

Empedocles on Sensation, Perception, and Thought

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Abstract

Aristotle claims that Empedocles took perception and knowledge to be the same; Theophrastus follows Aristotle. The paper begins by examining why Aristotle and Theophrastus identify thought/knowing with perception in Empedocles. I maintain that the extant fragments do not support the assertion that Empedocles identifies or conflates sensation with thought or cognition. Indeed, the evidence of the texts shows that Empedocles is careful to distinguish them, and argues that to have genuine understanding one must not be misled into supposing that sense perception is sufficient for knowledge. Nevertheless, sense perception is necessary for human knowing.

In *De Anima* III.3 (427a15ff.) and in *Metaphysics* Γ.5 (1009b13ff.) Aristotle claims that Empedocles took perception and knowledge to be the same; Theophrastus follows Aristotle. Why would Aristotle and Theophrastus identify thought/knowing with perception in Empedocles? Are they right about this? I shall argue that the extant fragments do not support the assertion that Empedocles identifies or conflates sensation with thought or cognition. Indeed, Empedocles is careful to distinguish them, and argues that to have genuine understanding one must not be misled into supposing that sense perception is sufficient for knowledge. Nevertheless, sense perception is necessary for human knowing.

I begin by making some distinctions that are implicit in the surviving fragments. Being aware of them can help us to explicate and to understand Empedocles' accounts of sensation, perception, and thought, although I do not suppose that Empedocles himself recognized them.¹ First, I limit the concepts of *sensing* and *sensation* to the mechanical process that occurs in an organism when a sense organ is affected by the external world. For Empedocles seeing in this sense occurs when the relevant effluences (whichever they are) enter the pores of the eye, the organ of sight; hearing as sensing is the affecting "of the cartilaginous part [...] suspended in the ear" by the air "set in motion by the voice" (A93 and A86) and so on, *mutatis mutandis*, for the other senses. I use the terms *perceiving* and *perception* to refer to the *awareness* of an organism that a sensing is occurring. Thus, if effluences of fire and water enter the appropriate pores in my left eye, which admits the effluences but is nevertheless blind, I can be said to sense but not to perceive. If my right ear is deaf (i. e. the nerves fail to connect properly with my brain), the ear drum can be affected by sound waves (effluences) so that my ear is *sensing* but I do not *perceive* sound. Usually, in most animals in good condition, there will be both sensing and perceiving; yet, there may still be differences in range and acuity. The same motions of air can affect

¹ Part of the difficulty is the wide-ranging meaning of ἀίσθησις. See Anaxagoras A117 [Aristotle]: *desiderio eas [plantas] moveri dicunt, sentire quoque et tristari delectarique asserunt*. "Sentire" has the same wide range of meanings. See, for example, the first note in Stratton's 1917 English translation of *De Sensibus*: "The meaning of the word ἀίσθησις would be more accurately represented here by 'sensation and sense perception'; but this is too cumbersome for frequent repetition. Nor have I found it possible to render ἀίσθησις by any constant English expression. According to need, it has been translated as 'sense' or 'sensation' or 'sense perception'".

both me and my dog (we both sense, i. e. the relevant parts in our ears are affected by the motion), but his perception is more acute: I perceive nothing, but he leaps to his feet, barking at the sound.² Finally, I use *thinking* to refer to cognitions of various kinds that all involve intellectual states (judging, believing, knowing, understanding, etc.). With these distinctions in hand, we might begin to untangle Empedocles' claims about sensation, perception and thought, and to answer the question why Aristotle, Theophrastus, and those following them say that Empedocles equates sensation, perception, and thinking. (The distinctions can also be useful for grasping what Empedocles means by saying that all things can be affected by pleasure and pain.)

What we might think of as a new consensus about Empedocles has been emerging since the publication of the Strasbourg Papyrus (Martin & Primavesi 1999). While scholars continue to disagree about the number of poems Empedocles wrote (and there are still sharp disagreements about the relations among the doctrines, and about the relations between the cosmic and daimonic cycles), they now more readily recognize that we cannot classify Empedocles' various doctrines as belonging exclusively *either* to physics *or* to religion. Many have discarded the sharp division that dominated some Empedocles interpretation in the 20th century that allowed only certain doctrines, such as the theory of elements and the cosmological cycles to be scientific, while confining others to the religious side of Empedocles' thought. Empedocles was equally serious about and committed to the doctrines on each side (as it were). This means that Empedocles' views about understanding and sensation should fit (in some sense) with both aspects of his thought. A striking example of the overlap of doctrines is apparent in B23:

ὥς δ' ὀπότεν γραφῆες ἀναθήματα ποικίλλωσιν
 ἄνδρες ἀμφὶ τέχνης ὑπὸ μῆτιος εὖ δεδαῶτε,
 οἳ τ' ἐπεὶ οὖν μάρψωσι πολύχρσα φάρμακα χερσίν,
 ἀρμονίῃ μίξαντε τὰ μὲν πλέω, ἄλλα δ' ἐλάσσω,
 ἐκ τῶν εἶδεα πᾶσιν ἀλίγκια πορσύνουσι,
 δένδρεά τε κτιζόντε καὶ ἄνδρας ἤδ' ἑ γυναῖκας
 θῆρας τ' οἰωνοὺς τε καὶ ὕδατοθρέμμονας ἰχθύς
 καὶ τε θεοὺς δολιχαίωνας τιμῆσι περίστοις·
 οὕτω μὴ σ' ἀπάτη φρένα καινύτω ἄλλοθεν εἶναι
 θνητῶν, ὅσσα γε δῆλα γεγάκασιν ἄσπετα, πηγῆν,
 ἀλλὰ τορῶς ταῦτ' ἴσθι, θεοῦ πάρα μῦθον ἀκούσας.

Just as when painters adorn votive offerings –
 men well taught by cunning in their craft –
 who when they take the many colored paints in their hands,
 mixing in harmony more of these but less of those,
 out of them make shapes resembling all things,
 bringing into being trees and men and women
 and beasts and birds and water-nourished fish
 and long-lived gods best in honors.

*So in this way do not let deception overcome your mind
 [to think] there is any other source for mortal things, as many as are*

² Compare to Theophrastus' report about Parmenides on perception by corpses (in *De Sens.* 1.4; 28A46): "A corpse does not perceive (οὐκ αἰσθάνεσθαι) light, heat, and sound because it lacks fire but perceives (αἰσθάνεσθαι) cold, silence, and the other opposites."