

The purpose of this paper is to examine the Democritean physiology of taste as presented in Theophrastus' *de Sensibus*. It looks specifically at the objects of taste, the qualities and characteristics they exhibit, and the interaction that takes place within the percipient. In particular, I focus on the possible basis for Democritus' explanation of and reference to the effects flavours have on the percipient.

Questions of taste are intimately linked to Democritus' epistemological inquiries (DK 68 B9, B11, B117, B125, A49, Plut. *Adv. Col.* VIII.1110e-f and DK 67 A32). However, most of the recent scholarship on the sensible qualities draws on his claims about the conventionality of bitter and sweet, paying little attention to the physiological information about taste reported in the *de Sensibus* (Curd 1998; O'Keefe 1997; Furley 1993; Wardy 1988). Those scholars that do engage with the description of flavours often reiterate Theophrastean summaries of atomic shapes, and often mention Theophrastus' objections to Democritus' theory. However, they undertake no detailed analysis of the physiological effects such flavours have on the body (Lee 2005; Ganson 1999). This is not to say that the philosophy of taste is neglected in scholarship. On the contrary, there has been a renewed interest in theories of taste, but this has not yet filtered into the study of Democritus, or indeed ancient philosophy (Korsmeyer 1999; Telfer 1996). Although these studies aim to place themselves within the history of western thought, they tend to trace the philosophical (dis)interest in the sense of taste back to Plato and Aristotle without giving more than a cursory nod to Democritus and the other Presocratics. By providing a close analysis of Democritus' description of flavours, this paper offers an alternative to the predominantly Post-Socratic narrative of the beginning of taste theory.

More specifically, I examine Democritus' theory of flavours, and raise the question of why Democritus offers the explanation he does. In many cases, comparison with a naturally occurring phenomenon clarifies the description of various flavours' affects. For example, Democritus' account of the *oxus* (sharp) flavour and ancient Greek descriptions of garlic give very similar versions of what happens to the body upon ingestion. Both sharp flavours and garlic are said to pass quickly through the body and cause contractions, warmth, and bloating (Arist. *Pr.* 13.6; Hippoc. *Diaeta* 2.54.1-5). Visual identification (the swollen buds and bulbils of the garlic and the hollowness associated with the flowering structure of the genus *alium*, Theophr. *Hist. pl.*) seems to offer a further point of comparison for Democritus' sharp flavour and garlic. Similarities between the descriptions of Democritus' flavours and other ancient sources can also be found. A close analysis of the *de Sensibus* reveals that the process of taste generated by various flavours effects the entire body, not just the tongue. Thus, it seems that Democritus' explanation takes into account naturally occurring phenomena in food as well as the effects various flavours have on the body, which he then translates into atomistic terminology.