PARMENIDES’ CONCEPTION OF LIGHT*

BY

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In this paper I shall deal with a problem in the philosophy of Parmenides which has been rather neglected, because it did not seem to be a problem at all. Parmenides based his cosmology on the dualism of two primary substances, Fire or Light and Night. It is commonly held that he borrowed this conception from Pythagoreanism 1). There is indeed some ground for believing that he was acquainted with the Pythagoreans and underwent some influence from their ideas 2). It is also to be admitted that the Pythagoreans held a dualistic conception of reality and that the contrast Light-Darkness occurred in their list of contraries 3). However, there remains this important point of difference that they seem to have regarded the contrast Light-Darkness as a special aspect of the primary contrast Limit-Unlimited, whereas Parmenides made Light and Darkness the fundamental principles of the phenomenal world 4).

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*Paper read before the Xth International Congress of Philosophy, at Amsterdam on August 12, 1948.


2) Cf. VS 28, A 1, 21; A 4; A 12. For influence of Pythagorean mathematics on Parmenides, see J. Stenzel, Metaphysik des Altertums (Munich-Berlin 1931), 47, F. Enriques, Histoire de la pensée scientifique, II (Paris 1936), 45, and my thesis, I n. 2. There may also have been some influence of Pythagorean medicine, as is suggested by O. Gigon, Der Ursprung der griechischen Philosophie (Basel 1945), 287. I doubt whether Parmenides should have regarded knowledge as a means of purification, as is maintained by R. Mondolfo, Zeller, La filosofia dei Greci, II (Florence 1938), 600.


4) I cannot agree with W. Jaeger, The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers (Oxford 1947), 64, that Light and Night formed the primeval antithesis of Pythagorean cosmology. O. Gigon, op. cit., 272/273, presumes
The fundamental character of these principles cannot be accounted for by the fact that the contrast Light-Darkness is also found in one other philosophical system, but it seems to presuppose a deeper motive.

We might look for such a deeper motive in a general religious belief. In this connection it has been remarked that Orphism thought of man as being made up of two elements, an earthly body and an ethereal soul. However, there is no evidence that Parmenides should have been influenced by Orphic beliefs; the resemblance is confined to some linguistic parallels. Besides, it is true that Parmenides called Fire "etherial", but it cannot be maintained, as was done by Aristotle, that he identified Night with Earth. Finally, Orphism does not seem to have extended its dualistic conception of man to a dualistic cosmology; Night and Ether play some part in Orphic speculations, but they have only a genealogical function.

that Parmenides borrowed the contrast Light-Night from Anaximander. But our sources only attribute a primary contrast Hot-Cold to Anaximander (VS 12, A 10). Raven, loc. cit., says: "The answer to the reasonable question, why and not another pair of contraries, e.g. Male-Female, from the Pythagorean list.


7) Frag. 8, 56. The gates of Night and Day are also called "etherial" (frag 1, 13). On Aristotle's misinterpretation of Night as Earth cf. H. Cherniss, Aristotle's Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy (Baltimore 1935), 48 n. 192. This does not imply that Parmenides should not have regarded Earth as a materialization of Night. Cf. Gigon, op cit., 272/273, Vlastos, op. cit., 67 n. 9.

8) Cf. Guthrie, op. cit., 80 ff., 102 ff. The goddess Night also occurs in Homer and Hesiod, but her importance should not be overrated. She is said to be feared by Zeus (Iliad 14, 261), but these words are spoken by Hypnos, who is likely to exaggerate her dignity. According to Hesiod (Theog. 123/124), Night and Day or Ether are born of Chaos. However, they do not form the basis of a cosmological dualism, for there is also, and quite unrelated to them, the contrast Earth-Heavens. So I cannot agree with Gigon, op. cit., 34, that Hesiod's Night and Day suggested to Anaximander his dualism of Hot and Cold. Cf. also R. Bultmann, Zur Geschichte der Lichtsymbolik im Altertum, Phil. 97 (1948), 12: "Erst in der hel’enistischen