Parmenides’ Theory of Sense-Perception:
Fr. 16 DK revisited

These four lines provide us with the only Parmenidean statement suggesting a theory of sense-perception. They have been first cited by Aristotle (Metaphysics Γ 5, 1009b22), to illustrate in an extremely laconic manner the point that both Parmenides and Empedocles agreed in understanding the perception as a process of physical change. Aristotle gives no further information about the original context of this passage. Theophrastus (De sensu, 3 = Dox., p. 499), though relying very probably on an independent source, offers a fuller account of Parmenidean ideas on this particular subject. Nevertheless, his quotation remains closely associated with the Aristotelian discussion and leaves us ignorant of its original place, as well as, consequently, of the proper sense of its ambiguous constructions (cf. τὸ γὰρ πλέον ἐστὶ νόημα).

In his fine article on “Parmenides’ Theory of Knowledge” (TAPA, vol. 77, 1946), Gregory Vlastos made an attempt to elucidate the passage by isolating it from the ‘frame’ of Aristotelian discussion and by connecting it to other Presocratic theories of knowledge and sense-perception (Empedocles, Heracleitus, Democritus). A succession of essays and
monographs devoted to the Presocratics during last decades makes now possible to press the parallels one step further.

I propose to examine a wider range of evidence including not only so called Presocratic authors but also Plato’s *Timaeus* and the ancient Hippocratic treatises, such as *On Diet* and *Fleshes* (see Aristote, *De sensu*, 436b1: “… one may say that most natural philosophers, and those physicians who take a scientific interest in their art, have this in common: the former end by studies in medicine, and the latter base their medical theories on the principles of natural science”).

It seems indeed that the idea of **varying ratio of two (or more) radically opposed elements in a physical composition** was used to explain not only knowledge, but also psychological states and diseases, and that this sort of biological (psychological) account was in no way incompatible with religiously colored cosmological systems. The most obvious example is found in the Hippocratic treatise *On Diet*. According to the author, human beings as well as animals are composed of two primary component substances: the fire and the water. Thinking depends on the predominance of one of these radically opposed elements to the other. Seven ratios of fire to water are distinguished in chapter 35 as being the rational explanations of seven categories of intelligence.

The Fr. 16 DK of Parmenides is, we may say, the very first articulation of this ancient concept.