

Empedoclean effluences or Democritean films?: A Reference to Democritus in Plato's *Phaedrus*

While commenters have frequently noticed Empedoclean references in Plato's discussion of the lover (*erastes*) and beloved (*eromenos*) at *Phaedrus* 250c6-d7 (see especially Yunis (2011) 153), they have not recognized how in the same passage Plato engages with the theories of his close contemporary or even rival Democritus (ca. mid-5th C. BCE-early to mid 4th C. BCE; Taylor (1999) 157ff.). While Ferwerda (1972) has shown that ancient doxographers and philosophers often linked Plato and Democritus with one another, even at times quoting them "in support of the same theory" (p. 351), direct references to the latter have proven very difficult to detect in the Platonic corpus. A close examination of this passage in the *Phaedrus* helps to fill this lacuna, revealing Plato's engagement in a sort of philosophical dialogue with Democritus as he borrows his vocabulary through the use of the word εἶδωλον (250d). Moreover, this passage also supplies the very evidence, which Long (1966) laments is lacking, that Empedocles' "ἀπορροαί, like everything else, are material and ... analogous to the εἶδωλα of Democritus" (p. 260). Here, we see that at least in Plato's mind the two terms are equivalent. By noticing Democritean allusions in the passage, I argue we can not only better understand how Plato engages with contemporary scientific theories, but also see how Democritus' terminology (and Plato's use of it) would later influence Hellenistic philosophy, particularly Epicureanism.

I show that Plato employs Democritus' vocabulary to articulate his own conception of vision while also alluding to the similar explanation for vision proposed by Empedocles. The passage is rife with scientific jargon and references, which Plato intends the reader to understand based on a background of both Empedocles and Democritus. This becomes most apparent in the discussion of *effluences* (tiny particles that everything perpetually releases), which the eye physically admits through pores and which thereby provide a material basis for vision

[ἀπορροήν... διὰ τῶν ὀμμάτων, *Phdr.* 251 b-c]. In the *Meno* too, Plato explicitly discusses Empedocles' ἀπορροαί (at 76c7, c9, c10, and d4); yet, only in the *Phaedrus* does he connect the concept with its Democritean name εἶδωλον. While never mentioning him by name in any of his dialogues, Plato nevertheless utilizes Democritus' term εἶδωλον, which was central to his theory of vision and which had not been present in Empedocles. Therefore, this passage, *contra* the *LSJ* entry for εἶδωλον, is actually the first instance of the term used to explain the transfer of information from physical objects to the eye and ultimately to the mind.

By understanding Plato's allusion to Democritus and by also noticing his use of the adjective *enargēs*, which he links with it, I argue we can better understand how the *Phaedrus* passage influenced later Hellenistic philosophy. On the one hand, it was Democritus' theory of material films (εἶδωλα) emanating from all physical bodies and giving rise to vision that played an important role in the physics of Epicurus; on the other, Epicurus also picked up on the adjective *enargēs*, repeated three-times in the passage, for articulating his theory of *enargeia* (self-evidence) as the basis for all knowledge (despite his overt criticism of Platonic philosophy). While the earliest uses of *eidōlon* in Homer, Herodotus, and the tragedians had referred to a "phantom" or "any substantial form", in Epicurus' works it possesses a far more nuanced and technical meaning that goes back to Democritus and which we also see employed in the *Phaedrus*. *LSJ* recognizes this change, defining the word: "in the system of Epicurus, *film* given off by any object and conveying an impression to the eye" (p. 483). I show, however, that the term surely had this same technical meaning in the (mostly lost) works of Democritus. Plato seems to be fully aware of the similar meaning of εἶδωλον and ἀπορροαί, which is why he employs them side-by-side (within a few sentences of one another [εἶδωλον at 250d6, ἀπορροαί at 251b2]). In both cases, it is precisely Empedocles' *effluences* and Democritus' *films* that he is

describing as entering through pores into the eye. This passage thus grants us an instance in which we can witness how Empedocles influenced Democritus, how they in turn influenced Plato, and how ultimately all three eventually came to influence later philosophers like Epicurus.

Bibliography

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