

## ANCIENT THEORIES ON THE NATURE AND PERCEPTION OF COLOUR

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Topics on colour have been among the oldest and most contested in the secondary literature on antiquity. There are many perspectives from which scholars have investigated what the ancient Greeks had to say about colours. For instance, classical philologists have been interested in the origin and use of Greek colour terms in literary texts; archaeologists have been examining the ancient painters' views about the choice and mixing of colours; historians of science have tried to reconstruct Euclid's and Ptolemy's optical theories on the nature and propagation of light. My main interest is in the ancient philosophers' theories about what makes things coloured and how we perceive colours. That is to say, my main interest is in the metaphysics and epistemology of colour. Hence, the questions on which I focus are the following:

- What is, according to different ancient philosophers, the nature of colour? Is it something that characterizes an object independently of whether it is perceived, or is it something that exists only insofar as it is perceived by an observer?
- If it is something which characterizes an object independently of whether it is perceived, what is it precisely that makes an object have the particular colour it has? On the other hand, if it is something that exists only insofar as it is perceived by an observer, what does actually happen when we perceive a particular colour?

Ancient philosophers gave very different replies to these questions. Empedocles, for instance, claimed that the colour of an object depends on the colours of its basic elements; more specifically, on the proportion between the black watery particles and the white fiery particles which the object contains. Democritus, on the other hand, initiated in the history of philosophy a radically different tradition of colour theory, according to which the basic constituents of objects, the atoms, are colourless, and the colours of objects are not real but only, as he famously put it, 'by convention'. In my presentation I intend to discuss these two main traditions of ancient colour theories and the ways they were developed by other philosophers during the classical and Hellenistic period.

suggested readings:

K. Ierodiakonou, 'Empedocles on colour and colour vision', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 29 (2005), 1-37

M.-K. Lee, 'The distinction between primary and secondary qualities in ancient Greek philosophy', in L. Nolan (ed.), *Primary and Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate*, Oxford 2011, 15-40

R. Pasnau, 'Democritus and secondary qualities', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 89 (2007), 99-121