

ANAIS DE FILOSOFIA CLÁSSICA

SOME DISPUTED QUESTIONS IN THE INTERPRETATION OF PARMENIDES

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It is always a pleasure to have an opportunity to return to Parmenides, a philosopher I fell in love with when I was a graduate student. Over the years I have published more than once on Parmenides' conception of Being and its impact on Plato. So my views on this subject are well known, and I shall not repeat them here. But I will at least refer to Parmenides' concept of Being, and I would be happy to discuss this in the question period. But I want to start by situating Parmenides in relation to the tradition of natural philosophy that begins in Miletus, and I will then proceed to discuss a few disputed points, first concerning the interpretation of crucial passages and finally concerning the direction of the chariot ride in the proem.

1. Parmenides and physics

In a recent paper on Parmenides I suggested that we can best conceive the development of Presocratic philosophy in three waves. The first wave is marked by the emergence of naturalistic cosmology and proto-science in the sixth century B.C. primarily in Miletus. The new cosmology is connected with developments in astronomy and probably in geometry. Above all, it seeks to replace the anthropomorphic gods and personified powers of Hesiod's Theogony by impersonal entities such as the hot and the cold, the dry and the wet,

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and it offers a mechanical or at least a naturalistic account of the origin of things and of major phenomena such as lightning and eclipse. Our documentation for this period is very weak; we are essentially dependent on what remains of Theophrastus' summary for Anaximander and Anaximenes. But, as I argued in my book on Anaximander, the outlines of this earliest Ionian world view can be recognized in common features shared by later cosmologies and by certain key concepts such as physis and kosmos, presupposed by Heraclitus, Parmenides and all later thinkers. By the end of the sixth century, some version of this new natural philosophy had begun to spread throughout the Greek world, as we can see, for example, from the fragments of Xenophanes and from the appearance of philosophy in South Italy with Parmenides and Zeno.

In the second wave, represented by Heraclitus and Parmenides, this Ionian pursuit of a naturalistic cosmology is taken for granted and reinterpreted. The reinterpretation may have begun even earlier, with Pythagoras, if we are right in supposing that he provided some sort of cosmology as a theoretical background for his practical enterprise in founding the Pythagorean community, the cult society that played such an important role in the politics of South Italy. But the early history of Pythagoreanism is so murky that we had best limit our view to Heraclitus and Parmenides, where we have texts to rely on. On the basis of these texts, we can describe the second wave of Presocratic thought as logically "second-order," that is, as reflecting on, and finding new meaning for, the Ionian study of nature. This is what Heraclitus and Parmenides have in common: they can take for granted some version of Ionian natural philosophy and define their own philosophical position by reference to it. They do this of course in very different ways, and I will have more to say about that in a moment. First, however, let me briefly point ahead to the third and final wave of Presocratic philosophy, represented by the fifth-century cosmologies of Anaxagoras, Empedocles and the atomists.

These fifth-century cosmologies continue the enterprise of Ionian natural philosophy or proto-science, but they feel obliged to provide this enterprise with new foundations, with an element theory designed to answer the Eleatic critique of Parmenides and Zeno. Thus Anaxagoras and the atomists are direct descendents of the Ionian tradition peri physeôs, and many of their detailed doctrines resemble those of sixth-century Miletus. Much the same is true of Empedocles, although he belongs in the western branch of that tradition, influenced by

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a theory of the soul that is in a broad sense Pythagorean. In the case of all three cosmologies, their novelty consists primarily in what Aristotle calls the archê, the starting point of their system, that is, in the account each one gives of elemental principles that can escape Parmenides' attack on coming-to-be and passing-away. In other respects, Anaxagoras, Empedocles and the atomists are genuine practitioners of the Ionian enterprise of explaining the nature of things in quasi-scientific terms.

Heraclitus and Parmenides (in the first part of his poem) are not practitioners of this enterprise but commentators on it. In the second part of the poem Parmenides does appear as a practitioner: he presents a detailed cosmology illustrating the Italian branch of the Ionian tradition. But in the first part of the poem, in the discourse on Truth, Parmenides stands outside this entire tradition and demotes the study of nature to "the views of mortal, in which there is no true trust." He thus distances himself from his own work in cosmology.

Like Parmenides (and unlike Anaxagoras and the others), Heraclitus also regards the tradition of natural philosophy from an outside point of view, that is to say, from a position of his own that allows him to give a new meaning to the Ionian project in natural philosophy. Writing in prose like the Milesians, Heraclitus introduces the point of view of a logos tradition, a tradition of wise men and wise sayings, including both the new naturalistic wisdom and the older, more popular authorities (like Homer and Hesiod) that the naturalists seek to replace. This the tradition of logoi or story-telling that Hecataeus makes fun of (as he says, "The logoi of the Greeks are many and ridiculous," fr. 1), the tradition also of the logoi or informants of Herodotus, the wise men of Persia who have stories to tell about the ancestral hostility between the Greeks and their Eastern neighbors. Heraclitus begins by announcing his own logos, in contrast with all the logoi he has heard. His own logos is true forever, although forever misunderstood. It is a logos both about the world order ("all things come to pass according to this logos") and also about the human soul. ("You will never come to the limits of the soul if you travel every way, so deep is its logos.") Heraclitus has thought about physics, but also about life and death. He has investigated the nature of things, but he has also investigated himself. And he has found that the order of nature is also the order of his own soul. So in a sense Heraclitus remains within the naturalistic tradition, but he integrates the new conception of nature into a much larger view of the meaning of life.

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We are concerned now with Parmenides and his own way of reinterpreting the Ionian tradition in natural philosophy. We must take account of the fact that, in the second part of his poem, Parmenides presents a detailed cosmology of the Milesian type, although it has of course distinctive features (such as a reference to transmigration) that mark it as belonging to the western or Pythagorean tradition, as in the case of Empedocles. Our ignorance of this tradition before Parmenides makes it impossible for us to evaluate the degree of originality in Parmenides' cosmology. I assume that the old Cornford-Raven attempt to reconstruct an earlier Pythagorean view, a view that Parmenides would be reacting against, has no longer any supporters. We must simply accept the fact that Parmenides' cosmology is the earliest known example of the Italian tradition.

We can only guess how much of his own life Parmenides had devoted to the study of nature, how much of his cosmology he has simply taken over from unknown predecessors. The striking fact is that two important scientific discoveries were mentioned in his poem for the first time in any Greek source known to us. One new piece of information is the identity of the Morning Star and the Evening Star, in other words the recognition of the planet Venus. This identity had been known in Babylon for many centuries, but it is unknown to Hesiod, and it is not mentioned in any Greek text before Parmenides. Parmenides' other innovation is more momentous: he recognizes that the moon's light is dependent on light from the sun. This is practically equivalent to recognizing that lunar eclipse is due to the shadow of the earth – a discovery usually attributed to Anaxagoras. Was Parmenides himself practicing observational astronomy? Is he personally responsible for either of these scientific breakthroughs? We simply do not know. What we can say with some assurance is that, if Parmenides was not doing original work in astronomy, he was at least acquainted with the best scientific knowledge of his time. To that extent, Part Two of his poem represents a genuine contribution to early Greek natural philosophy or proto-science. There is a passage of Nietzsche that suggests that in his early years Parmenides was a student of astronomy and physics and had worked out his own cosmology, before undergoing something like a metaphysical conversion to the higher knowledge of Being. This is an attractive story, since it accounts for the extensive development of physical theory in the second part of the poem.

Nevertheless, Parmenides denies the attribute of truth to this elaborate cosmology. He does so in the name of a higher conception of truth, the truth of Being, as revealed to him by an anonymous goddess. Seen in this light, the new natural philosophy – what we call science or proto-science -- is no more than deceptive appearance, "the opinions of mortals."

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Parmenides' cosmology is intended to be the best of its kind, "so that no view of mortals will ever surpass" it (8, 61). In addition to its rich empirical detail, this cosmology includes the first proper element theory, in the proposal to explain all phenomena in terms of the mixture of two principles, Fire and Night. But this exposition of this natural world order is itself merely a "deceptive kosmos of verses"(frag. 8, 52), in a punning reference to Parmenides' account of the physical kosmos.

How did Parmenides reach the radically new view of Being that he puts in the mouth of his unnamed goddess? In this connection we need to look at the poem. But first I want to consider the interpretation of several crucial passages in Part One of the poem.

2. Disputed questions of syntax

The poem of Parmenides is full of thorny problems of interpretation, some of which may be insoluble. But some of these problems are imported into the text by commentators who think they know in advance what Parmenides is going to say, or not going to say. I want to consider three passages where the construction seems relatively clear, but where the meaning of the text has been distorted beyond recognition by interpreters who are not happy with the philosophical implications of a straightforward reading.

i) τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι

"It is the same thing to think and to be," or "Thinking and being are the same." This reading is grammatically unproblematic. Why has it not been universally accepted? Because some commentators have understood this reading in terms of Berkleyan or post-Kantian idealism, as a denial of objective reality that would be unparalleled in Greek thought. In fact the claim being made by fragment 3 is quite different, and more fully expressed in B.8, 34-6:

ταὐτὸν δ' ἐστὶ νοεῖν τε καὶ οὐνεκεν ἐστὶ νόημα.
οὐ γὰρ ἄνευ τοῦ ἔοντος, ἐν ᾧ πεφρατισμένον ἐστὶ,

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εὐρήσεις τὸ νοεῖν·

"Thinking is the same as what thought is about; for you will not find thinking without the what is in which it is articulated."

In fully rational cognition, thought and the object of thought are identical, and the only object of true thought is Being or what-is. This is how Plotinus understood B.3, which he quotes several times (?). And the doctrine is not distinctly Neoplatonic. It is accepted also by Aristotle, for whom nous in act is identical with the noêton (ref.)

I will not take the time to point out how unnatural and asymmetric is the construction of B.3 with esti-plus-infinitive taken as potential: "It is the same thing that can be thought and that can be." I submit that it is only a modern philosophical bias that could make this reading attractive; the notion of what is thinkable or conceivable has a certain modern appeal. It is only the habit of reading this in modern translations of Parmenides that can make this seem acceptable as a reading of the Greek. If one reads fragment 3 without preconceptions, there is only one construal that is at all plausible.

ii) B.6, 1-2: χρῆ τὸ λέγειν τε νοεῖν τ' ἐὸν ἔμμεναι· ἔστι γὰρ εἶναι,
μηδὲν δ' οὐκ ἔστιν·

This passage is genuinely difficult, but the only unforced reading is to take the article τὸ as nominalizing the two infinitives ἔστι saying and thinking be real (literally, be what-is); for Being is, but Nothing is not." The sense seems to be the following: There are only two possibilities; hence λέγειν and νοεῖν must be Being or nothing at all.

The last clause (ἔστι γὰρ εἶναι) can be, but need not be, read as potential: "It (what exactly?) can be, but Nothing cannot be." A philosophical preference for the potential construction is the only basis I see for preferring this reading of the second clause. On my reading (with ἔστι as existential-veridical), we have a stylistic variant here on the fundamental choice between the two ways: On the one hand to-be is real and true; but is not is simply nothing.

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The first clause identifies νοεῖν with Being, as in B.3 and B.8, 34, but adds the same identification for λέγειν: speech too must be real, if Parmenides' doctrine can be asserted or expressed in language. (Compare πεφρατισμένον in B.8, 35.) Parmenides' monism is not the unconditional claim that there is only one thing in the world; speech and cognition are recognized as distinct levels or aspects of Reality. And there are also a number of distinct signposts or attributes along the way – attributes of Being --, as B.8,2 tells us. Parmenides is a metaphysical monist but a semantic pluralist. There is only one Being, but this one reality has a plurality of aspects and expressions. It is only later, from Plato's perspective, that the monism theme becomes so central.

iii) B.8, 53-4 μορφᾶς γὰρ κατέθεντο δύο γνώμας ὀνομάζειν·
τῶν μίαν οὐ χρεῶν ἔστιν, ἐν ᾧ πεπλανημένοι εἰσίν

"Mortals have made up their mind to name two forms, one of which it is not right to name, in which they have gone astray." Much ingenuity has been expended in the attempt to make τῶν μίαν mean something other than what it says, namely that mortals were wrong to name one of these two forms. The statement is of course paradoxical, since the two forms of Fire (or Light) and Night are defined as opposites and apparently as logically dependent on one another. It would seem that either both forms are right or both are wrong. This poses a serious problem of interpretation. But the rule of method is the same as in the preceding cases: let the text say what it does seem to say, and then try to make sense of it. Once one begins to play with less natural construals of the syntax, the whole enterprise of interpretation becomes arbitrary. Instead of extracting a meaning from the text, we impose one upon it.

Given what the verse says, we must ask what reason Parmenides may have had for identifying mortal error with one of the forms rather than with both. There is a clue in the properties attributed to the two forms in the following verses: "to one form they assigned a blazing fire of flame, being mild, immensely light, the same with itself in every way, but not the same as the other; but the other in itself opposed, unknowing night, a dense and heavy frame" (transl. after Coxon). The negative associations of night are emphasized here by identifying night with ignorance; light, on the other hand, is favored as a gentle being (ἥπιον

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ὄν B. 8, 58) and characterized by one of the properties of Being itself ("the same with itself in every way," echoing the culminating description of what-is in terms of the symmetry of a sphere, "equal to itself in every direction" B.8,42-49). Furthermore, one of the epithets of Fire repeats the term αἰθέριον that appears twice in the proem. We will return to this connection in the next section of the paper.

If we follow these hints, we must identify Night as the form it was not right to name. The epithet ἄδαής applied here to Night reflects the ignorance of mortals in introducing this form. That does not mean that the other form, Light or Fire, is identical with true Being. But it does suggest that the positive form points in the right direction. In the second part of the poem we are of course still within the deceptive cosmology of mortal illusion. But we can say that, within this cosmology, Light reflects the principle of truth and knowledge as compromised by its co-existence with its opposite form Night. Thus Light serves as both the symbolical and the physical representative of Being within the world of mortal opinion and perception. (So correctly Aristotle Met. 987a 1: "Parmenides ranks the hot with Being, the other principle with Not-Being".) Theophrastus reports that this asymmetry between the two forms was developed systematically in a lost passage on cognition: "thought becomes better and purer because of the hot. . . . He says the corpse does not perceive light and heat and sound because of the loss of fire, but it perceives cold and silence and the opposites" (A. 46 in Diels). See Vlastos' 1946 paper, "Parmenides' Theory of Knowledge," for a full discussion.) And the surviving fragment on cognition (B. 16) confirms, for the world of physics and sensation, the identity between thought and its object expressed in fragments 3 and 8, 34: "Thus mind (νόος) for humans is the same as what it thinks (φρονεει), the nature of human limbs." As the corpse thinks only darkness, the knowing mortal will think mostly light.

3. The direction of the chariot ride

Until recently, this cognitive preference for light over night in the cosmology has led most commentators to assume that the emphatic phrase εἰς φῶς in line 10 of the proem was intended to indicate that the voyage of the kouros was a voyage from darkness into light, and this view seemed confirmed by the fact that the kouros is escorted by Sun Maidens who have

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just left behind them the halls of Night (l. 9). But this view was challenged by J.S. Morrison in a 1995 article in JHS claiming that Parmenides' voyage was better understood as a katabasis, an initiation into the mysteries of the underworld. Since then articles by Walter Burkert () and David Furley () have supported Morrison's suggestion, and established a new trend against the reading of the proem as a voyage from darkness to light. (Burkert argues that the direction of the chariot ride is neither up nor down but horizontal: "the Beyond lies neither above or below but simply very, very far away" (p.15).) The latest discussion of this question by Mitchell Miller, which appeared only this summer (OSAP 2006, 12-28) argues for a deliberate ambiguity. Against the view of Alex Mourelatos and others that Parmenides leaves "the topography of the journey ... blurred beyond recognition, " Mitchell finds "a clear, and clearly contradictory, double sense" for the direction of the chariot ride" (p. 23 n. 39). Parmenides, he thinks, wants to have it both ways.

In some sense Mitchell may be right in taking the ambiguity seriously. If Parmenides had wanted to make the path of the chariot ride unmistakably clear, there would not be so much room for disagreement on this matter between excellent scholars. The topography is certainly mixed, and some features are suggestive of the underworld. But as an indication of direction, the notion of a katabasis cannot be correct. There are a dozen references to motion in the proem but only one specification of where all this movement is going. That is the phrase εἰς φῶς. There is no counter-balancing indication of a movement downwards or into darkness.

It is true that, in its immediate context in verse 10, the phrase εἰς φῶς refers only to the movement of the Heliades leaving the halls of Night. But the function of the daughters of the Sun, and their motive in leaving the house of Night, is to lead the kouros. Where are they leading him? There is no other direction indicated, either for the Heliades or for the chariot or for the horses that draw it. In the first five verses of the proem the verb *pherein* occurs 4 times, the verbs ἰκάνειν, πέμπειν, ἄγειν and ἡγεμονεύειν each once. That is eight verbs of motion in five verses. An alert reader must ask: Where is this motion going? Where does the "way of the goddess" lead? A hint comes with the participle αἰσθόμενος for the axle blazing in the wheel (v. 7), to be echoed a few lines later by αἰθέριαι for the gates themselves (v. 13). A second, stronger hint is given by the identity of the Heliades (in verse 9), the daughters of the Sun who will know how to guide the chariot on the sun's path. The significant parallel to Phaethon was pointed out by Bowra and others; according to the

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story, the Heliades helped Phaethon set off on his ill-fated journey with the chariot of the Sun. The parallel would suggest that Parmenides' kouros is also traveling through the sky, on a path like that of the Sun. And the one and only definite answer to the question "Where is all this going?" comes in the words εἰς φάος in the emphatic initial position at the beginning of verse 10. This specifies, first of all, the movement of the Heliades out of the halls of night. But where are the Heliades going? Where are they leading the chariot? If they immediately drop their veils, that is presumably a signal that they are now at home, having left their temporary, overnight dwelling in the halls of Night. Their home is of course the realm of the sun, the realm of light. And it is precisely there (ἔνθα v. 11) that the gates are to be found, the gates that are ἀιθέριαι – aloft, in the sky. There is no hint so far of any movement except upwards, through the sky (αἰθήρ) and into the light. If, syntactically speaking, the phrase εἰς φάος modifies only the movement of the Heliades out of the halls of Night, rhetorically speaking, coming as it does in the initial position of verse 10, this phrase specifies all the movement of the first 10 lines. That is why, until recently, all commentators understood Parmenides' journey as a voyage into the light.

Why then do some readers now look for a katabasis, a voyage down into the underworld? There is simply no basis for this, as far as I can see, in the first ten verses of the poem. (The halls of Night have been mentioned in verse 9, but only as a place that the Heliades have abandoned.) It is only in verse 11 that supporters of the katabasis reading can begin to find references to the underworld, first in the Hesiodic associations of the introductory ἔνθα in verse 11, together with the designation of the gates through which the kouros must pass as "the gates of the paths of Night and Day." Thus Morrison claims: "The mention of the house of Night, and of 'the gates of the paths of Day and Night' with their threshold, enables us to identify the place as the familiar region of poetic tradition about the underworld." (1955, p. 59) But this is special pleading. The house of Night is mentioned here only as left behind. [Note: The text does not support Furley's suggestion that the Sun-Maidens "come to meet Parmenides and take him back home with them – back into the House of Night" (Exegesis and Argument, p. 2). If the Heliades were heading back into the House of Night, why would they remove their veils only after they have left?]

But the emphatic ἔνθα, "There!" introducing the gates at the beginning of verse 11 is located not by its occurrence in the Theogony but by its context in Parmenides' poem. According to Odyssey Book 10 (v.86), the "paths of Day and Night" are located not in the

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underworld but simply very far away, in the land of the Laistrygonians. The gates themselves are here said to be αἰθέριαι, "celestial" or in the sky (αἰθήρ). Nothing in the proem points to a subterranean location. Some of Parmenides' mysterious language is suggestive of Hesiod, but with a difference. Thus Hesiod's underworld threshold is made of bronze, Parmenides' threshold is made of stone (λάινοσ οὐδός, v.12). Dike as gatekeeper is certainly not located in Hesiod's underworld; on the contrary, in the Erga Hesiod has Dike seated next to Zeus in Olympus. Clearly, Parmenides is creating his own mythical landscape for his own mythical chariot ride, using as raw material whatever in the poetic tradition suits his purpose. But that Parmenides' chariot is traveling not underground nor into any cave but aloft, through the sky, is guaranteed not only by the parallel to Phaethon but also by the description of the gates through which he must pass as αἰθέριαι (v. 13).

[Mitchell and others have seen Hesiodic associations for the chasma that appears when the gates fly open in v. 18, thus recalling the deep pit of Tartarus in Theogony 740. But "chasms" are not necessarily in the underworld. Morrison himself draws the parallel with the double set of cavsmata in the myth of Er, one pair going into the heavens, one pair into the earth (Rep. X, 614c-d). And the paradoxical phrase χάσμι' ἀχανές may have the effect of neutralizing the Hesiodic associations.]

The mythology of the proem comes to an end when the goddess greets the kouros and assures him that his celestial chariot ride is approved by Themis and Dike –he was not, like Phaethon, sent by a μοῖρα κακῆ (vv. 26-28). What follows the meeting is no longer myth but a revelation of Truth. Of course the mythical resources of the epic persist throughout the poem, borne by the hexameter form. But the kouros and his chariot have no role to play after the proem.

From the literary point of view, the proem focuses on two points: the effort and passion of the journey, and the formidable solidity of the gates that must be opened and entered. It is natural to see these two points as allegory for the intellectual passion (θυμός) of Parmenides' inquiry into truth, and the difficulty of his intellectual break-through into the conception of Being to be presented in the body of the poem. Should we (with many commentators) see in the journey of the kouros a reflection of some personal experience of enlightenment on Parmenides' part, something like a philosophical epiphany or experience of

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being transported into a higher cognitive reality? Of course the text itself cannot guarantee what lies behind it in Parmenides' own experience. Still, the radical nature of his claims, in both ontology and epistemology, and his acute sense of the distance from the views of ordinary mortals, strongly suggest that Parmenides had experienced a revolutionary insight, which he has chosen to present to us in this imaginative form. As far as I know, we have no real parallel to this proem in the literature of archaic Greece. The notion of poetry as a divine revelation is of course common from Homer on, and Hesiod has described his own meeting with the Muses on Helicon. But Hesiod's description is given as a naturalistic report, not as a mystic chariot ride. The chariot of song is familiar as a poetic device, but not as a personal narrative. There may well have been closer parallels in the lost revelation literature of the sixth or early fifth century. But my guess is that Parmenides was as daring and unprecedented in his construction of the proem as he was in the doctrine of the poem itself.

Without the natural poetic gifts of Xenophanes or Empedocles, Parmenides has nevertheless chosen to use the medium of epic poetry rather than the new prose of Ionian philosophy, presumably because he has something to say of more general importance than could be expressed in a purely technical treatise. Furthermore, he has enhanced the traditional authority of the epic genre by this elaborate narrative of a special revelation. Whether or not the proem reflects a definite personal experience, it certainly articulates a claim to special knowledge. At the same time, the mystical or magical character of the opening narrative is designed to prepare the way for an entirely rational message. It is in this sense that the proem is allegorical. The physical details are worked out with great care, but we are not asked to believe that Parmenides was physically transported in a chariot and escorted by the daughters of the Sun. It is precisely because the proem is so carefully crafted that it seems important to get an accurate view of the direction of Parmenides' journey. The currently popular interpretation of his trip as a *katabasis* fails to do justice to the unified imagery of the poem and also to the essential rationality of his message. It is not the shadowy region of the underworld and the darkness of *νύξ ἀδαής*, "unknowing Night," but the bright light of the *αἰθήρ*, the sunlit sky, that symbolizes Parmenides' passion for the Truth and the goal of his chariot ride. That is why his guides are Daughters of the Sun, his axle is blazing (*αἰθόμενος*), the gates are celestial (*αἰθέριαι*), and he is being led towards the light (*εἰς φάος*). It is probably no accident that he describes the traveler as an *εἰδὼς φάος*, a "knowing mortal," (*εἰδὸτα φῶτα* in verse 3) with a play on the meaning of *φάος* as light.

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(The same pun occurs in fragment 14, where the Homeric verse ending ἀλλότριον φῶς for an alien mortal is used to allude to the borrowed light of the moon.) Thus the light imagery of the proem is, from the beginning, associated with the positive notion of knowledge, just as the figure of night is later associated with silence and ignorance. All of this is turned upside down if we construe Parmenides' chariot ride as a katabasis.