

## *Venus and the Erotics of Parmenides*

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**ABSTRACT:** The twenty-first century begins with many interpretive turns towards the pre-Socratic thinkers, among them Parmenides of Elea. I investigate how the cosmological contents contained in the fragments of the Poem can be integrated into the Parmenidean program of knowledge of the truth, achieved by thought. In this way, scientific discoveries concerning the Moon, Venus and others are glimpsed. I also propose that an old way of integrating the knowledge of astronomical contents to the knowledge of contents related to generation and sex, which compose the physical subjects of the Poem, takes the form of an Erotic interpretation of the world, ruled by Eros and Aphrodite.

**KEY-WORDS:** Parmenides, Pre-Socratics, Cosmology, Erotics, Aphrodite, Venus.

**RESUMO:** O século XXI começa com muitas viradas interpretativas com relação aos pensadores pré-socráticos, entre os quais Parmênides de Eleia. Investigo como os conteúdos cosmológicos contidos nos fragmentos do Poema podem ser integrados ao programa parmenídeo de conhecimento da verdade pelo pensamento. Neste caminho vislumbram-se descobertas científicas relativas à Lua, a Vênus e outras. Proponho ainda que uma antiga forma de integrar o conhecimento de conteúdos astronômicos ao conhecimento de conteúdos relativos à geração e ao sexo, que compõem os assuntos físicos do Poema, dá-se na forma de uma interpretação erótica do mundo, regido por Eros e por Afrodite.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Parmênides, Pré-socráticos, Cosmologia, Erótica, Afrodite, Vênus.

*Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

A coherent contemporary interpretation of Parmenides' Poem depends on a first hermeneutic step ordering the fragments that tradition has bequeathed to us. However, this ordering itself is only possible when we have imagined what the entire poem would be. The only objective sign of the fragments' position that we have, though, concerns the beginning; and the only consensus among commentators is that the verses quoted by Sextus are the first. Thus, an interpreter of the Poem has to know the meaning of the extant fragments and still suppose what the lost parts would be. The interpreter must be not only a philologist, but also somewhat visionary, in the way of Calchas, "who sees what is, what was and what is to be" (*Il.* I, 70), as he has to consider how what we have has come to us, providing himself with consistent information about the contexts of composition and transmission; and must also look to the future, seeing what can be thought from such a legacy. That is why the philologist, in addition to being a historian, always has to have a philosopher's impetus and be unafraid to enter the hermeneutic circle, where general understanding depends on the ordering, and the ordering depends on an overall view. The Poem of Parmenides is like a galaxy. As we know, it is not easy to see stars in a beautiful cosmic order: we need to consider day and night, to put some immobile reference in our wandering planet perspective, see where the light and the shadows come from, and finally where the centre fits, if we have to put it somewhere.

Recently, a new wave of readings affirms that Parmenides' investigations contributed to the history of Western knowledge beyond the fields of metaphysics and logic, reaching also into the domains of

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Rose Cherubin for her stimulating comments and friendly reviewing of my wildish English.

natural sciences such as astronomy and (more rarely<sup>2</sup>) biology. That was only possible after a critique of the orthodoxy of Diels-Kranz' *Die Fragmente des Vorsokratiker* editions, which considers all the statements of sensible things as deceiving and delusional opinions, following a Neoplatonist worldview<sup>3</sup>. Giovanni Casertano (1989), Karl Popper (1999), Giovanni Cerri (1999), Luigi Ruggiu (2003), Nestor Cordero (2011; 2017; 2019), Livio Rossetti (2015; 2016; 2017), Guido Calenda (2017) and others are all contributing to this new wave.

In a sense, this was reinforced by another wave, one that examined the literary contexts in which the poem might be included, in dialogues with the epic and cosmogonic poetry of Homer, Hesiod and the Orphic tradition. This was especially important in order to understand how *doxa* is more a problem dealing with words than one that deals with worlds. Herman Fränkel (1962), Clémence Ramnoux (1970), Lambros Couloubaritsis (1986), Barbara Cassin (1987; 1998), Marcelo Pimenta Marques (1990), Alberto Bernabé (2004), Alexander Mourelatos (2008) and others, have been sailing in this current.

I would like to surf over those two waves, proposing that Parmenides' Poem is, in effect, a cosmological treatise arguing against some beliefs and theories, in a specific theological tradition. A sort of mental correction of illusory convictions supports his arguments. The verses we have been considering for so long as belonging to the Way of Truth (DK B2, B3, B4, B5, B6, B7, B8.1-49) would be, in this sense, a preparatory or methodological discourse establishing how to use in a better way the knowledge powers of thought with some issues related to natural as well divine phenomena. The Poem of Parmenides could be appreciated in a wider theoretical scope since it is an ontological and epistemic reflection, but not in an abstract or isolated way. Its

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Journée 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Which is renewed in old standard "English-language discussions of Parmenides" (Curd 2004, 9 ff.), since they follow Diels editions' ordering and interpretation of the so-called *Doxa* section.



χρῆν δοκίμως εἶναι διὰ παντὸς πάντα περ ὄντα.

*you must instruct yourself in everything:  
both the intrepid heart of the persuasive Truth  
and the opinions of mortals where there is no true faith.  
However, you will also learn this: how appearances  
needed patently to be, through everything like everything else...*

On the other hand, the part of the program related to the content is not even considered by the orthodoxy as a true knowledge program, since it appears, in Diels' ordering, after the last verses of fr. DK B8, which announce the deceitful discourse of mortals in a "cosmic verisimilar ordination". Also, just after this, in Diels edition, comes DK B9, dealing with the cosmological error of differentiating the Day and the Night according to the way they are named, an error because in truth they are both equal. What I consider a program to deal with traditional cosmic content is DK B10, which in my Brazilian edition (Santoro 2011) I also separated from the so-called group of verses on the *doxa*. I placed it next to the beginning, just after the verses referring to the methodological program. The passage starts in a prescriptive way, as at the beginning of the speech of the Goddess: "You will know..." and there is nothing in it referring to illusion or deceit. There is a list of phenomena that must be objects of investigation and knowledge, seeking the necessity that they are in the way they are. If we understand a little prospectively<sup>5</sup> the idea of necessity, we can see its prevision included in the program as an indication of a search for the explanation of the phenomenon and its unavoidable condition, maybe for its divine laws (or natural rules) expressed by thought. The program thus proposes to explain the phenomena by the powers of thought and generally in opposition to the opinions about their immediate appearances. The explanation of something by its necessity is one of the first and most crucial ideas of what should be understood as scientific knowledge in

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<sup>5</sup> Like Aristotle's statements of necessity on causality and scientific knowledge (*Analytics*, *Metaphysics* I,1, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 6)

the West. These are some verses for the program of the content of knowledge:

*DK B10 PROGRAM 2*

- 1 εἴσηι δ' αἰθερίαν τε φύσιν τὰ τ' ἐν αἰθέρι πάντα  
 σήματα καὶ καθαρᾶς εὐαγέος ἡλίοιο  
 λαμπάδος ἔργ' αἰδηλα καὶ ὀππόθεν ἐξεγένοντο,  
 5 ἔργα τε κύκλωπος πεύσηι περίφοιτα σελήνης  
 καὶ φύσιν, εἰδήσεις δὲ καὶ οὐρανὸν ἀμφὶς ἔχοντα  
 ἔνθεν ἔφυ τε καὶ ὥς μιν ἄγουσ(α) ἐπέδησεν ἀνάγκη  
 πείρατ' ἔχειν ἄστρον.

*You will know the nature of the Ether and all the signs  
 in the Ether and the invisible works of pure flame  
 of the bright Sun, and where they came from.  
 You will probe the wandering works of the Cyclopic Moon  
 and its nature, you will also know the Heaven that embraces  
 everything,  
 where it comes from, and how Necessity took it in the halter  
 maintaining the limits of the stars.*

The content of this program includes a set of astronomical objects and phenomena: the ether and its signs, the sun, the phases of the moon, the sky and the stars<sup>6</sup>. Probably the program was more extensive because we also find in the Poem other themes of knowledge, such as, for example, the part relating to the sexual reproduction of human beings. Plutarch, when listing the content of Parmenides' "ordering of the world", his *diakosmos* or cosmology, quotes: "the earth, the sky, the sun, the moon, and also the generation of men"<sup>7</sup>. The content is similar in traditional cosmogonies, which include from the

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Calenda 2017 (61-71).

<sup>7</sup> Plutarch, *Adversus Colototem* 1114b. ὅς γε καὶ διάκοσμον πεποιήται καὶ στοιχεῖα μιγνύς τὸ λαμπρὸν καὶ σκοτεινὸν ἐκ τούτων τὰ φαινόμενα πάντα καὶ διὰ τούτων ἀποτελεῖ· καὶ γὰρ περὶ γῆς εἴρηκε πολλὰ καὶ περὶ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ἡλίου καὶ σελήνης καὶ γενέσειν ἀνθρώπων ἀφήγηται· καὶ οὐδὲν ἄρρητον ὡς ἀνὴρ ἀρχαῖος ἐν φυσιολογίᾳ καὶ συνθεῖς γραφῆν ἰδίαν, οὐκ ἄλλοτρίαν διαφορῶν, τῶν κυρίων παρήκεν. "Who created indeed an ordained world, with a mixture of elements, the shining and the dark, and through them produced all phenomena; so also said many things about the earth and about heaven and the sun and the moon, and spoke of the offspring of men. As a man of ancient times, he did not fail to speak of any of the principal matters relating to the study of nature and composed his own text, without outside interference." Cf. Popper 1999, p.100, 115.

ordering of the stars to the offspring of mankind<sup>8</sup>. The great difference is precisely the methodological program that makes the *diakosmos* known by a demonstration of the necessity of the phenomena. This reordering of the world according to the order of need is done precisely by finding intellectually the reasons for the phenomena and for our mistakes in expressing opinions about them. The verses with theoretical content on the cosmic phenomena would not be presented as another new cosmogony, but precisely as an analysis of appearances in order to find the truth with reasons brought by thought. The well-realized model of this method is the wonderful and compact demonstration that the moonlight is a foreign light at night, against the appearance and opinion that it comes from the moon itself. The fragment B14 gives in a single verse all we need to understand that the phases of the moon show different angles of reflection from a day light at night.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Cosmos*

We have a tiny part of the entire cosmological exposition: twenty-five verses (B11-18), plus three of doubtful authorship (B20), before the three concluding verses (B 19). This little “Cosmos” seems not furnish sufficient content to attest to the entire programmatic scope, nor to show how the methodological program was fulfilled, and whether it was indeed fulfilled. Nevertheless, I would like to present a list of contents according to the known fragments and thus establish a research program (for us) on Parmenides’ *diakosmēsis*, or cosmology or physics. This list can be divided into two groups: one concerns celestial

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<sup>8</sup> “When one closely analyses Hesiod’s theogonic account, it is possible to discern the same three part schema that is discernable in the pre-Socratic accounts of the *peri phuseos* type: namely a cosmogony, an anthropogony, and a politogony.” Naddaf 2005, p.13; cf. also pp. 134-140. In the bequeathed fragments of Parmenides we clearly have the first two parts, but not something we can really call a politogony, even if we know that Parmenides had an important legislative activity (Diog. Laertius 9.23 = DK28 A1.23), and used for his ontological statements a forensic vocabulary, cf. Santoro 2011b.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Santoro 2015; 2018.

objects and phenomena; the other concerns phenomena related to sexual reproduction. It should be noted that some verses were placed in both groups: the fragments DK B12 and B13, as well as the testimony DK A37.

- 1) First group: the Heaven of Parmenides, with fourteen verses and some testimonies.

DK B11, DK A37, DK A43 and A43a The heavenly bodies and places: Earth, Sun, Moon, Ether, Galaxy, Olympus and Stars.

DK B12 and DK A37 < crowns (?) > filled with fire with a deity in the centre, perhaps Eros (DK B13) or Venus (Plutarch, *On Love* 13, 756f.).

DK B14, DK B15 and A42 The phases of the Moon.

DK B15, DK A41 and DK A42 The Sun.

DK B15a The Earth (?) (according to Basil, *Homiliae in Hexaëmeron*, 25, 201.2).

DK A40a The star of Venus.

DK A41-44 The Fire.

DK A44a Tropics, solstices and equinoxes.

- 2) Second group: sexual reproduction, with twenty-one verses and some testimonies.

DK B12 Cosmic union of male and female.

DK B13 Eros, first conceived.

DK B16 Mixture of limbs.

DK B17 To the left and to the right in the uterus.

DK B18 The mixture of seeds by Venus.

DK B20 The meadow of Venus. (fragment of doubtful authorship attribution)

DK A37 The divinity in the midst of the crown of fire, Eros or Venus?

DK A40a Venus.



- DK A51 The mixture of moods.  
 DK A52, The warmth of women.  
 DK A53, A54 On the sides of the uterus.

There are several testimonies about fire and cold and other polar elements that could also relate to the analysis of sexual generation<sup>10</sup>.

We do not know how much of the poem was lost, or how and why it was lost. The conservation of a set of verses depends entirely on the interest of the author who quotes them. We owe the largest blocks of quotations to only two authors, Sextus Empiricus for thirty verses of the fragment DK B1 and five of DK B7, and Simplicius for DK B2, B6, B7, B8, B9, B11, B12, B13, B19. Sextus interpreted the initial image of the chariot according to the allegory of the five senses. Simplicius sought to show that Parmenides separated the world into sensible and intelligible, according to a Neoplatonist reading. As at the time of Simplicius it was already rare to find a copy of the Poem, he did well to quote long excerpts. It is thanks to this that we have most of what has been preserved. The authors who quoted the physical verses were interested in the lunar orbits, like Plutarch, or were doctors, like Galen and Caelius Aurelianus. The Peripatetics, following Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, were interested in questions related to sensory perception and elementary principles such as fire and cold. It is, therefore, an almost dream-like task to imagine what the whole diacosmic or cosmological part of the poem would be like.

### *The Moonlight Model*

The way in which DK B14 almost demonstrates by the wandering of foreign light that moonlight is daylight reflected on the

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Betegh, 2019, p. 40.

moon makes me believe that it is an excellent model of reflected knowledge. Thought, together with methodical observation, is capable of revising the opinion (and the name) born from our illusion that moonlight originates on the Moon. At the same time that that thought exposes the truth about the solar origin of moonlight, it also explains why we see the phases of the Moon as we see them. The truth about what we see is demonstrated by a methodical exercise of thought that constructs an image inaccessible to the eyes. The truth of the moon's foreign brightness is a truth reached by observing the transformation of its phases, according to the spherical regularity of its monthly cycles that makes it appear each day at a different time, with a part of brightness visible according to the relative position of the sunshine.<sup>11</sup> The methodological program is applied to a point of the programmatic content<sup>12</sup>.

B 14

νυκτὶ φάος<sup>13</sup> περὶ γαῖαν ἀλώμενον ἀλλότριον φῶς

Nightly shine wandering around the Earth foreign light.

We can divide the hexameter of frag. B14 in three parts, as three moments of a kind of poetic demonstration: 1) νυκτι φάος; 2) περὶ γαῖαν ἀλώμενον 3) ἀλλότριον φῶς. The first part presents what our eyes can see: the deceptive and paradoxical appearance of a natural oxymoron “a light by night”, “a nightly shine”. The second part requires

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<sup>11</sup> Popper (1999, 119–122) perfectly achieves this empirical dimension of Parmenides' astronomical discovery, as well as the critique of sensualism embedded in it (*per modum tollens*); but he stays there, without moving on to the constructive and concrete dimension of the method (*per modum ponens*). The truth of moonlight, for him, through the denial of the illusory senses, has nevertheless the psychological effect of reinforcing the logical and abstract truth of the divine signs. It is a coherent cosmological theory waiting, of course, to be refuted (by the Atomists) (op. cit. 127–128).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Santoro 2011c, 119–125; 2018.

<sup>13</sup> νυκτὶ φάος mss. : νυκτιφαῆς Scaliger.

a methodical but simple astronomical observation that the moon makes a cycle every month, day by day in a different relative position, being with divine regularity a “wandering around the earth”. The third part is the conclusion obtained by imagination and thought, because it is not visible, it is only deducible from the initial premises. These premises are constituted by 1) the observation of the phases of the moon and 2) the postulate of a model of celestial spheres and orbits (crowns). Those premises are not shown in this lonely hexameter quoted by Plutarch, but they are spread through the poem, which claims the spherical shape of the whole world. The conclusion obtained from the junction of observation with the idealized model is that moonlight is a “foreign light”, a light coming not from night but from day, and reflected on the moon. This explanation fits perfectly in the program of divine knowledge. We have both parts: 1) “the opinions of mortals” that moonlight come from the moon, i.e. from the night; and 2) “the intrepid heart of the persuasive Truth” that moonlight come from the day and is reflected by the moon. And what is epistemologically amazing is the fact that for the *explanandum* there is a perfect *explanans*, which is the fact that moon is a “wandering around the earth”. This *explanans* has in fact two *explananda*, not only the true nature of the moonlight but also “how appearances needed patently to be, through everything like everything else” i.e. the cause of human misunderstanding.

The moonlight explanation model is so perfectly illustrative of the method that, even had it been the only physical content, I would not consider it an overstatement to imagine that the entire Poem was built to offer and demonstrate this unique and sophisticated astronomical discovery, and all that it requires and that arises from it in cosmological and epistemological terms. This is because there are very important premises that appear throughout the Poem, such as the homogeneity of the cosmos and the indistinction between day and night, the spherical shape of the stars and also of the Earth, the circularity of the orbits that

do not coincide with the Sun, the Moon and the stars.<sup>14</sup>

### *Which Goddess?*

The unnamed Goddess who receives the young person could be a celestial deity, like that mentioned in DK B12. It could be, for example, the reclusive Artemis to whom another physicist, Heraclitus, had already dedicated his work.

But the Poem certainly goes beyond lunar issues. The substantial part concerning sexual reproduction, which includes more verses than those of astronomical content, would not fit into an Artemisian<sup>15</sup> cosmology exclusively interested in celestial issues. Should we imagine another axis able to include celestial and sexual contents in Parmenides' *diakosmēsis*?

Another lead we can follow is given by the fragments DK B12 and DK B13 and the DK A37 testimony. The first three verses of DK B12 seem to speak of crowns or orbits of fire that are ruled by a divinity. This same divinity that regulates the heavenly orbits also governs childbirth and copulation, as the last three verses of the fragment say<sup>16</sup>. Simplicius, using a Stoic terminology from Peripatetic or even older origin, says that this deity occupies the function of an “efficient cause” (ποιητικὸν αἴτιον)<sup>17</sup> and perhaps it is She who “first conceived Eros”, as the verse quoted in Plato's *Banquet* (DK B13) says<sup>18</sup>. A dual cosmic-erotic function also appears in another discourse of the *Banquet* (180e), which presents two Venuses: the heavenly Venus and the popular

<sup>14</sup> Popper (1999, p. 115) still lists such knowledge as “empirical”.

<sup>15</sup> Artemis is a virgin goddess well known by its reclusiveness. The love story between Selene and Helios (DK B15), which delighted Popper (1999, p. 99) would be a case of fraternal love, if transposed to Leto's twins, Artemis and Apollo.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Ferrari 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Betegh 2019, 38–40.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Casertano 2019, cap. “L'infanzia di Eros (da Omero a Parmenide)”, 31–44.

Venus. So it is not uncommon for some ancient philosophers of nature to associate Eros and Venus with cosmology, in both fields that we call nowadays astronomy and biology, precisely those where the Parmenidean physical contents fit.

## DK B 12

αἱ γὰρ στενιότεραι πλῆντο πυρὸς ἀκρήτσιοι,  
αἱ δ' ἐπὶ ταῖς νυκτός, μετὰ δὲ φλογὸς ἵεται αἴσα·  
ἐν δὲ μέσῳι τούτων δαίμων ἢ πάντα κυβερνᾷ·  
5 πάντων γὰρ στρυγεροῖο τόκου καὶ μίξιος ἄρχει  
πέμπουσι ἄρσενι θῆλυ μιγῆν τό τ' ἐναντίον αὐτίς  
ἄρσεν θηλυτέρῳι.

*Some are narrower, full of unmixed fire,  
Others are facing them, full of night; beside a flowing flame;  
In the middle is a divinity, which drives everything:  
ruling every terrible childbirth and mating,  
sending the female to join the male and back,  
male to female.*

## B 13

πρώτιστον μὲν Ἔρωτα θεῶν μητίσατο πάντων  
[καὶ τὰ ἑξῆς]

*the first of all the gods she conceived was Love.  
[one after the other]*

Aristotle, in the first book of what we call the *Metaphysics*, makes a comment before quoting the same verse about Eros quoted by Plato in the *Banquet*. *Metaphysics* Alpha provides one of the first histories of philosophy, as the natural human trend toward knowing. It is also an explanation of how some ancestors of philosophical thought spoke about the first principles of the universe. Those principles are also called “causes” (*aitíai*) by Aristotle, and the ultimate cause of nature is called there “final cause” (*telos*), “beauty” (*kalos*), and “god” (*theos*). Aristotle quotes the names of Hesiod and Parmenides as predecessors for the idea that the moving principle of the universe is like love or desire:

*Metaphysics I, 984b*

οἱ μὲν οὖν οὕτως ὑπολαμβάνοντες ἅμα τοῦ καλῶς τὴν αἰτίαν ἀρχὴν εἶναι τῶν ὄντων ἔθεσαν, καὶ τὴν τοιαύτην ὅθεν ἢ κίνησις ὑπάρχει τοῖς οὖσιν· ὑποπτεύσειε δ' ἂν τις Ἡσίοδον πρῶτον ζητῆσαι τὸ τοιοῦτον, κὰν εἴ τις ἄλλος ἔρωτα ἢ ἐπιθυμίαν ἐν τοῖς οὖσιν ἔθηκεν ὡς ἀρχὴν, οἷον καὶ Παρμενίδης· καὶ γὰρ οὗτος κατασκευάζων τὴν τοῦ παντός γένεσιν “πρώτιστον μὲν” φησιν ...

*Those who thought this way considered that the principle of beings was at the same time the cause of the beauty and the cause of where their movement is instated. One could suppose that Hesiod was the first to investigate such a thing, or some other that established love or desire as a principle in the beings, as well as Parmenides considering him as the articulator of the origin of all things when he said ‘first of all...’ [DK B13]*

For Aristotle, in Hesiod as in Parmenides, and other wise poets, Love or desire was seen as a cosmic principle that moves the beings, both the celestial bodies in their orbits and the sexual bodies that seek to give origin to new ones. He calls these lore poets ‘theologists’ (cf. *Metaph.* 1074b; 1091a; 1000a), when they deal with the first principles and causes using divinities names. As this principle is a god, and precisely the god Eros, one might call that theory an “Erotic Theology”. The poets who, in different ways, consider Eros, Love, a fundamental principle of the universe are the ancestors of the Aristotelian metaphysical search for causes and principles of beings. In Aristotelian metaphysics, which incorporates physics and theology, there is room for a God that moves the whole of nature by an aiming of achievement, which Aristotle likens to the force of desire and love. It is not our goal here and now to go deeply into this tradition of poets nor into Aristotelian theory, beyond what we need to understand that Eros and the erotic might be crucial to a poet and philosopher of nature such as Parmenides.

Aristotle will return to the subject, engaging with the same tradition of authors who conceived erotically and theologically the motor principle of wandering stars and the generation of living beings.

This occurs in Book Lambda of *Metaphysics*, his second treatise on the Prime Unmoved Mover. A Mover that moves without moving, Aristotle says (1072a), is like the desirable (*orekton*) and intelligible (*noeton*) because it moves while it is loved (*erōmenon*) (1072b). For Aristotle this God is not precisely Eros or love, but He moves the world in the way that love moves lovers. This is the principle of both the movement of celestial beings (eternal circular movement of stars and planets) and mortal beings (movement aiming at generation of life). He explains that the natural motion of beings is the movement for achievement of each form, a natural trend of living beings searching their own perfection and beauty. If one wants to follow this line and open his eyes for that constellation of poets, physicians and philosophers speaking about love as a principle, he can start by noting all the authors quoted by Plato in the *Banquet* and by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* Lambda.

According to this tradition, which, as Aristotle says, comes from Hesiod and goes through Empedocles, the divinity in Parmenides' fragment DK B12, the one who governs the movement of the stars and the movement in view of the generation of life, "ruling every terrible childbirth and mating, sending the female to join the male and back, male to female", might be Eros or Aphrodite, Venus. Certainly not, though, Venus as She was understood by "mortals' opinions" (DK B8.51); that is, not as one of the anthropomorphic gods forged by storytellers.

As Parmenides did in the case of the moon's light (DK B14), correcting the common opinion in view of astronomical knowledge that is the result of reflection by thought, we could think that he also reserved for the wandering star of Venus a correction of the general sense, again performed by thought. No verse has come to us with this content of knowledge. We have only a testimony of Diogenes Laertius (*Vitae* 8, 14 – DK A40a) about Parmenides having been the first to recognize that the Evening star (*Hesperon*) and the Morning star (*Eōion*) are one and the same:

## DK A 40a

Παρμενίδης πρῶτον μὲν τάττει τὸν Ἐῶιον, τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ νομιζόμενον ὑπ' αὐτοῦ καὶ Ἑσπερον, ἐν τῷ αἰθέρι· μεθ' ὃν τὸν ἥλιον, ὑφ' ᾧ τοὺς ἐν τῷ πυρώδει ἀστέρας, ὅπερ οὐρανὸν καλεῖ.

*Parmenides orders the Morning Star, which is considered by him to be identical with the Evening Star, as first in the ether; after it the sun, beneath which he places the heavenly bodies (i.e. stars) in the fiery region, which he calls 'heaven'.<sup>19</sup>*

Aphrodite's star, Venus, is the first sign in the sky announcing the night, as well as the last to be seen at dawn. She dominates the Doors of Night and Day (DK B1.11), and would be a serious candidate for the nameless Goddess of the poem. Even if he did not give her a name, would Parmenides have corrected the misleading names given to her by mortals: *Hesperon* and *Eōion*? Mortals are mistaken in not seeing that she is the same and one star, very much as was pointed out in fragment DK B9, regarding the true lack of distinction between *Hēmar* Day and *Nyx* Night. They are the same because it is ever the same surrounding sky, whether the sun illuminates it, or whether it is in shadow. We know, from Aristotle (*Metaph.* 1071b), who still is our best source for pre-Socratic wisdom, that such an astronomical correction could be addressed to the theologians, such as Hesiod, who state that the world came to be from the Night or Chaos.

The philosophical consequence of this is very important since it points to a criticism of the progressive and linear perspective of time: a perspective in which the day, according to Hesiod, would succeed the night as the cosmos follows the chaos; and as being comes from not being. If, contrary to Hesiod and other theologians, day and night are the same, one can ask, among other things, whether the passage of time is not another illusion of mortals. The issue and the contrast between

<sup>19</sup> Translation by Jaap Mansfeld (2016).



reflection and perception are very similar to the mistake pointed out about the perception of moon phases and its explanation by thought (DK B14). The names deceive us. It is the demonstration of the phenomenon that matters. In what sense would names perhaps matter?

It is well known that in Parmenides' Poem there are few male gods, such as *hēlios*, the Sun; *ouranos*, the Sky; *eros*, Love; but many goddesses<sup>20</sup>: the *hēliades*, Daughters of the Sun; *nyx*, Night; *hēmar*, Day; *dike*, Justice; *themis*, Law; *moira*, Destiny; *alētheia*, Truth; *pistis*, Faith; *anankē*, Necessity; *selēnē*, the Moon; *gaia*, the Earth; *gala*, the Milky Way; Venus (in the Latin fragment); and of course *thea*, the (nameless) Goddess who speaks. The name *aphroditēs*, Aphrodite, appears in a fragment of doubtful authorship, attributed simply to the "poet", who could be Parmenides, Empedocles, or Orpheus...<sup>21</sup> The authorial attribution is uncertain, but all the possibilities are included in a tradition of theological and cosmological poems that point to Eros as a primordial deity. This tradition, which includes Parmenides, Empedocles, Hesiod, and other poets, closely follows the Orphic cosmogonic poetry (cf. *Metaph.* 983b), and sometimes it is enough to say "the Poet", epithet of a mythical Orpheus. Like Homer, though, Orpheus is not a historical individual, but the way to name by synecdoche a lineage of poetry and oral wisdom that starts to have authorial texts only from the 7th century B.C. To be honest, I am delighted to call this wise poetic tradition, and their worldviews in form of cosmogonies and theogonies, by the name of "Erotic Theology", a lineage of poets dealing wisely with nature and singing the primordial force of Eros and Aphrodite. If the dubious fragment B20 continues in search of an author<sup>22</sup>, it can at least be attributed to that theological tradition.

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Cherubin 2019, 55 ff.

<sup>21</sup> As W. Kranz guess in the last *Vorsokratiker* edition (1951): "Parmenides nach Meineke, doch ohne zureichenden Grund; eher "Orpheus" oder Empedokles (Fr. 120, 128 vergleicht Reinhardt)."

<sup>22</sup> Cf. West 2008.

## DK B 20

αὐτὰρ ὑπ' αὐτὴν ἔστιν ἀταρπιτὸς ὄκρυόεσσα,  
 κοίλη, πηλώδης· ἢ δ' ἠγήσασθαι ἀρίστη  
 ἄλσος ἐς ἱμερόεν πολυτιμίου ἀφροδίτης.

*Underneath indeed there is a terrifying path,  
 digging, muddy, but the best to drive  
 to fascinating meadow of venerable Aphrodite.*<sup>23</sup>

Hippolytus of Rome, a Christian apologist, interprets these verses in the context of Eleusinian mysteries (*Refutatio Omnium Haeresium*, v 8, 97.2) and understands the terrifying path as what leads the dead to Persephone, another goddess whose name does not appear in the extant verses, and another serious candidate to be the nameless Goddess. We know it was often forbidden to say her name, and initiated people called her *korē*, the Girl. In addition to this interpretative line, runs the comment suggesting that the journey described in the Poem is a *katabasis*<sup>24</sup>, in accordance with the Orphic myths and mysteries. However, in the doubtful verses, the path does not lead to Persephone, but to Aphrodite. In Eleusis' procession, people first pass through the temple of Aphrodite, and then arrive at the sanctuary of Kore – this is what Hippolytus might have thought, interested in the mysteries. If in the verses the order is reversed, it is because we are on the way back, the *anabasis*. Of course, the image, the meaning and the names of the goddesses continue to serve, even if we never leave Italy for the Attican procession. Persephone and Aphrodite are antipodal goddesses. Are these not the names of another deception of mortals, who do not see that *katabasis* and *anabasis*, the way down and the way up, are one and the same path?<sup>25</sup> And maybe the way to the same unnamed Goddess of nature?

<sup>23</sup> Cf. DK 31 B 66.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Burkert 1969, Cornelli 2007, Cursaru 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Heraclitus, DK 22 B 60.

## DK B 5

Ξυνὸν δὲ μοί ἐστιν,  
ὀππόθεν ἄρξωμαι· τόθι γὰρ πάλιν ἴξομαι αὖθις.

*together, however, is for me,  
from where I'll begin; since I'll come back to it again.*

Death and birth are only delusional names of what in fact is the same cycle of nature; this correction of human opinions will be repeated and clarified by Empedocles (DK 31 B8). In Parmenides there is no coming to be or ceasing to be because everything is being together now.

## DK B 8, 5

οὐδέ ποτ' ἦν οὐδ' ἔσται, ἐπεὶ νῦν ἔστιν ὅμοῦ πᾶν

*nor was it ever, nor will it ever be, for it is all together now*

Nevertheless, the image raised by these verses of doubtful authorship is better perceived in Martin West's reading, more sensitive to erotic poetry. The verses describe a biased perception of a vagina, and the path to joy. The frightening digging muddy path (ἀταρπιτὸς ὀκρυόεσσα κοίλη, πηλώδης) where men get dirty might come from a misogynist tone (which would be valuable to reinforce the attribution to Parmenides, cf. B17); but it can be a dramatic reinforcement for the experience of ecstasy as well (cf. B16)<sup>26</sup>. The 'origin of the world' is the place of birth and also the place of a joyful 'little death' or even the 'grateful holy death', as it was common for children and mother to die during birth or just after it. Ancient Greeks had no problems to understand both birth and death, in the natural cycle of fertility, arising

<sup>26</sup> About sex and gender problems, patriarchal tradition and dualism in the Poem and in some of his contemporary interpretations, cf. Cherubin 2019. "Rather than presenting the identity and the prerogatives of upper-class Greek men as self-sufficient and normative, and rather than excluding what was associated with women and with those whose voices were not heard in public fora, Parmenides pointed out the incompleteness and limited scope of his own situation as a man of noble birth." op. cit. p.31.

from digging lands, from ploughing a female earth<sup>27</sup>. We know, only through fuzzy testimonies alas (Plutarch, frag. 178), that some ecstatic experiences of the mysteries were performed as a sort of rehearsal of death, which releases the initiate from his fear of death and delivering an “enlightened joy” (Seaford, 2006, p. 53). Dark and subterranean places might lead to Kore, Aphrodite or both, if birth and death, dawn and dusk, day and night do not succeed each other, but are instead one and the same. We find a dramatic, violent, and tragic tone in the verses of Parmenides dealing with sexual reproduction, both of which come to us through the context of medical treatises:

## B 17

δεξιτεροῖσιν μὲν κούρους, λαιοῖσι δὲ κούρας

*on the right the boys, on the left the girls*

## B 18

1 *femina virque simul Veneris cum germina miscent,*  
*venis informans diverso ex sanguine virtus*  
*temperiem servans bene condita corpora fingit.*  
 5 *nam si virtutes permixto semine pugnent*  
*nec faciant unam permixto in corpore, dirae*  
*nascentem gemino vexabunt semine sexum.*

*When together male and female mix the seeds of Venus,*  
*so in the veins, the forming power, from different bloods,*  
*taking care of the measure, forges a well-built body.*  
*If the powers fight, though, in the seminal mixture,*  
*so they do not make a unit in the mixed body, and furious,*  
*harass by the double seed the rising sex.*

Finally, following our erotic outline, it might be appropriate to rethink the always-repressed image in orthodox interpretations of frag. B 16. The confusion of the mixture of twisted limbs describes, straightforwardly and in an appropriate register, sexual intercourse. If it comes to represent something else, such as the confusion of thoughts of

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Clarke 2001, p. 372.

the mortals, it does so by analogy and comparison (ὥς... τὼς...).

B 16

ὥς γὰρ ἕκαστος ἔχει κρᾶσιν μελέων πολυκάμπτων,  
τὼς νοὸς ἀνθρώποισι παρίσταται· τὸ γὰρ αὐτό  
ἔστιν ὅπερ φρονέει μελέων φύσις ἀνθρώποισιν  
καὶ πᾶσιν καὶ παντί· τὸ γὰρ πλεον ἔστι νόημα.

*Just as every instant you have a mixture of twisted limbs,  
so also the thought is presented to men; for it is the same  
which discerns by the nature of the limbs in men  
for everyone and for all, as the full is thought.*

The Parmenides' correction presented here on the discernments of mortals' thoughts refers to their characteristic of dismembered and particular (ἕκαστος) meanings, like perceptions from separate members of the body. This is because each separate part of a perceiving body gives deceitful perceptions in so far as that part is among the members (μελέων) in the confusion of *krasis*. The main word of this fragment is *krasis*, which is either mixture or the sexual union. Mental confusion is also provided by particular perceptions of twisted limbs, for example, as in cases of conflicting perceptions gained through different senses. This will become a classic matter in theory of knowledge, where Parmenides seems to be a pioneer in his critics of sensorial perception. Sensory parts of the body often provide differing and conflicting information about one and the same object. The eyes can delude us, as can the ears, as can every sense, separated or mixed. But there is a particular kind of delusion, which occurs when more than one sense or sensible member is activated at the same time; it is the sensation that there are several objects when in fact there is only one.

For Parmenides it is very important to detect by thought when one and the same object is perceived as more than one, and named twice; and to correct those delusions of multiplicity. The same object can be the one heaven, perceived as day and night, or the same wandering star that appears in the morning or in the evening. It can be

also a birth and a death, which brings the same illusion, namely that “becoming” (alive or dead) implies “not being” (before birth or after death). For Parmenides, the very truth of things, which grasps what a being really is beyond the partial perception of separate limbs, which corrects the errors of duplicate names for double heads, and avoids the idea that being comes from not being, the very truth, – in joyful ecstasy – is reached by thinking one being and only one, as the full is thought.

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