν ὁ  
κόσμος κοσμεῖται καὶ τὰ ἡδέα ἡμῖν καὶ τερπνὰ καὶ ἀβρότατα γίνεται  
δίκην γυναικὸς ἡμᾶς καταθέλγοντα καὶ τρυφερωτέρους ἀπεργαζόμενα, ὃ  
καλεῖ πλάσιν γυναικὸς ὁ ποιητής.

“From the use of fire were discovered the arts, which offer pleasure,  
delight and refined behavior, which attract us strongly, just like woman,  
and make us more susceptible to pleasures, which the poet defines as the  
irresistible nature of woman.”

DK68B5

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Plat. *Phaedr.* 237e-238a: δόξης μὲν οὖν ἐπὶ τὸ ἄριστον λόγῳ ἀγοῦσης καὶ κρατούσης τῷ κράτει σωφροσύνη ὄνομα· ἐπιθυμίας δὲ ἀλόγως ἐλκούσης ἐπὶ ἡδονὰς καὶ ἀρξάσης ἐν ἡμῖν τῇ ἀρχῇ ὕβρις ἐπωνομάσθη. “The dominance of opinion, which through reason leads to the best and dominates, is called prudence; while the dominance of desire, which, by dominating us, leads us irrationally to pleasure, is called hubris”. Cf. Theogn. *Eleg.* 379; Xen. *Cyr.* 8.4.14.



Based on all these findings, we come to the conclusion that woman in Democritus is the personification of the strong erotic passion, of erotic pleasure. Tzetzi's reference to DK68B5 confirms this version again. Democritus here refers to the discovery of fire, which was the cause for the creation of the new arts, which make people more refined (*ἀβρότατα*) and more prone to pleasures (*τὰ ἡδέα ἡμῖν καὶ τερπνὰ*). The arts are the path to well-being, to the development of a life without physical strain and labor. The arts raise the standard of living<sup>49</sup>, but at the same time they also increase voluptuousness (*τρυφερωτέρους*), softness and lack of hardness. However, the convenience they provide attracts humans strongly (*καταθέλγοντα*), to the point where they cannot resist their attraction for promised comforts. Up to this point there is nothing inconsistent in the development of the passage, however the attraction that the arts exert on man is likened by Democritus to the irresistible attraction (*δίκην γυναικὸς*) that feminine nature exerts on man (*πλάσιν γυναικὸς*).

It is surprising that Democritus uses the attraction that a woman exerts on a man to show how much the arts attract people, but also how much the pleasure created by them leads to softness, just like erotic pleasures. From this passage it is clear that the reference to woman has a symbolic use and is related to Democritean ethics. Woman is identified with erotic pleasures, which must be overcome by human rational ability. Also, Democritus's insurmountable admiration for feminine nature is highlighted once again. The nature of woman is irresistible, almost poetic, it is very difficult to resist this sublime natural beauty, this powerful attraction of beauty and the erotic desire for pleasure. There is a real confession of Democritus about the influence that woman exerts on him as a man who desires her incessantly, but also as a philosopher who struggles to free himself from this powerful influence of erotic passion

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<sup>49</sup> Cole T., *Democritus and the Sources of Greek Anthropology*, Cleveland: Western Reserve University Press, 1967, pp. 40-41; Kouloumparitsis, L., 1984. 'Physics and Anthropology in Democritus' in Benakis L. (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus*, Xanthi, 1984, pp. 67-85, at pp. 80-81.

through rationality. If he really managed to escape the shackles of female charm, he did so with difficulty, perhaps he really blinded himself, in order to achieve the impossible. But still woman is as sweet and desirable as human civilization itself<sup>50</sup>. If there is something with which the progress and development of the arts can be compared, it is the pleasure that emanates from woman. The entire human condition and the significant achievements of technological development<sup>51</sup> barely compare to the natural female form and the erotic pleasure that emanates from it. We really do not know if there is a greater hymn to woman in the history of philosophy in the sense that all human civilizational activity pales before it.

### Democritus dies among women

κάνταῦθά φησιν [Asklepiades], ὥς λόγος ἔχει Δημόκριτον ἀσιτήσαντα  
τέσσαρας ἡμέρας πρὸς τῷ ἀναιρεῖσθαι γίνεσθαι καὶ αὐτὸν  
παρακληθέντα πρὸς τινων γυναικῶν ἐπιμεῖναι ἡμέρας τινὰς ἐν τῷ βίῳ,  
καὶ ἵνα μὴ γένωνται ταύταις δυστυχῶς τὰ κατὰ κείνους τοὺς χρόνους  
Θεσμοφόρια λελυμένα, φασὶν αὐτὸν ἀπαλλάττειν κελεῦσαι, καθίζειν δὲ  
πρὸς τοὺς ἄρτους, καὶ τούτους καταπνεῖν ἀτμὸν τὸν γινόμενον. καὶ ὁ  
Δημόκριτος ἀποσπασάμενος τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ ἵπνου ἀτμὸν ῥώννυται τε τὰς  
δυνάμεις καὶ ἐπιβιοῖ τὸ λοιπόν.

“And there he [i.e., Asclepiades, a first century BC medical writer] says that there is a story that Democritus had fasted for four days and was on the point of death when some women begged him to remain alive for a few days, so that the Thesmophoria, which were then being celebrated, should not be spoiled by an ill omen.<sup>46</sup> He told them to go away, and sat by the loaves which were being baked so that the vapour blew on him.

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<sup>50</sup> For the conventional form of human civilization and civil society cf. Kahn C., ‘The Origins of Social Contract Theory in the Fifth Century B.C.’ In Kerferd G. B. (ed.) *The Sophists and Their Legacy: Proceedings of the Fourth International Colloquium on Ancient Philosophy* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1981), pp. 92-108; Robitzsch J. M., ‘Democritus on Human Nature and Sociability’, *Ancient Philosophy* 44, 2024, pp. 1-15.

<sup>51</sup> Iribadjakov N., ‘The philosophical-historical and sociological views of Democritus’ in Benakis L. (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus*, Xanthi, 1984, pp. 415-422

And Democritus regained his strength by inhaling the vapour from the oven, and so lived on for the remaining time”<sup>52</sup>.

DK68A28

Of great interest is also the way in which Democritus died, among women. When Democritus reached a very old age (possibly 109 years old) he decided to die voluntarily, abstaining from food for a few days. Because those days coincided with the festival of Thesmophoria, some women of the house in which he was staying (or his sister DK68A1.84-91) begged Democritus to somehow postpone his voluntary death, so as not to tarnish the festival. He agreed on the precondition that they place him next to warm bread - or honey according to another version (DK68A29) - so that he could breathe the steam or the smell they gave off and remain in existence. The women obeyed Democritus's exhortation and the philosopher was able to stay alive for a few more days until the festival was over, revived by this paradoxical trick.

Even the last days of Democritus' life have the air of a scientific experiment, as the trick with the smell of bread or honey is probably related to his theory of respiration<sup>53</sup>. Democritus

<sup>52</sup> Taylor C. C. W. 1999. *The Atomists Leucippus and Democritus: fragments: a text and translation with a commentary*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 65-66.

<sup>53</sup> DK68A106: Δημόκριτος δ' ὅτι μὲν ἐκ τῆς ἀναπνοῆς συμβαίνει τι τοῖς ἀναπνεύουσι λέγει, φάσκων κωλύειν ἐκθλίβεσθαι τὴν ψυχὴν· οὐ μέντοι ὡς τούτου γ' ἔνεκα ποιήσασαν τοῦτο τὴν φύσιν οὐθὲν εἴρηκεν· ὅλως γὰρ ὥσπερ καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι φυσικοὶ καὶ οὗτος οὐθὲν ἄπτεται τῆς τοιαύτης αἰτίας. λέγει δ' ὡς ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ θερμὸν ταῦτόν, τὰ πρῶτα σχήματα τῶν σφαιροειδῶν. συγκρινομένων οὖν αὐτῶν ὑπὸ τοῦ περιέχοντος ἐκθλίβοντος, βοήθειαν γίνεσθαι τὴν ἀναπνοὴν φησιν. ἐν γὰρ τῷ ἀέρι πολὺν ἀριθμὸν εἶναι τῶν τοιούτων ἃ καλεῖ ἐκείνος νοῦν καὶ ψυχὴν· ἀναπνεόντος οὖν καὶ εἰσιόντος τοῦ ἀέρος συνεισιόντα ταῦτα καὶ ἀνείργοντα τὴν θλίψιν κωλύειν τὴν ἐνοῦσαν ἐν τοῖς ζώοις διέναι ψυχὴν. καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ἐν τῷ ἀναπνεῖν καὶ ἐκπνεῖν εἶναι τὸ ζῆν καὶ τὸ ἀποθνήσκειν· ὅταν γὰρ κρατῇ τὸ περιέχον συνθλίβον καὶ μηκέτι θύραθεν εἰσιὸν δυνήται ἀνείργειν, μὴ δυναμένου ἀναπνεῖν, τότε συμβαίνει τὸν θάνατον τοῖς ζώοις· εἶναι γὰρ τὸν θάνατον τὴν τῶν τοιούτων σχημάτων ἐκ τοῦ σώματος ἔξοδον ἐκ τῆς τοῦ περιέχοντος ἐκθλίψεως. τὴν δ' αἰτίαν, διὰ τί ποτε πᾶσι μὲν ἀναγκαῖον ἀποθανεῖν, οὐ μέντοι ὅτε ἔτυχεν, ἀλλὰ κατὰ φύσιν μὲν γήραι, βίαι δὲ παρὰ φύσιν, οὐθὲν δεδήλωκεν. “Democritus says that breathing has the effect of

believed that the material atoms of the body and especially the soul or mind that make up the human organism are renewed through the process of breathing<sup>54</sup> through the respiratory passages of the nose or mouth, but possibly also through the pores of the skin. As long as a person is young, these pores are open and the atoms are renewed smoothly, but as a person ages, the pores, in combination with the pressure exerted by the external air<sup>55</sup>, close and there is an imbalance in the atoms that are lost and those that enter through breathing, with the result that the human organism gradually declines and ultimately death occurs as a condition of non-renewal of the internal atoms by the influx of atoms from the external world. This trick with the smell is perhaps based on this biological theory with the aim of proving that the atoms that come out of the food through the steam may also contain nutrients, as they enter through the respiratory system or the pores of the skin into the human being. In this paradoxical way, Democritus managed to prove that his theory of breathing is valid, because he managed to

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preventing the soul from being squeezed out, but he does not say that nature acts for that purpose; in general, he, like the other natural scientists, makes no use of that cause. He says that the soul and the hot are identical, consisting of spherical atoms, and when these are separated out by the squeezing of the surroundings, help comes from breathing. For in the air there are a great number of atoms of that kind, which he calls mind and soul; when one breathes in these come in along with the air and, by resisting the pressure, prevent the soul which is in the animal from slipping out. That is why life and death depend on breathing in and out. For when the pressure of the surroundings gets the upper hand and there is no further external supply to resist it, i.e., when the animal cannot breathe in, then death occurs; for death is the loss of those atoms from the body through the pressure of the surroundings. But he gave no explanation of the reason why everything must die, not in a chance fashion, but naturally of old age, or by violence contrary to nature". Taylor C. C. W. 1999. *The Atomists Leucippus and Democritus: fragments: a text and translation with a commentary*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. 104; Arist. *De Anima*, 403b25-404a16; *De Partibus Animalium*, 652b8-15; Philoponus, *Commentary on the De Anima*, 68.20-69.5.

<sup>54</sup> Augustin M., Pellò C., "Life and Lifeforms in Early Greek Atomism", *Apeiron* 55: 4, 2022, pp. 601-625.

<sup>55</sup> Peixoto M. C. D., "Life, Birth and Death in Democritus. Atomistic Reflections Between Physics and Ethics", *Peitho / Examina Antiqua* 1: 8, 2017, pp. 141-153.

prolong his life with the smell of food, which apparently brought atoms into him from outside. Women, therefore, are also present in Democritus' last moments as the impetus for this strange experimental incident. The philosopher's relationship with women is special and multifaceted until its remarkable end.

## Conclusions

1. From the discussion of the issue so far, it emerges that the image of woman in Democritus has two aspects. First, at a superficial glance, Democritus seems to adopt the view of his time and to place the woman within the home as a being destined for the birth of children and their upbringing. The woman should not talk much and, moreover, should not question the dominance of the man for any reason. Also, the woman should remain in the background, far from the field of development of socio-political life and particularly from political offices. Furthermore, the woman is surrounded by a veil of ethical degradation and a tendency towards erotic pleasure, which is the greatest cause of disorientation from the path of virtue and wisdom. Second, with a more thorough reading, this first impression seems to be shaken. The texts demonstrate to us that the term woman takes on a symbolic content, related to erotic pleasure in general. Democritus personifies in woman the dominance of passions over rationality, something that disrupts the smooth movement of the soul's atoms and intellectual function. Therefore, the meaning of most passages is not literal, but symbolic, as they represent the rational battle of the philosopher, the natural scientist or more generally the virtuous man or politician against the humblest passions, which torpedo their most important undertaking.

2. This observation is reinforced by the Democritean view of virtue and happiness. Democritus nowhere excludes woman from the direction of happiness. Woman is a human being who can reach aretaic integration through rational choices that will create a proper order in the movement of the atoms of the soul. Woman's rational ability allows her to be virtuous and

happy, because human value is determined by human choices and not by human gender. Since a woman participates in reason and her soul can move harmoniously, she is no different from a man in the perspective of happiness. Discerning the right measure and choosing long-term and more beneficial intellectual pleasures over short-term corporal ones can make a woman integrated according to the order of nature and happy according to the rightness of virtue.

3. Also, the participation of women in the process of virtue paves the way for their equal participation in politics and specifically in the governance of the state. Democritus says that only those who have mastered their pleasures with rationality can rightfully claim political governance, only the virtuous or the wise have a share in power, while the wicked and the unwise must be in a position of submission, since they are the prey of their humble passions and their decisions are wrong. If a woman can be wise or virtuous, she clearly must be placed in a position of political governance vis-à-vis men who are unwise and non-virtuous. Democritus' eudaimonistic<sup>56</sup> perspective on virtue, which does not exclude women from happiness, validates her inclusion in politics. Also, this view does not exclude women from education<sup>57</sup>. Democritus, when referring to the education of young people, does not speak specifically about boys, but about children in general. Children, whether male or female, must be taught self-respect and mutual respect (DK68B179: αἰδώς) through the persuasion of laws or the imitation<sup>58</sup> of virtuous acts, so that they can

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<sup>56</sup> Annas J., 'Democritus and Eudaimonism' in V. Caston and D. Graham (eds.), *Presocratic Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Alexander Mourelatos*, London: Ashgate, 2002, pp. 169–182; Johnson M., 'The Ethical Maxims of Democritus of Abdera' in Wolfsdorf D., (ed.) *Early Greek Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 211–242, at pp. 232–238.

<sup>57</sup> Lenz F., 'ΕΘΟΣ ΔΕΥΤΕΡΗ ΦΥΣΙΣ: A New Fragment of Democritus?' *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 73, 1942, pp. 214–231; Tortora G., 'Φύσις and διδασχὴ in Democritus ethical conception' in Benakis L. (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1st International Congress on Democritus*, Xanthi, 1984, pp. 387–397

<sup>58</sup> DK68B39: ἀγαθὸν ἢ εἶναι χρεῶν ἢ μιμεῖσθαι. "One must either be virtuous or imitate a virtuous man"; B53; B79; B154; B184; B194; B208; B302.32; Cf. Luria S., *Democritus*, Nauka publishers: Leningrad, 1970,

become part of the political organization and subsequently develop any political activity.

4. Is Democritus, after all, misogynist or phallocrat? One could easily accuse Democritus of misogyny by adopting a superficial reading of his positions. However, if we deepen our analysis, especially under the development of his philosophical system, we will find that this accusation is frivolous to unfounded. Democritus is not only not an opponent of women, but he is a pioneer and radical thinker who includes women in every realization of his philosophical proposals. Women are treated equally with men as wise, virtuous or political humans and receive an equal share in virtue, happiness and political governance or in other words in human individual and political fulfillment. Democritus stands against the conventional views of his time that placed women in the background of socio-political life and limited the horizons of their happiness, making them a living tool of male pursuits. The presentation of the Democritean positions scientifically and philosophically negates this marginalization and includes women equally in every aspect of integrated human life.

5. Any opposition of Democritus to female nature occurs either on a symbolic or personal level. Woman either symbolizes the intense erotic pleasure, which reason combats within human nature, or symbolizes family life, which constitutes an obstacle to the fulfillment of the ideal of wisdom and science. If we put a woman in the position of the wise or virtuous person, the same rejection would apply on her part to man as a source of pleasure or disorientation from the philosophical life. Undoubtedly, Democritus had his own personal experiences with women either at the level of erotic disappointment or at the level of voluptuous attraction towards them. The anecdotal reports about his bitterness or his attempt at self-blinding show that there was an intense contact with the female sex, which marked him indelibly. However, Democritus' philosophical suggestions are not drawn into these personal feelings, but propose the equal valuation of both sexes in terms of achieving

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comment 562,1; Voros F., 'Democritus' Educational Thought', *Paedagogica Historica*, 15, 2006, pp. 457-470.

material order in the movement of the atoms of the soul and therefore in the achievement of virtue and happiness.

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