

Knowledge in Parmenides: a Theophrastean Interpretation of Fragment 16 DK

Luca Torrente

Textual problems

According to several scholars¹ the text of B 16 should be read as follows:

ὥς γὰρ ἐκάστοτ' ἔχη κρήσιν μελέων πολυπλάγκτων,
τὼς νόος ἀνθρώποισι παρέστηκεν· τὸ γὰρ αὐτό
ἔστιν ὅπερ φρονέει μελέων φύσις ἀνθρώποισι
καὶ πᾶσιν καὶ παντί· τὸ γὰρ πλεόν ἐστὶ νόημα.²

Both Aristotle and Theophrastus cite these four lines³; The pupil's version seems to be preferable to the master's one for several reasons. In the first verse, ἐκάστοτ(ε) is clearly a *lectio difficilior* compared to the variant ἕκαστος and is also best supported by the MSS⁴. The expression πολυπλάγκτων is accepted by most editors, while πολυκάμπτων would be considered as trivial and a mere *epitheton ornans*⁵. In the second verse, the form παρέστηκεν is preferable to παρίσταται for metrical reasons and for the Homeric use of this verb⁶. The lines 3-4 are fortunately free from textual problems. According to these facts we can affirm that the text transmitted by Theophrastus is the closest to the original. The text presents a great difficulty in translation, mainly due to the multivocality of the terms that appear in it, but I think it is better to anticipate the translation that I propose, whose choices will be explained and motivated forward in this paper.

For as, at every moment, is the mixture of the much wandering limbs,
so is insight present to humans; for that which knows is the same,
namely, the inner reality of the limbs,
in each and all human beings; for what is fulfilled is knowledge.

¹ Tarán (1965), Mourelatos (1970), Kirk-Raven-Schofield (1983), O'Brien-Frère (1987), Conche (1996), Cerri (1999), Coxon (2009).

² Coxon (2009), p. 95. These are the variations of the manuscripts: 1 ἐκάστοτ' Ar. EJ, Theophr.: ἕκαστος Ar. E2, Alex., ἐκάστῳ Ar. Ab, ἕκαστον (om. κρᾶσιν) Ascl. ἔχη Ar. E: ἔχει Ab J, Alex., Ascl., ἔχειν Theophr. κρήσιν desiderabat Diels: κρᾶσιν Ar., Theophr., Alex. πολυπλάγκτων Theophr.: πολυκάμπτων Ar., Alex., Ascl. 2 τὼς Ar. EJ, Theophr.: τ' ὡς Ar. Ab, ὡς Ar. E2, Alex. παρέστηκεν Theophr.: παρίσταται Ar., Alex., Ascl.

³ Ar. *metaph.* Γ 5, 1009b22 (hinc Alex., Ascl. Ad loc.); Theophr. *de sens.* 3.

⁴ See Mansfeld (1964), 175; Verdenius (1964), 6; Bormann (1971), 107; Conche (1996), 243; Cerri (1999), 280; Coxon (2009), 378. On the contrary, DK, Colli (1988), 176 and Cordero (1984), 33, read ἕκαστος.

⁵ See Conche (1996), 245; Cerri (1999), 280; Coxon (2009), 378.

⁶ See Conche (1996), 246; Coxon (2009), 379. Mansfeld (1964), 179, points out that παρέστηκεν is «ein Terminus aus der Begriffssphäre der „religiöse Ergriffenheit“ ist».

Dualistic Interpretations of Parmenides

Many studies have been made on these four lines and it is possible to assert that even the general scope and purpose are controversial. It is not clear whether we are dealing with a theory of sense-perception based on a physiological ground⁷, or with a general theory of knowledge⁸, or with a conception about the nature of mental states⁹ or even with a theory of the transcendence of the mind¹⁰. In this paper I will follow closely the interpretation of Theophrastus and then get to a new reading of the fragment.

In order to do this, it seems to me appropriate to explain in short some criticisms of the Platonic and Neoplatonic interpretations of Parmenides. This tradition has understood the distinction between the Way of Truth and the Way of Opinion in terms of a fundamental dualism. This division leads to two assumptions in the ontological domain (A) and in the epistemological one (B). Many ancient interpreters, who followed the Platonic tradition, such as Plutarch¹¹ and Simplicius¹², believed that Parmenides had been the first to distinguish two levels of reality (A): on the one hand the “sensible” world of becoming, on the other the “intelligible” and changeless world of being. Others have denied or have not expressed themselves on this ontological dualism, nevertheless they have supported a lecture of a dualism of the cognitive faculties (B). This is for example the case of Sextus Empiricus¹³, which sees in Parmenides’ poem a division between *reason* and the *senses*¹⁴.

Regarding (A), most modern scholars have criticized this dualistic lecture and this has led to a renewed interest in the second part of the poem. Nevertheless, many interpreters still think that (B) is to be ascribed to Parmenides and that this form of dualism, declined according to the different versions of it, is the only possible lecture that could explain the difference between the two parts of the poem. L. A. Bredlow has shown that this dualism of faculties cannot be found in the crucial passage (B 7.3-6) where it has been believed to be stated: «after all, the basic dichotomy for Parmenides is not between “reason” and “the senses”, but between logical argument and established belief (“the opinion of mortals”)»¹⁵. F. Fronterotta found the same anachronistic error in the interpretations that Plotinus gives of the fragment B 3 (*Enn.* V 1 [10] 8, 17 and V 9 [5] 5, 29-30). Parmenides would have placed the true being outside the sensible reality and therefore, having recognized its intelligible nature, would have attributed it an intellective character¹⁶. However, this is a Platonic reading which presupposes the distinction between sensible and intelligible as domains of separate realities and the respective forms of knowledge, thought and sensation. This reading cannot be accepted and it does not seem to me that there are enough decisive elements in the verses of the Eleatic philosopher that could ascribe him the distinction between the perception of sensitive objects and the intellection of intelligible objects.

We cannot deny that Parmenides had an intuitive notion more or less implicit of the difference between perception and knowledge, or at least between the use of eyes and ears and that of reflection and mind or thought. However, in everyday experience, the reflexive faculty and the organs of perception function as *a whole*; it is not only an effort to distinguish them, but also, above

⁷ Vlastos (1946), 66 and 71-72; Tarán (1965), 258; Cerri (1999), 277-278.

⁸ Verdenius (1964), 10; Laks (1990), 11.

⁹ Hussey (2006), 16.

¹⁰ Dilcher (2006), 46.

¹¹ *Adv. Colot.* 13, p. 1114 d (28A34 DK).

¹² *Phys.* 38, 20 (28A35 DK).

¹³ *Adv. mathematicos*, 7.111-4. But also see Diogenes Laertius, who in his *bios* of Parmenides (IX, 21-23), exhibits the same opinion as Sextus (the two texts depend on the same tradition).

¹⁴ Mansfeld (1999) argues that neither Parmenides nor Heraclitus had separated the sensitive perception by the thought and that they did not yet possess a theory of perception properly so called.

¹⁵ Bredlow (2011), 259.

¹⁶ Fronterotta (2016), 1.

all, another effort to realize what constitutes their specific difference¹⁷. The true opposition in Parmenides is therefore not between perception and thought, but between the *logos* of *Aletheia* and the *logos* that produces the common language of men: words, or rather names, which do not refer to being.

Theophrastus' Interpretation

In discontinuity with the Platonic interpretations, Aristotle and Theophrastus explicitly stated that Parmenides had identified sensitive perception and thought¹⁸, thus denying both (A) and (B).

Theophrastus quotes the fragment B 16 inside the *De sensibus*, a dialectical work of *critical endoxography* whose subject is sense-perception¹⁹, and places Parmenides within the group of philosophers that explain perceptual processes through similarity. The testimony begins with the statement that Parmenides «did not define anything at all»²⁰ and some recent scholars have argued that this introduction should be read as “Parmenides in general did not define anything precise with respect to particular senses”²¹. But I think that even the simplest and traditional reading can work, since we have no element to state that Parmenides had said something about sense perception in his poem²². Moreover, since he did not distinguish sensation and thought, then Theophrastus could expose in the *De sensibus* the Parmenides' theory of knowledge, included in the fragment B16, as a *doxa* concerning sense-perception.

Theophrastus continues his account by stating that Parmenides, having identified two elements – the hot (light / day / fire) and the cold (darkness / night / earth) – explains knowledge (γνώσις) according to the prevalence of one or the other element. There will therefore be a different knowledge if hot or cold prevails; the best and purest one will be with the presence of the hot. This proposition is followed by an important restriction: «nonetheless (οὐ μὴν ἀλλά) also this [the knowledge] requires a certain correspondence (συμμετρία)». Many scholars have interpreted the term *συμμετρία* as a certain proportion, internal to the knowing subject, between hot and cold. However, H. Fränkel had the merit of highlighting that the term *συμμετρία*, which normally designates “the mutual adaptation of two things”, takes a technical value in Theophrastus to indicate that a sense organ is commensurable to its object and is arranged in such a way as to appropriately accommodate it²³. Hence, the passage has to be understood as follows: knowledge is determined by that of the two elements that prevails in the bodily mixture. Therefore, it is different depending on the dominance of one of the two elements, but the higher knowledge is that produced by the hot (but also in this case a certain *συμμετρία* - or correspondence, commensurability - is necessary with

¹⁷ I take this reflection from Mansfeld (1999), 343.

¹⁸ Ar. *metaph.* Γ 5, 1009b14: «τὸ ὑπολαμβάνειν φρόνησιν μὲν τὴν αἴσθησιν»; Theophr. *de sens.* 4: «τὸ γὰρ αἰσθάνεσθαι καὶ τὸ φρονεῖν ὡς ταῦτό λέγει». This statement seems not to be true with regard to Aristotle, for two passages where he speaks of Parmenides and Melissus as “passing over sense-perception and disregarding it, on the ground that one ought to follow reason (λόγῳ)” (*de gen. et corr.* A, 325a13-15) and Parmenides as “assuming that what is one according to reasoning (λόγον) is many according to sense-perception” (*metaph.* A 5, 986b31-33). But Aristotle is not committed here to distinguish two mental faculties, “reason” and “sense-perception”; rather he opposes abstract reasoning or argument to elementary facts of observation. We can state that Parmenides surely distinguish the logical argument from the mere observation based on sense-perception, but he did not recognize thought and sensation as distinct mental functions and then λόγος is probably to be understood here as “reasoning”, “argument”, or “discourse”, rather than “reason” as a faculty of rational thought. Parmenides, in a word, is not concerned here with mental *faculties* at all, but with mental *attitude*. See Burnet (1920), 173 n. 1; Verdenius (1964), 64; Leshner (1994), 24 n. 46; Mansfeld (1999), 331-333; Bredlow (2011), 233.

¹⁹ See Baltussen (2000).

²⁰ Theophr. *de sens.* 3, «ὄλως οὐδὲν ἀφώρικεν».

²¹ See Laks (1988), 264-265.

²² Mansfeld (1999), 342; Bredlow (2011), 238.

²³ Fränkel (1960), 175. See Laks (1988), 269.

the perceived object, which is constituted, like all things, of both elements in a variable proportion²⁴.

After this, Theophrastus quotes the fragment B16 and it is therefore necessary to link his interpretation of the verses of Parmenides with what stated before. The term κρᾶσις, that appears connected to μελέων πολυπλάγκτων in the first line, can be referred in the cognitive domain to (A) the mixture and proportion between the elements internal to the subject, that is the physiological constitution of the body capable of knowing. It can also be referred to (B) the momentary (ἐκάστοτε) mixture of the bodies caused by the encounter between the subject and the object which generates knowledge through the process of apprehension of the sensible. These descriptions of the cognitive process are terminologically and conceptually peripatetic, but it is possible through them to understand better the sense of the fragment. We can also state, as M. M. Sassi wrote in a recent contribution²⁵, that Parmenides was the first to link cognition to the mixture of the elements in the body and would therefore be the inventor of the “*krasis* theory” that was developed later by Empedocles²⁶. The word συμμετρία is often associated with κρᾶσις in the *De sensibus*, when the latter is used in the (B) meaning. The “mixture of the wandering limbs” would then be, for Theophrastus, the moment in which the sensible is present in the sense organ: the knowledge so occurs for the combination of the elements in the body which is proportional to that in the object. The epithet πολύπλαγκτος has therefore to be taken literally, as in Homer²⁷; it alludes to the individual’s changes of environment which lead to a change in the physical constitution and thereby to a modification in the corresponding knowledge.

In the previous lines, we have already indicated the connection between the mixture of the limbs and knowledge and now it is explained in the second verse of the fragment, thanks to the Homeric simile “ὡς (even as) ... τῶς (even so) ...” that relates the κρᾶσις of the limbs with the presentation (παρέστηκεν)²⁸ of the νόος. In this way, the physical constituents of the body connect and determine every cognitive process. The idea that human knowledge is exposed to changes due to external forces such as divinity or the environment is anything but original, for it already appears in Homer and has numerous parallels in lyrical poets²⁹.

As we have seen from the very beginning and as many scholars have already pointed out³⁰, the comparison with Homer (and Hesiod) is fundamental for the understanding of Parmenides. In this contribution for reasons of limited space I will have to give you some definitions, without being able to motivate them sufficiently, about the Homeric conception of man, in order to compare it with the “anthropology”³¹ of Parmenides. Homeric man is not a *homo disgregatus* or a mere

²⁴ Bollack (1957), 69; Sassi, (1978), 166-167. A further proof of the goodness of this interpretation of συμμετρία are words of Theophrastus that follow the quotation of B16: «but that he also attributes perception to the opposite <element> in its own right is evident from the passage where he says that a dead man – since now the fire has left for him – does not perceive light and warmth and sound, but does perceive cold and silence and the other contrasting qualities». The reason why the corpse cannot perceive the light is that inside it does not possess fire, and therefore, being completely devoid of the element of the hot, there is no correspondence (συμμετρία) between the corpse (cold) and light (hot). See about these lines Laks (1988), 266 and Dilcher (2011), 38-9.

²⁵ Sassi (2016), 461.

²⁶ For Verdenius (1964), 25, the similarity between Parmenides and Alcmeon of Croton (frag. B4) is due to a common source in the thought of the Pythagoreans.

²⁷ Hom. *Il.* 11, 308; *Od.* 17, 425 and 511; 20, 195. See also Theog. *Eleg.*, 1257.

²⁸ The verb παρέστηκεν is a *perfectum prasens* that is best understood in the light of Homer’s use of it (*Il.* 24, 132; *Od.* 16, 853). The expression is actually an instance of the idiom παρίστασθαι, “to come into one’s head, to occur to one”. See Mourelatos (1970), 255-256; Coxon (2009), 379.

²⁹ Hom. *Od.* 1, 1-2; 17, 511; 18, 136-7; Pind. *Pyth.* 7, 95-6; Archil. fr. 68 Diehl; Semonides fr. 1.3-5 West. See Fränkel (1946); Sassi (2016), 463-4.

³⁰ Mourelatos (1970); Capizzi (1987); Most (2007); Di Giuseppe (2011); Rossetti (2017), 58.

³¹ I think that we can rightly speak of an anthropology of Parmenides represented by the verses contained in fr. B16 and which has to be placed in the second part of the poem. The term ἄνθρωπος appears only in fr. 16 and 19 (in B 1.27 the term is used to indicate the distance of route of Truth from the path of men)

aggregate of parts, but a whole³², in which the body/soul division is at least problematic. The difficulty of distinguishing between ‘body’ and ‘not-body’ is, in other words, a difficulty of perceiving the difference between the so-called psychic/mental and the somatic phenomena ‘within’ the Homeric man³³. Both are at the same time ‘corporeal’/‘physiological’ on the one hand, and ‘mental’ on the other. If we turn to the nouns καρδία, κήρ, ἦτορ, φρένες, θυμός, πραπίδες and νόος, we can immediately see that these things are manifestations in action of an indivisible human whole, a whole in which the complexities of mental life make sense best if apprehended without trying to divide the man into mind and body. In Homeric epics, indeed, the verbs ‘to see’ and ‘to know’ tend to include both the mental act and the corresponding physical action in a single word, suggesting that the emotional, cognitive, and active sphere are not distinguished³⁴. The implication of this all is that «Homer does not oppose mental life to the life of the body but takes them as an undifferentiated whole. There is no ‘ghost in the machine’: Homeric man does not *have* a mind, rather his thought and consciousness are as inseparable a part of his bodily life as are movement and metabolism»³⁵.

The Homeric man has the fundamental psychological functions inside the chest, in the lungs but above all in the heart³⁶. It is interesting now to observe the indications on the possible localization of νόος within man: all the testimonies clearly tell us that the νόος was located inside the chest (ἐν στήθεσιν)³⁷. Parmenides maintains this feature when he states in B6, 5-6 that «ἀμηχανὴ γὰρ ἐν αὐτῶν στήθεσιν ἰθύνει πλαγκτὸν νόον» (for perplexity in their own breasts directs their mind astray) and we can argue that also in B16 the human νόος is something which is inside the body and which is qualified by the κρᾶσις μελέων. Parmenides does not distinguish the body and the soul as opposed to one another: νόος has not to be understood as something similar to the Platonic soul, it is not opposed to the body, but is a central element of the structure of man³⁸. We can therefore read the fragment as a physiological treatment of νόος in its relationship with the human body.

In this perspective we can better understand the expression «φρονέει μελέων φύσις» at the line 3. The verb φρονεῖν indicates the function of νόος and therefore does not imply any distinction between sense-perception and thinking³⁹. We could then assume that the φύσις of the limbs is nothing but the “heart” (the inner essence) of the human being, conditioned by the mixture of the elements, and identifiable with the νόος itself⁴⁰. The term φύσις is then to be meant as “inner reality” or “inner essence”⁴¹, meanings that include within them also that of “the real constitution”. However, it is important not to think of φύσις as an unbound and disconnected interiority from the external environment. On the contrary, the Homeric man is always open to the influences of the outside and the same idea appears in the anthropology proposed by Parmenides in B16 (this according to the simile with the κρᾶσις μελέων and the interpretation of Theophrastus). Indeed φύσις can be considered both from within (the inner constitution or character) and from without (the

³² Fränkel (1975), 76-77; Di Giuseppe (1993) 48-56.

³³ I dealt with this topic in a contribution on the meaning of σῶμα in Homer: Torrente (2017).

³⁴ Onians (1951), 16; Colli (1988), 24.

³⁵ Clarke (1999), 115.

³⁶ I refer to the tables in the fundamental work of Jahn (1987), 300-319. See also Di Giuseppe (2011), 128-129.

³⁷ Hom. *Il.* 3, 63; 4, 309; 9, 554; 13, 732; 24, 41; *Od.* 2, 125; 10, 329; 13, 255 and 330; 17, 403; 20, 366. Hesiod. *Theog.* 120-122; Theognis, 1.121-2, 1.387-396, 1.507, 1.898-9, 1.1163-4. See Onians (1951), 82-82; Bormann (1971), 114.

³⁸ Colli (2003), 188; Rossetti (2017), 74. There are some interesting testimonies in 28A45 DK that inform us about the fact that Parmenides would define the ψυχή as composed of earth and fire or only of this last element, placing the soul in the chest, and even identifying the ψυχή with νόος.

³⁹ Verdenius (1964), 16; Robinson (1989), 160. See also Sassi (2016), 453.

⁴⁰ See Hershbell (1970), 12; Bormann (1971), 116.

⁴¹ Mourelatos (1970), 257; Colli (1988), 179. The term appears in another fragment of Parmenides (B10). In Homer we have only one occurrence in *Od.* 10, 303, where Hermes shows Odysseus the φύσις of a magical plant, tearing it from the ground and discovering its roots. I think that here too there is the idea of φύσις as something that is the inner essence and therefore it is hidden, in this case underground. After all, the famous fragment B123 of Heraclitus affirms exactly this characteristic: «φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ». See also Emped. B63 and 110; Epicharmus B2 and 4.

outward constitution or frame of a thing)⁴². The νόος then, as well as the κρᾶσις of the limbs, indicates an interiority that unifies the multiplicity and connects distant (fr. B4) and much-wandering things. Several scholars⁴³ recognized this *unifying function* of νόος and it appears to us as its most peculiar characteristic.

For all the previous reasons it is important to state that νοεῖν is not identical with a pure logical process, because maintains an “intuitive” nature. The original meaning of this verb does not imply any distinction between thinking and perception, and Parmenides does not introduce such a distinction in his poem⁴⁴. He uses the word in a wide sense and could be translated as “knowing”. If νοεῖν retains a semantic value close to the meanings of the Homeric language (“to have an intention”, “to realize or to understand a situation”, “to recognize”)⁴⁵ – and undoubtedly this is the best exegetical choice – it will refer to a modality of immediate perception. This kind of perception, although without detaching itself effectively from the senses, it goes beyond a simple sensible observation, because it succeeds in grasping the things that are in their entirety and as unities. The function of νοεῖν then is to be in direct contact with ultimate reality, and there can be no νοεῖν without its object, the ἐόν, because they are inextricably connected⁴⁶.

From such an exegesis of the upper lines we can perhaps understand also the last sentence that has been interpreted in many and different ways. Τὸ πλεόν can indeed be translated as “the more”, i. e. “what prevails in the mixture”, comparative of πολύ, or as “the full”, neutral of πλέος⁴⁷. I adopt the second possibility for two orders of reasons. The former is an interpretative suggestion and it is based on the fact that in the world of *doxa* everything is equally formed of light and darkness (fr. B9). The fullness is then *what it is*, and with this meaning, the term appears in the first part of the poem (fr. B8.29). In fact, if all *that-is* is one, and if all *that is thought* is one, then what one thinks and the object of thought are the same one thing. In the fragment B4 the starting point is the physical world, while in the fragment B16 we start from the human being, but the point of arrival is the same unity⁴⁸. All men therefore have the opportunity, despite their knowledge based on opinion and names, to experience a certain degree of unity between being and thought (fr. B3). This temporary unification is nothing but a reflection and an appearance of the true unity of being stated in the first part of the poem. The second reason, which is more linked to text and interpretation, refers to the previous reading of the passage: τὸ πλεόν could well designate the momentary unity formed by the “much wandering limbs” that in the moment of sense-perception / thought are one and generate the result of knowing (νόημα). It seems indeed that Parmenides wants to say that knowledge is an accomplishment or a fulfilment, that, according to Theophrastus, requires a certain symmetry. The verb πληρόω, “fill full of”, can be used with reference to the realization of what θυμός wants and in the sense of filling up or completing some aspiration⁴⁹. The νόημα would then be the result of the unification made by νόος and «given this pattern of linguistic usage, πλεόν comes to be very close conceptually to τετελεσμένον, “accomplished, perfect.” The phrase τὸ γὰρ πλεόν ἐστὶ νόημα can also be understood as τὸ τετελεσμένον ἐστὶ νόημα, “thought is that which is realized”»⁵⁰.

In conclusion, we could state that the fragment B16 exposes an anthropology that is close to the Homeric one and that sees a principle (νόος) placed inside the chest that knows and unifies the

⁴² Heidel (1910), 97.

⁴³ Bollack (1957), 61; Verdenius (1964), 18-9, 27; Hershbell (1970), 12; Colli (1988), 178; Colli (2003), 188.

⁴⁴ Verdenius (1964), 10, 65; Bormann (1971), 114. For the characterization of νόος as not excluding the sphere of the senses cf. Xenoph. B 24 and Emped. B2.

⁴⁵ Von Fritz (1943).

⁴⁶ Von Fritz (1945), 238; Fronterotta (2016), 7.

⁴⁷ Bredlow (2011), 249, suggests to consider and accept the conjecture τὸ πέλων proposed by García Calvo (1981), 221.

⁴⁸ Bollack (1957), 70.

⁴⁹ Cf. LSJ, s.v., I.2, II.2. See Hershbell (1970), 13.

⁵⁰ Mourelatos (1970), 258.

multiple data and undergoes continuous modification according to the different mixtures of the elements that occur in the human body and outside of it. The result of the cognitive process is therefore a momentary unification of bodies in continuous becoming.

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