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"Night" in Presocratic Philosophy

"Night" plays a significant role in Parmenides' poem, *Peri Phuseos*. In order to reconstruct the significance of Nux (Night) in this poem, I rely on mythic cosmologies such as Hesiod and relevant Orphic texts. Parmenides exploits these accounts of Night in a philosophically significant way. Night presents challenges to any epistemological program by introducing obscurity, death and limits to analysis. These features are not "absence" of light. Night has a dynamis of its own, a power requiring philosophical reckoning and one which complicates and qualifies Parmenides' message. I argue that Night cannot be understood simply and negatively as the counterpart of philosophically privileged light. Scholars (Curd 1998 and others) have understood Night and light thus, as enantiomorphs, or opposing terms, relying chiefly on the goddess' exposition of false mortal opinions as expressing a mixture of Night and light (Parmenides, fr. 9). This view posits a contradiction between the two terms (comparable to that between being and non-being) and resolves this contradiction in favor of light. *Peri Phuseos* has typically been seen as a straightforward journey of rational enlightenment (Kingsley 1999 is a notable exception). I question this view and show that the text is much more complex.

Parmenides introduces Nux in three significant passages. Night plays a prominent role in the first and third parts of the poem, which frame the better-known message on true being (fr.8). In the first passage, the youth is led by Sun Maidens who leave the Halls of Night (*domata nuktos*) to escort him to the gates where Night and day cross their paths. Later in fr.9, the goddess mentions Night along with light as two forms, the naming one of which leads mortals astray. Finally, in fr. 14, Parmenides uses the adjective *nuktiphaios* in a beautiful description of the moon.

I begin with fr. 14, which shows Parmenides' keen grasp of the interplay of Night and light and his skill in using this knowledge in making subtle distinctions of philosophical relevance. The light of the moon is borrowed, not its own, and it wanders, homeless in the darkness over the earth. The original source of light, the sun, is not visible in the Night sky. Parmenides is keenly aware of Night in relation to light and day (not the same thing!), to absence and presence, to original and "borrowed" light, to motion and stability, to clarity and obscurity, visibility and concealment and to Night's important meanings in genealogy, cosmology and philosophy.

A brief historical digression clarifies the philosophical relevance of Night. Night and light do not have equal value in early Greek thought. Night has priority in two senses: both as having power over the gods, and as coming first, or as a principle of generation. Aristotle notes the archaic cosmogonical aspect of Night. (*Metaphysics* N4, 1091 b4), explaining that the gods are themselves generated from Night in ancient cosmogonies. In Hesiod, Night comes into being at an early stage (although not first), in the generation of Gaia, Okeanos and Ouranos. (*Theogony* 20,106f). Orphic thought elevates Night to a first principle. Night, Aer and Tartaros appear at the origin of the world in these poems. Light, on the other hand, does not share such a privileged position in the cosmologies of Hesiod,

and the Orphics. Night is primordial and privileged. Light is just not important yet, in the history of philosophy.

When we apply this evidence to Parmenides' poem, we are better able to understand the question: what does the goddess criticize as wrong, in this third part of the poem, the so-called mortal doxa? Two current interpretations are relevant: 1) The goddess faults mortals' opinions for being dualistic (enantiomorphic) or pluralistic, as Curd, for example, holds, and 2) The minimal positing of difference is a mistake (as Tar-n 1965, p.225) holds. He says, "consciously or unconsciously those who explain and believe in the sensible world posit difference as real and the minimum of difference is two." Based on this misinterpretation, says Tar-n, scholars attribute monism to the material world. He concludes: "Since the existence of this minimal difference is impossible, any explanation of the phenomenal world is apatelon."

I conclude that neither the "minimal difference" of Night and light, nor their supposed "dualistic opposition" fully explains the problem of the goddess' elaboration and criticism of mortal doxa (opinion). Parmenides exploits the significations of Night to evoke essential features of mortal knowing. Any account of nature (physis) is ineradicably involved with Night and thus with obscurity, death, unknowability and "borrowed" light. Night has a determinate dunamis, which light either as absent or present ("revelation" or philosophical illumination), cannot fully explain. Parmenides' paradoxical separation of mortal knowing and immortal epistemology is thus deeper than we wish to admit.