

# Problems of Understanding and Embodiment in Parmenides B 16/D51

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It is a great privilege to offer this essay in honor of Livio Rossetti, a scholar whose acumen, curiosity, and willingness to look at things anew are equaled by his generosity and his passion for engagement and inclusion. I hope that this small offering will make clear the value of his work for those of us who follow, and the inspiring spirit in which this model scholar gives it to the world.

## Parmenides B 16/D51

- 1 ὥς γὰρ ἕκαστοτ' ἔχει κῤῥᾱσις μελέων πολυπλάγκτων,
- 2 τὼς νόος ἀνθρώποισι παρέστηκεν· τὸ γὰρ αὐτό
- 3 ἔστιν ὅπερ φρονέει μελέων φύσις ἀνθρώποισιν
- 4 καὶ πᾶσιν καὶ παντί· τὸ γὰρ πλεον ἔστι νόημα.

- 1 For as on each occasion a blending holds of much-wandering limbs,
- 2 So *noos* is present to humans; for the same [thing]
- 3 Is that which *phroneei* and the nature (constitution) of limbs in humans  
(OR: Is what the nature (constitution) of limbs *phroneei*?)
- 4 Both for all and for each; for the more (full)<sup>2</sup> is *noēma*.

<sup>1</sup> Cassin and Narcy (1987: 290 ff.).

<sup>2</sup> Laks (1990); Hussey (2006: 18, 29).

Parmenides DK 28 B 16/LM 19 D51 is difficult to understand for several reasons. What is clear is that it says something about humans' *noos*, *phroneein*, and *noēma*. It also evidently proposes that there is some connection between humans' constitution (including but perhaps not limited to what we would call the physical) and our awareness or cast of mind. As far as I understand it, that is where the clarity ends.

The fragment's syntax is difficult and ambiguous. Its key terms (*noos*, *phusis*, etc.) had multiple senses in the fifth century and are still subjects of much controversy. Beyond the meanings of the words and statements themselves, there are difficulties as to how to understand the passage in context. There is a question as to where in the poem the fragment appeared: in the section of the goddess's speech on roads of inquiry, in the section on the opinions of mortals, somewhere else? Beyond that is the question of how it fits into that section. That is, what is each section of the poem doing? And in what spirit is the fragment meant: as a declaration of something that the goddess or Parmenides would espouse? as something that derives from the opinions of mortals, perhaps the best understanding that can be achieved on that basis yet something that falls well short of *alētheia*? something else?

I will not attempt to resolve the syntactical problems here. Therefore I will not offer any conclusion as to the precise nature of the connection Parmenides might have been sketching between humans' constitution and our *noos*, *noēma*, or *phroneein*. Instead, I propose something more modest. I would like to explore two questions in a way that does not presuppose any particular solution to the syntactical issues, and that will, I hope, be able to suggest something constructive with respect to the placement issues:

- First, what kind of claim might B 16/D51 be making about what humans understand or "have in mind"? That is, what is it that Parmenides is saying is connected, and what does this mean with respect to relationships between *noein* and *eon*?
- Second, what are the implications of this kind of claim with respect to where and how the fragment might fit with the other extant fragments? Since much in the extant fragments concerns the relationships among *noein*, *eon*, *alētheia* and inquiry, what might B 16/D51 suggest about the epistemological status of statements in each part of the poem? What might the fragment say about the epistemological status of its own claims?

### **What is B 16/D51 is talking about? *Noein*, *noos*, *noēma*, *phroneein*, *eon*, *alētheia* in and before the fifth century**

In order to get some purchase on what B16/D51 is talking about, we must look at the senses of its key terms as these were used in and before Parmenides' time.

Line 2 describes how *noos* "comes to" humans, and connects this (*hōs gar (...) tōs*, "for as (...) so") with *phroneei* in line 3. Line 4 connects (*gar*, "for") something – either that

which *phroneei* or that concerning which there is *phroneein* (or both) – with *noēma*. But what is it that Parmenides is talking about as connected?

1. *Noos*, *noēma*, *phroneein*, and bodies: Let us note first that *noos* is never presented as a physical organ, and may not be a non-physical organ (e.g. as part of a non-material *psuchē*).<sup>3</sup> It is not assigned a specific bodily location, though like *phroneein* it is sometimes associated with the *phrenes*.<sup>4</sup> It can also be associated with *thumos*.<sup>5</sup> Yet it does appear to be associated with bodies: according to Homer, Tiresias is the only human to retain *noos* after bodily death (Hom. *Od.* 10.492–495), and this only by special dispensation of Persephone.<sup>6</sup>

The fragment mentions a correlation between *noos* and the arrangement or mixture of what seems to be body parts; but it is not clear regarding what if any causal or necessary relationship might obtain between *noos* and body.

In line 4, *to pleon esti noēma*, the more/full is *noēma*. This by itself does not mean that B 16/D51 reduces *noos* or *noēma* to something bodily or sensible.<sup>7</sup> *Noēma* is either a thought or intention, or that which one is aware of or intends or “has in mind.” In Greek, *noēma* seems to refer to intentions, ideas, or understanding, rather than to that regarding which we claim to have understanding or intention or ideas.

Aristotle and Theophrastus, our sources for versions of the fragment, present it as an assertion that the composition of a mortal’s body is that of the mortal’s *noēma*, such that the *noēma* itself is composed of fire and earth or hot and cold. This is not the only way to read B 16.4/D51.4, and neither Aristotle nor Theophrastus offers any further verses from Parmenides to support their reading.

At the same time, let us note that there is no evidence in B 16/D51 of a *noos* (or of *noein* or *noēma*) that is or works independent of body.

2. Also very important is the range of senses for *noos*, *noein*, and *noēma*. As early as Homer, all of them have to do with reflective awareness or consciousness (as is also the case for *phroneein*). This can range from grasping the facts of a situation, to understanding the explanation of something, to devising a plan or ruse, to having an intention. One might very roughly associate *noein* with the English expression “having in mind,” and *noos* with “mind” or “-mindedness,” in that these English expressions may refer variously

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. von Fritz (1943, 1945); Krischer (1984), Stefanelli (2009: 231).

<sup>4</sup> As e.g. at Hom. *Il.* 9.514, 9.600. Von Fritz notes that *noos* at least as late as Xenophanes draws information from various sense organs (at least in beings other than Xenophanes’ proposed one god), though it does not seem to belong to any of those organs.

<sup>5</sup> See Hom. *Od.* 14.490. *Noos* and *thumos* were also often treated as distinct, or even contrasted, as at Thgn. I.630 and 631.

<sup>6</sup> Stefanelli (2009: 250) finds that it does seem typically to be associated with humans in early works. But as she also notes, there are a few cases where *noos* is said to be present in non-humans. Hephaestus’ golden automata are said to have *noos* in them at Hom. *Il.* 18.417–420; Odysseus’ shipmates retain their human *noos* even when changed bodily into pigs at Hom. *Od.* 10.235–240. These exceptions involve divine intervention; it is not clear whether for Homer non-humans or non-embodied entities could otherwise have *noos*. Non-human animals do, for Homer, have *phrenes*, as e.g. at Hom. *Il.* 4.245.

<sup>7</sup> See also Dilcher (2006: 42 ff.).

to intentions, designs, world views, conceptions of things or states of affairs, and understandings or purported understandings of situations. Reasoning of some sort seems to be involved in some references to *noos*, *noein*, *noēma*, and *phroneein*; but it by no means involved in all, and may even be excluded in some cases.

This range means that we cannot begin with the supposition that any of these terms refer specifically to what one might call descriptive cognition, awareness that something is the case or awareness of the way that something is. Nor do they always refer to awareness of an explanation for how or why something is the case; though sometimes they do.

Thus in all occurrences within the fragments of Parmenides, even those within the goddess's account of the road of inquiry she recommends, we must allow the possibility that the terms refer to plans, designs, or intentions (which may have moral or evaluative content, and which seem to imply passage of time). Parmenides may have meant his uses of these terms to take in the whole range of senses.

3. Following from this, however, we can note another important aspect of the way these terms were used. They generally connote an actual or purported grasp of what-is.<sup>8</sup> Or at least, they connote awareness or thinking that is oriented toward addressing what-is (even if this does not always succeed in grasping what-is), awareness or thinking that is supposed to be able to be successful at this. That is, when someone is said to grasp what-is, or to have a good understanding of it, *noos*, *noein*, or *phroneein* are very often the terms used. In many of these cases, some sort of recognition of causes and implications is involved – for example, where *noein* refers to planning or intending.<sup>9</sup> Therefore it makes good sense that Parmenides' goddess would present *noein*, in her account of the road of inquiry that she recommends, as something that we are to use to focus on *alētheia*.

4. A fourth feature to consider is the fact that instances of *noos*, *noein*, *noēma*, and *phroneein* in humans can turn out to be erroneous, mistaken, limited, or unrealizable.<sup>10</sup> A sudden and unforeseeable intervention by the gods may make otherwise reasonable and perceptive plans fail. What appears to be a well-informed and perceptive grasp of a situation may turn out to miss crucial information, and thus to fail to reflect *alētheia*. Memories, preoccupations, and priorities can limit the scope of *noos*, *noein*, etc. Anger can even “swell” *noos* and affect its facility (note that anger is within *noos*, in these cases at least, and that *noos* so affected does not cease to be *noos*).<sup>11</sup> Parmenides himself indicates that mortals' *noos* can be mistaken when we operate on ill-founded assumptions (B 6/D7, vv. 4 ff.). Similarly, the use of the term *noēma* does not imply a realizable intention or a complete and accurate grasp of what-is.

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<sup>8</sup> Von Fritz (1945: 223–235); Constantineau (1987); Leshner (1994: 27; 1981: 9–11); Nagy (1983); Woodbury (1971: 156–157; 1986: 8).

<sup>9</sup> As e.g. at Hom. *Od.* 3.126; 7.73; *Il.* 699–702.

<sup>10</sup> This is sometimes, though very rarely, the case for gods as well: Hom. *Il.* 23.149.

<sup>11</sup> Hom. *Il.* 9.554. As will be discussed below, this is well in keeping with Rossetti's emphasis on the potential spectrum of variation within the *noos* of an individual offered by Parmenides B 16/D51 (2019: 64–45; 2017: 56).

It is then simply not the case that when a human's awareness or cognition is always accurate or comprehensive when it is called *noēma* or *phroneein*. A person might aim for *alētheia*, trying to understand a situation or to respond appropriately; but circumstances might undermine that effort without being noticed. To refer to someone as having *noos* or *noēma*, or as using *noein* or *phroneein*, is sometimes to say that he or she is showing valid understanding or making perceptive and reliable plans. But it is also sometimes a way of saying that someone is generally successful, or can reasonably expect to be successful, at grasping what-is and at planning realizable things based on that grasp – without implying that a particular exercise of this capability is successful.

If they could be affected by anger or by prior focus, as described above, then it seems that *noos*, *noein*, etc. were not understood as necessarily independent of prejudgment, prior conceptions, emotional color, or prejudice. Unlike Descartes' mind or reason, pre-fifth-century *noos* was a locus or venue for passions and emotions. *Alētheia* is not the same as Cartesian certainty. Nevertheless, the question arises as to what it would mean to say that *noos* and its relatives do address *alētheia* given their restrictions; and as to what that means with regard to *alētheia*.

### Light and Night

B 16/D51 proposes some connection between the limbs of humans and our *noos*, *noēma*, and *phroneein*. Specifically, it connects these cognitive features with the blending or mixing of the limbs. The mention of *krasis* may imply the presence of particular proportions. If the fragment falls within the part of the goddess's speech that treats the opinions of mortals, and if within that part its function is to present something built on those opinions, then it would likely mean or imply some blending of Light and Night. Mortals lay down the *gnōmai* Light and Night to name forms (B 8.53–61/D8.58–66), and say that everything is Light and Night (B 9/D13). Therefore human limbs would be made of Light and Night, in the opinions of mortals.

I will leave open the question of whether B 16.4/D51.4 means that the proportion of (or the predominating element between) Light and Night is *noēma*, or that the proportion (or whatever predominates) in the blend of limbs qua bodily components, not in terms of the limbs' own composition, is *noēma*.<sup>12</sup> I also leave to the side the question

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<sup>12</sup> Here is the difference that this distinction would make: Consider, as a modern parallel, an analysis of the components of sandwiches. Say that we have salami, roast beef, sausage, lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, peppers, condiments, and various kinds of bread. We construct two sandwiches, each of which has at least one kind of meat, at least one kind of vegetable, at least one condiment, and at least one kind of bread. Suppose that the arrangement and the proportion of salami, roast beef, etc. (the ratio of each to the total weight of the sandwich) are different in each sandwich. It might still be the case that the proportions of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen; or the proportions of nutrients such as protein, vitamin, fat, and fiber; might be the same in both sandwiches. Similarly, in a case in which the proportion of limbs differed from one person to another, or one state of a person to another, the proportions of Light and Night might not differ. Or, the arrangement might differ in two cases of similar proportions.

of whether Theophrastus and/or Aristotle is at all accurate in the interpretation of this passage. My focus instead will be the independent point that B 16.4/D51.4 says that something bodily “is” *noēma*;<sup>13</sup> and that 16.3/51.3 says that the nature or constitution or arrangement of the limbs “is the same as” either that which *phroneei* or that of/regarding which there is *phroneein*. My questions are: Given what we have seen of *noos*, *noein*, *noēma*, and *phroneein*, what could these identities or equivalences mean? What kind of epistemological claim is the goddess or Parmenides making in proposing them? And how could that fit with, or inform, other parts of the fragments?

If B 16/D51 falls within the part of the goddess’s speech that treats the opinions of mortals, and if within that part its function is to present something built on or described in terms of those opinions, then the *krasis* of line 1 and the *phusis* of line 3, respectively, would likely mean or imply some blending and constitution of Light and Night. Mortals lay down the *gnōmai* Light and Night to name forms (B 8.53-61/D8.58-66), and say that everything is Light and Night (B 9/D13). Therefore in the opinions of mortals, human limbs would be made of Light and Night.

If we are to examine this fragment’s possible relationship to the mortal belief that everything is Light, Night, or some combination of the two, we need to keep in mind what the goddess says about the establishment of this belief. She says not that mortals know that what-is is Light and Night, nor that their opinion about Light and Night is a matter of *noein* or *phroneein*. She also does not say that mortals identified real features of what-is and somehow guessed or inferred that these were fundamental. Nor does she say that mortals must conceive of what-is in terms of Light and Night (or their qualities). What she says is entirely different: she says that mortals laid down, *katethento*, two opinions or judgments to name forms (B 8.53/D8.58).

### Implications for mentions of *noos*, *noein*, and *noēma* in Parmenides

This has several consequences relevant for the interpretation both of B 16/D51 and of the other fragments that mention *noos* or *noein*. If in fact B 16/D51 directly or indirectly connects Light and Night to the presence of *noos* and *noēma*, then

- (1) The goddess is not asserting that we mortals use *noos* to grasp correctly what makes *noos* possible. If B 16 does connect Light and Night with the presence of *noos* and *noein*, it is connecting something mortals lay down with the presence of *noos* and *noein*. Thus the question arises

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<sup>13</sup> It might be argued that *pleon* refers to a ratio and not to more (or all) of a thing, e.g. that it would refer to ‘three-quarters’ or to the ratio 3:1 rather than to the stuff that made up the three-quarters (or the four quarters). But a ratio could also be understood as a ratio between kinds of stuff. Numbers were understood as aggregates of units. So even if *pleon* refers to a ratio or a quantity, it may still connote a ratio or quantity specifically of bodily entities.

as to whether the fragment identifies that connection as something mortals believe (erroneously or not), or as something the goddess is presenting as an accurate view of the nature of what is.

(2) If the goddess is not asserting that we mortals use *noos* to grasp correctly what makes *noos* possible, she is also not directly denying it. So far, the possibility remains that the goddess might imply that we use *noos* to grasp correctly what makes *noos* possible. This implication would be problematic; it could rest on a circularity or on a begging of a question. I would like to propose here an argument as to why such an interpretation would not be consistent with central features of the fragments.

### Where and how might B 16/D51 fit with other fragments?

Let us now address the questions of where among the fragments B 16/D51 might fit, how it might fit there, and what it might contribute to the poem.

We know the poem to contain a tale of a journey and a speech by a goddess. The latter is described as incorporating two things: something that involves the young man learning the “heart of... *alētheia*” (B 1.28–29/D4.28–29) and the opinions of mortals (B 1.30/D4.30). As far as we know, there were no other parts. Thus the placement options for B 16/D51 would seem to be either within the discussion of roads of inquiry, or within the account of the opinions of mortals. There are further complications:

- If B 16/D51 is part of the section of the goddess’s speech about roads of inquiry and *alētheia*, is it part of the series of injunctions about what one is to say and *noein* on the recommended road of inquiry?
  - Or is it instead a general remark that is meant to apply independent of that road?
- If the fragment is part of the section on the opinions of mortals, does it detail something that the goddess claims mortals believe?
  - Or is it instead a claim that is espoused by Parmenides or the goddess as true independent of what mortals believe, perhaps as unconditionally true?<sup>14</sup>

On the surface, all of these options lead to problems.

If Parmenides meant to espouse the account of human understanding and cognition in B 16/D51, then it seems that he would be espousing an account that is fundamentally at odds with the way the goddess says one must say and conceive or intend (*noein*) what is on a road of inquiry oriented toward *alētheia*. If the *krasis* in B 16.1/D51.1 is to be understood as directly or indirectly a blending of Light and Night, and if Aristotle and Theophrastus are more or less correct, then Parmenides or the goddess would be saying that all that is is multiple, that at least some of it is mobile, and that some sort of non-being is

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<sup>14</sup> If it is part of the discussion of roads of inquiry, it would seem to be a statement of some general condition rather than a claim about what one is to say and conceive for purposes of inquiry, or about what is said or conceived on some specific road.

real; and that it is in fact appropriate and accurate to conceive of or grasp or intend (*noein*, *noēma*) what-is that way. If Aristotle and Theophrastus are not correct, then Parmenides would still be espousing a view that what-is includes multiple and mobile things, and some sort of non-being.

Bodies do not fit the way one is to say and conceive (*noein*) of what-is on the recommended road of inquiry. Nor, it seems, do *noos* or *noein*, in so far as they are distinct from what-is, from other modes of awareness, and from bodies. On the other hand, if we accept that *noos* is normally associated with bodies, and note B 16/D51's correlation between body parts or arrangements and *noos* and *phroneein* and *noēma*, we find that *noos* and *noēma* seem to acknowledge or somehow reflect proportion, difference, and body – which the goddess's account of her favored road of inquiry suggests they should not.

Even if *krasis* is taken to refer to limbs without any implication that Light and Night are involved, it clearly invokes multiplicity and motion, so that if Parmenides or the goddess intends it as accurate, this is at odds with the way that the goddess says we are supposed to say and *noein* what-is on the road of inquiry she recommends. Even saying that we have limbs or, I think, *noos* (as an identifiable thing, as a thing that can “have” various intentions and states that replace one another, or as something generally associated with bodies), is an artifact of mortal opinions, according to B 8.38–41/D8.43–46, and is in direct conflict with what the goddess has just warned that one must say and *noein* on the road of inquiry that she recommends.

Let us acknowledge here that the goddess invokes multiplicity, negation, and motion fairly often in B 2 through B 8.1–49 (D5 through D8.54; D10). That is an important problem, and I will say something about it shortly.

But B 16 poses further problems if it is read as something the goddess or Parmenides would endorse unconditionally. For one thing, there arises what I think may be a Liar-like paradox:

(1) Greeks say that *noos* can afford accurate accounts of what is; they define *noos* this way;

(2) According to B 16/D51, *noos* and *noēma* depend on or correlate to<sup>15</sup> multiple moving limbs and/or Light and Night;

(3) No account of what-is that relies on multiplicity and motion is compatible with what the goddess says we must needs *noein* in order to inquire toward *alētheia* (this is of course true even of the goddess's own speech);

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<sup>15</sup> I am not sure that understanding B 16.1-2/D51.1–2 as suggesting a correlation rather than a dependency would entirely avoid this paradox. If *noos* and *phroneein* are understood as correlated with, corresponding to, some arrangement or constitution of limbs, then it seems they are understood as having some arrangement or structure or proportion. Certainly a correspondence would suggest difference and change.



(4) Therefore the account of *noos* and *noēma* as correlative to multiple and moving things is not compatible with what one must say and *noein* in order to inquire toward *alētheia*. B 16/D51's claims are not compatible with what we must say and *noein* on that road of inquiry.

(5) Then either

- (a) *Noos* and *noēma* do not depend on or correlate to multiple moving things; or
- (b) we do not know that they do; or
- (c) what the goddess says about inquiry toward *alētheia* is not accurate; or
- (d) *noos* (as used toward inquiry) does not afford accurate accounts of what-is; or
- (e) we do not know that it does.

Recall that what the goddess says about inquiry was based on inferences from the same mortal opinions that say that we have a *noos* and mobile limbs.

(6) So far, we have what looks like a contradiction, or a begging of a question (and thus something that violates the completeness standard of B 8.29-32/D8.34-37).<sup>16</sup> The possible paradox comes in if we are also claiming that (1) or (2) – or potentially any of the inferences – are things that we are apprehending/conceiving/grasping via *noos*. The paradox comes in forcefully if we say that *noos/noein/phroneein* would be the only ways or the proper or most appropriate ways to apprehend this. It has even more force when we recall that *noos/noein/phroneein* can be mistaken or limited.

Tor has suggested that this can be resolved by supposing that the goddess implies that *noein* can be up to the task of grasping what-is only in the case that *noos* is, has become, pure Light.<sup>17</sup> But if I have understood correctly, this does not seem to square with the goddess's description of what one must say and conceive regarding *eon* on the road she recommends. Light is something that is defined in terms of something else, something that is interdependent with another, not complete or unchanging, and not even part of a complete system.

In addition, if for the goddess what-is is in any sense Light and Night, and if Theophrastus is accurate in ascribing to Parmenides (or the goddess) the notion that we apprehend Light via Light in us and Night via Night in us, and if the whole of what [we say] is comprises Light and Night, then adequate and accurate *noein*, or the closest we can come to that, would need to involve both Light and Night. That is, it seems from Parmenides

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<sup>16</sup> On the significance of completeness in Parmenides, see the section with that title below; and see Schrekenberg (1964), Fränkel (1968), Cherubin (2001). Cf. A. Pr. 511–517.

<sup>17</sup> Tor (2015). Part of the argument for this proposal rests on the idea that humans must conceive of or apprehend what-is in terms of the opposites that are incorporated in Light and Night (8). But the fragments do not state or imply such a necessity, and B 8.53 and 55/D8.58 and 60 seem to challenge that idea: to “lay down” such oppositions is exactly not to receive them “ineluctably” or “passively.”

and Theophrastus that we would need both Light and Night in our *noos* in order to apprehend the world as appropriately as possible.

Another possible objection to this is to suggest that perhaps Parmenides did not notice the inconsistency just mentioned. Let us note, then, that if Parmenides was consistent, he did not mean B 16/D51 as something that the goddess or Parmenides would espouse unconditionally.

All of these problems might suggest that we should look to place B 16/D51 somewhere outside of the goddess's discussion of the road she recommends for inquiry oriented by *alētheia*. They also make it difficult to see how the fragment could fit within the discussion of the opinions of mortals if it is supposed to be a direct unconditional claim about what-is that the goddess or Parmenides endorses.

Yet problems also arise if we take the fragment as an expression of a faulty belief of mortals. I suggest, though, that there may be a way to make some of those problems work toward attributing a coherent and meaningful message to Parmenides, rather than against it.

### **Place and role of the fragment: suggestions and questions**

If we include B 16/D51 in the "opinions of mortals" section and argue that Parmenides denied the trustworthiness of those opinions, we must ask: What are we to make of those accurate accounts of the moon and planets? What is untrustworthy in this account of mortals' opinions, and how does that bear on B 16/D51 ?

Are we to understand B 16/D51 as saying that through their belief that everything is Light and Night, mortals implicitly conceive that cognition comes to us through the mixture (of Light and Night) in our parts? Or are we to understand it to mean that according to the goddess, cognition actually does come to us through something which we imperfectly specify as a mixture of Light and Night?

Could we tell the difference? Could we tell which of these was the case? From what we have seen so far, the answers to these questions would seem to be "no," or rather, "we cannot tell whether we can tell," or "we cannot tell whether we can tell whether..." ("Telling whether" would seem to be supposed to involve *noos*.) Thus it would be inconsistent both with the implications of standard Greek usage, and with what Parmenides' goddess has said we are to conceive on the recommended road of inquiry, if Parmenides were to hold that our purported Light-Night composition is capable of letting us know with accuracy that we are of Light and Night.

More needs to be said concerning this last point: how would Parmenides' fragments suggest that we lack evidence as to whether our composition permits us knowledge of our composition? Our claims about our composition are based at least in part on judgments or opinions (*gnōmai*) we have laid down, posited, to specify forms. These *gnōmai* are Light and Night. Thus when we try to explain the nature and workings of what-is, we do so in terms of these posits. It seems to follow that when we talk of *noos* and *eon*, we do

so in terms of these posits: *noos* and *eon*, like goddesses and speeding chariots, are what we say is, in terms of these posits.

As we have seen, the goddess has said that our opinions about the way everything is constituted are in some way flawed. How are mortal opinions flawed? The goddess discusses this in B 8.1–49: In order to inquire in a way oriented by *alētheia* – roughly, the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, traced to its origins<sup>18</sup> – we must [do what we call] *legein* and *noein* that *eon* is one, unmoving, continuous, whole, and “not incomplete.” There is, of course, a general problem with speaking of *noos* as distinct from limbs, as involving a blend, as corresponding to movement, etc.

### Completeness

But there is also a special problem with respect to asking whether the posits Light and Night could allow us (mortal humans) to know our composition, whether we could even have any reason to say that what we laid down enables us to say of conceive of what is. This problem has to do with “completeness,” the feature that *anankē* supports in B 8.29–32/D8.34–37. *Anankē* was associated with the binding of cause and effect – things “following from” one another or having complements. Completeness for Parmenides means that nothing cannot be accounted for, and that each thing contributes to the explanation of the others.<sup>19</sup> But we have no assurance that if we were composed of Light and Night, or if our *noos* correlated to the blending of our limbs, our *noos* would be capable of grasping what-is. We have no way to such an explanation: we lay down Light and Night to specify forms. Thus when we say we use *noos*, we are saying we conceive of things through those posits. They are a limitation, possibly a misconception. And if we say that what is is Light and Night, that the forms we say we experience are composed of Light and Night, how could we ask whether there was anything else?<sup>20</sup> We can, however, show the gaps and inadequacies of the Light-Night conception, using that conception itself.

### Why humans?

This brings us to a question inspired by Rossetti’s judicious reflections on B 16/D51. Rossetti (2019: 63–64; 2017, 32, 58) notes that Aëtius and Theophrastus report that Parmenides held that all living things (as well as non-living things, according to Theo-

<sup>18</sup> Cole (1983), Germani (1988), Detienne (1990), Bakker (2002).

<sup>19</sup> See note 16 and Cherubin (2001: 297–301).

<sup>20</sup> Similarly, if we say that all that is is matter and energy, and that anything perceived must be a function of these, we have no way to ask whether there is anything else, whether these adequately and accurately convey what is. We can show that contradictions or impasses follow from our posit of matter and energy. Either the Light-Night conception is incomplete, or we have no current way of telling, or both. Potentially any claim as to what constitutes us would be problematic.

phrastus, A 46/D52/ *De sensibus* I.3–4) have some sort of awareness. Aëtius goes as far as to call this *noos* (A 45/D53b). It is quite plausible that Parmenides did present something like this: if mortals believe that everything is composed of Light and Night (B 8.51–61/D51.56–66; B 9/D13) and that the proportion and mixture of Light and Night is responsible for a spectrum of consciousness or awareness, and reasoning;<sup>21</sup> then it would make sense to say that all living things, or as in Theophrastus all of what is, would have some level of awareness. Yet B 16 mentions only how *noos* is present to humans (*anthrōpoi*) in particular. What might be the significance of this?

One possibility is that Aëtius is inaccurate, and Parmenides' goddess is saying not that all animals and plants have *noos* but that, as Theophrastus has it, all beings have *gnōsis*, have some level of awareness or understanding or knowledge. Perhaps the goddess was suggesting that this level of awareness in non-humans is not as clear, insightful, comprehensive, reflective, or accurate as *noos* is in living humans. This possibility cannot be entirely ruled out. But it is worth noting that neither Aëtius nor Theophrastus attributes to Parmenides the idea that only living humans have *noos*. Theophrastus notes that a corpse (a dead human, *nekros*) perceives cold, silence, and everything that contrasts with light and warmth and sound, and so has an altered and attenuated consciousness (*De sens.* I.4). Theophrastus does not discuss which kinds of beings, or which arrangements of Light and Night in a being, foster *noos* according to Parmenides' goddess. This may indicate that no such discussion was available in Parmenides, that Parmenides did not propose criteria for determining which beings have *noos* as opposed to some other level or kind of awareness. Perhaps, then, in B 16/D51 he (or the goddess) happens to be discussing humans, but would say that other beings work the same way.

Yet this still leaves the question of the significance of the fact that there is an account of how *noos* is present to humans in particular. I offer the suggestion that this reference to humans reflects a point made earlier in this essay. The reference to humans is an indication that Parmenides was drawing attention to the fact that claims about our composition are based at least in part on judgments or opinions (*gnōmai*) we have laid down to specify forms. These *gnōmai* are Light and Night. We humans, according to the goddess, lay down Light and Night to specify and discuss, analyze, and try to understand what we experience. It is we who use these words and categories. We do not know whether other animals or plants have symbol systems isomorphic to ours, or in some cases (rocks, clams, algae) any at all. We also do not know whether the awareness that they show in being able to interact with, respond to, and affect their environments is similar enough to ours so that they would grasp and differentiate Light and Night.

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<sup>21</sup> As Rossetti notes, this allows for different states of the same individual (sicknesses, health, youth, age, etc.), as well as differences in attitude and temperament between members of a species and between species, to be reflections of different arrangements and proportions of Light and Night. For ancient reports and arguments that Parmenides applied this idea to differences between male and female living things with respect to understanding – such that females' or at least women's understanding had more Light than males'/men's, to women's advantage – see Journée (2012).

*Noein*, *esti*, and *eon* are integral to our standard mortal claims about what is. Parmenides' goddess invokes them to show the flaws in mortals' opinions, but so too does she invoke multiplicity, negation, and passage of time; the very things she wants to argue are incompatible with inquiry and explanation. Her arguments are all the more paralyzing to us because they rely on conceptions that mortals find useful (multiplicity, not-being, passage of time) in order to show the inadequacy of these very conceptions. In B 8.1–49/D8.6–54 the goddess seems to vindicate *noein* and *eon* with respect to *alētheia* in one sense, but shows them to be complementary parts of the same worldview as the conceptions she proscribes (multiplicity, change, etc.) in another. What the goddess shows in B 8/D8 is that if mortals' claims are adequate for inquiry and argument, then they are inadequate. If they are inadequate, then they are inadequate to support the inference of their inadequacy. The conclusion one might draw from B 8.1–49/D8.6–54 is then a variant of the Liar Paradox: Mortals' claims about the world imply their own inadequacy and inconsistency. I am a mortal, as far as I know, so my claims about the world, including this statement, imply their own inadequacy and inconsistency. The idea that humans fail to recognize and to name things that the gods can identify, and that we identify some things differently from the ways the gods do, can be traced as far back as Homer.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps Parmenides was exploring how and why this happens, and whether human cognition is capable of more.

I have argued elsewhere that the Light-Night scheme, or something isomorphic to it, looks like precisely the kind of conception one would need in order to underpin an account of a world of distinct moving things.<sup>23</sup> The accounts of astronomical phenomena in fragments usually assigned to the section on the opinions of mortals are remarkable for their predictive success and minute attention to observation.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the physiological fragments were intended to be similar explications of observed phenomena in terms of the Light-Night posit. Predictive success and *alētheia* are very different things. My very tentative suggestion here is that we might understand B 16/D51 as a human attempt to reflect on the opinions of mortals, one that shows how and why mortals' opinions fail to fit with what mortals' opinions say about what is and *alētheia*.

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<sup>22</sup> Clay (1972) provides a fundamental analysis.

<sup>23</sup> Cherubin (2017).

<sup>24</sup> For detailed expositions, see Graham (2013), Mourelatos (2013), Rossetti (2016, 2017, 2019).

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#### Problems of Understanding and Embodiment in Parmenides B 16/ D51

Parmenides B 16/D51 presents an account of human cognition and understanding. It is usually taken to form part of the account of the untrustworthy opinions of mortals. Regardless of its proper location within the poem, it invokes difference, movement, and multiplicity — features that the goddess describes as fundamental to mortals’ opinions and as incompatible with what one must say and conceive on the road of inquiry that she recommends. The tale of the journey and both parts of the goddess’s speech use negation, invoke difference and change and multiplicity, and in general conform in many ways to the conceptual framework the goddess attributes to mortals in B8.53-61/D8.58-66 and B9/D13. Does this reflect confidence in the Light-Night conception as a starting-point for an adequate account of what-is? Or does it produce a paradox, wherein the Light-Night conception undermines itself but we would have to use it in order to deny its adequacy? In sum, what kind of a claim about human understanding might the passage represent? What could B16/D51 say about the epistemological status of its own claims, and about the epistemological status of each part of the poem? Why does the passage mention humans (*anthrōpoi*) specifically, as opposed to all beings that have awareness? These questions will be the focus of this essay.

#### KEY WORDS

Parmenides, cognition, awareness, human, light, night, mixture, *noos*, body, difference, Theophrastus

