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Chapter 4

Nights of Insight: Plato on the Philosophical Qualities of the Night

Albert Joosse

1 Introduction: Darkness and Ignorance

What is the value of the night in Plato? As a philosopher whose most memorable images include the sun as the physical stand-in for the highest principle and a cave as the expression of the human condition, the answer may seem straightforward. We may think, that is, that Plato’s highly appreciative attitude towards knowledge and his preference for using the day and daylight as images for knowledge leads him to neglect the night or to use it as a negative marker: as a stand-in for ignorance, the image of the condition we ought all to escape from.

And indeed, the night does occur as a metaphor in such contexts. As Socrates sums up the cave analogy a little further on in the Republic, speaking about the training of the philosopher-kings: ψυχῆς περιαγωγὴ ἐκ νυκτερινῆς τινος ἡμέρας εἰς ἀληθινῆς, τοῦ ὄντος οὖσαν ἐπάνοδον, ἣν δὴ φιλοσοφίαν ἀληθῆ φήσομεν εἶναι (‘this is a matter of turning a soul from a nightly kind of day towards a true day—the ascent to what is, which we will say is true philosophy’).¹ This is part of a close-knit network of metaphors tying the eye and vision to the mind and knowledge. The eye of the soul needs to be opened in order to see the day of true reality.²

Part of this network is also the terminology of light and fire that are suddenly seen by the initiands into the Eleusinian mysteries. Plato uses this, for instance, to describe the splendor of the Form of Beauty and its overwhelming effect on those who have seen it (Phdr. 250b3, c3–4). The fire is seen suddenly because presumably the mysteries were conducted during the night or in an artificial night.³

¹ R. 521c6–8, trans. Reeve, modified.
² For this metaphorical domain see Louis 1945, 128–130, 131–133, 137, 139. I have unfortunately been unable to consult Smith 1975. Note that in this study I will restrict myself to the night and its effects; I will not discuss the themes of sleep and wakefulness in their own right, except where sleep is the effect of the night, as in the Timaeus passages of section 4.
³ This is also in the background in Diotima’s account of the ‘sudden’ (ἐξαίφνης, Smp. 210e4)
However, we encounter the night far less often in this role—as a metaphor for ignorance—than we might have expected. More importantly, this role by no means exhausts the significance of the night in Plato’s work. If we look at passages that talk about the night in a literal way, matters are much more complicated than our initial, straightforward picture suggests.

The role of the night in Plato’s œuvre has not yet been discussed specifically, as far as I am aware. In what follows, I will therefore briefly survey the different roles which the night plays in Plato (and in doing so will treat the corpus more or less as a unity). Among these roles we can roughly discern two groups. Although they do not exhaust all passages in which the night figures, each of these groups brings together a fair number of passages in which the night plays a comparable role. Group (A), as I will label it, is concerned with the night as a structural factor. This includes the night as a part of the cosmic order and the night as a narrative element in the dialogues. Group (B) concerns the night as allowing for privileged cognitive access. I will elaborate on group (B) in particular. It includes passages that feature the night as a period during which good and bad deeds are done, the *Timaeus’* discussion of divination, and passages revolving around the Nocturnal Council in the *Laws.*

### 2 Nights to Be Feared and Night as Relief

Before we turn to groups (A) and (B), we begin with a number of passages in which Plato draws on what I suggest are traditional associations of the night, of which he makes use without subscribing to them. Sometimes we encounter the night as a period in which eerie events take place. In the *Republic*, Socrates mentions as particularly unsuitable for the education of children the stories of gods who change shape and roam about the earth at night, told by mothers who want to scare their children into obedience (*R*. 381e1–6).4 The myth of Er ends momentously with a thunderclap and an earthquake at midnight (621b2–7).

In a different way, the *Apology* also appeals to traditional associations of the night. It makes use of the idea that the night offers us rest from the toils of the vision of Beauty. See Riedweg 1987, 47–56 on the image of the fire of the mysteries in Plato; cf. Louis 1945. 125–130. For the eye that is still unaccustomed to the light of truth, direct vision of it can induce blindness, οἷον ... νύκτα ἐν μεσημβρίᾳ ἐπαγόμενοι (*Lg*. 897d8–9); it is better to look at images of it first (*Lg*. 897e1–2; *Phd*. 99d4–e6), just as those just freed from the cave discern things better νύκτωρ (*by night*, *R*. 516a8–b2).

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4 See Damon in this volume on the way the Roman satirist Lucilius represents Numa’s religious institutions as a grander and political version of what these mothers do (114–119).
day. At the end of Socrates’ speech, in the course of his address to the jurors who have voted for his acquittal, Socrates assures them that no bad fate awaits him. For either death is a migration to a better place, or it is like a dreamless night—and who would not prefer such a night over many of the days he has lived through? (Ap. 40d2–e4) Here the night, considered apart from any dreams that might accompany it, offers relief and is anticipated with confidence.

3 Group A: Night as a Structuring Factor

3.1 Night as Part of the Cosmic Order

This grouping of passages includes the night as an element of structure. It structures the universe and in particular our human experience of it. It also structures Plato’s dialogues and the philosophical conversations they portray or describe. The universe includes night and day as two opposite but interdependent phases. As it is described in the Timaeus, the day is the phase in which there is daylight, which is an actual body of light that flows from the sun. In a sense, therefore, the night is what remains after the body of daylight has departed. Since the origin of the day, the sun, is a perfect body and hence has a perfectly regular motion, the succession of night and day is also regular. This in itself is, in Plato’s view, a beautiful feature of the cosmos, since regularity is beautiful. The night, therefore, is a constitutive part of this beautiful design of the cosmos.

In a more specific version of this idea, Plato notes that the succession of day and night is necessary for our—human—understanding and appreciation of cosmic order. This is because night and day are at the origin of our notion of number. And the notion of number allows us to acquire knowledge of mathematics and ultimately even of philosophy. We find this idea explicitly in the Timaeus (39b5–c2, 47a4–b2) and implicitly in the Laws (818c3–8). The night is part of the structure of reality and allows us to latch onto that structure.

5 See Ti. 45b2–d4. I will return to this context in the Timaeus when discussing the process of perception, below, pp. 101–102.

6 Hence its priority to the day in some cosmologies, most notably Orphic ones, on which see Edmonds in this volume.

7 Line references to the Laws are based on the Budé edition.

8 For discussion within a framework of the teleology behind sight see Johansen 2004, 112–113. The study of astronomy of course also requires nighttime activity. In the anecdote in the Theaetetus’ digression, Thales’ laughed-at fall into a well presumably also occurs during the night (ἀστρονομοῦντα, Tht. 174a4–5). See Wilson in this volume, and also Atkins (24–25) on the structuring role played in Hesiod by the night’s access to the stars.
3.2  **Night as a Narrative Framing Device**

The night also plays another structural role in Plato’s work: as a framing condition for philosophical conversation. The disappearance of the night makes it possible to start philosophical discussion, while its advent at the end of the day marks the expectation that the conversation will soon end.

In many cases, this is almost like a background condition that is not made explicit. But sometimes our attention is drawn to it. This happens very conspicuously in the *Protagoras*. This dialogue opens with Socrates telling an unnamed friend about his conversation, earlier that same day, with Protagoras and others, in the house of Callias. It all started as follows (*Prt*. 310a8–b3, trans. Taylor):

Last night, just before daybreak, Hippocrates, the son of Apollodorus and brother of Phason, began knocking very loudly on the door with his stick, and when someone opened it he came straight in in a great hurry, calling out loudly, “Socrates, are you awake or asleep?”

It turns out that Hippocrates has been away for a few days and so has not heard of the arrival of Protagoras in Athens. He explains how and when he learned of it (*Prt*. 310c5–d2):

When I got back, and we had had supper and were just going to bed, it was then that my brother told me that Protagoras had come. Late as it was, I immediately got up to come and tell you, but then I realized it was far too late at night; but as soon as I had had a sleep and got rid of my tiredness, I got up straight away and came over here, as you see.

This account conveys the enthusiasm that drives Hippocrates, but it also clearly brings out the role of the night as a kind of barrier to philosophical conversation. We talk during the day.
Correspondingly, the coming of the night is normally a reason to wrap up the conversation. Again, this does not often get marked, but when it is it brings out what is expected in the usual course of events. In the *Philebus*, Socrates warns his interlocutor Protarchus not to force the discussion beyond its normal confines by continually throwing up difficulties (*Phlb. 50d6–e2, trans. Frede*):

> Now, tell me whether you will let me go now or whether you will keep us up till midnight. One further remark will gain me my release, I hope. I will gladly give you a full account of the rest tomorrow, but for now I want to steer towards the remaining points ...

> νῦν οὖν λέγε πότερα ἀφίης με ἢ μέσας ποιήσεις νύκτας; εἰπὼν δὲ σμικρά σοι σημαίναι σοι τεύξεσθαι μεθεῖναί με· τούτων γάρ ἀπάντων αὖριον ἐθελήσω σοι λόγον δοῦναι, τὰ νῦν δὲ ἔπι τὰ λοιπὰ βούλομαι στέλλεσθαι ...

Whether in jest or not, Socrates’ remark indicates that the coming of darkness ought normally to terminate the discussion. Under ordinary circumstances, then, the dialogues are creatures of the day.9

This makes the exceptions to this rule stand out: the *Symposium* and the *Crito*. In both cases, the night involves threats to the integrity of philosophical conversation but also shows Socrates’ superiority to such threats. In the *Symposium*, the conversation goes on well into the night and ends with everyone but Socrates asleep, a new day breaking, and Socrates leaving the conversation to spend the next day in his customary way.10 The particular setting allows for a departure from the normal hours for conversation.11 But it also allows for elements that put pressure on rational conversation. Think of the disturbance made by Alcibiades and his companions; and later on, another group of drunk people crashes the party. But at the same time, the setting allows Socrates to show his philosophical mettle. He needs no sleep and does not get drunk. And he proves how exceptional he is by carrying on the philosophical conversation in the midst of distractions and irrational tumult.

9 The *Phaedo* is a special case and might be interpreted as highlighting the usual structure: Socrates’ friends gather at daybreak so they can be with him as long as possible on this last day of his life (*Phd. 59d3, 8*). At the end of the day, Socrates decides not to sit out the last of daylight but departs, in a way, early (116e7–117a4).

10 The literature is extensive, but see Wildberger 2011 on the *Symposium* as an exceptional text that departs from the normal dialogic mode and even parodies other dialogues.

11 For ancient evidence on nocturnal banquets see Chaniotis 2018, 20–21.
Within this nocturnal conversation another narrative underlines the test-like aspect of the night: Alcibiades relates how he had to wait until it was night to try to seduce Socrates (Smp. 217d3–6). And he kept at it, literally clinging to Socrates all night long (219b4–c2). His perseverance, however, does not bring Alcibiades any closer to his aim. Socrates remains unaffected, just as Alcibiades also relates that on another occasion, Socrates stood motionless all through the night when he wanted to think about something (220c3–d5; cf. 223b6–c5).

The other exception is the Crito. Here again, the unusual setting helps to bring out the constancy of Socrates’ philosophical character. On one level, conversation itself here figures as something inappropriate that needs the cover of night. Crito has bribed the guard to be able to enter Socrates’ cell when it is still dark (it is now ὀρθρος βαθυς, but he came earlier, Cri. 43a4, 10). And he came to urge Socrates to escape the following night (46a6). Crito’s is a clandestine operation, one which Socrates refuses to join. Even though it is night, Socrates remains true to his philosophical principles.

4 Group B: Night and Insight

4.1 Night as a Marker of Ethical Judgement

Under normal circumstances, then, it seems that the day and reasoned conversation belong together. This would suggest that the night has a limiting and perhaps negative value in Plato’s work. The night can nevertheless also be a contributing factor in ethical judgement and philosophical insight. To start with, it can help bring out the goodness or badness of people’s characters and actions.12

As to reproachable behaviour, the night is a common and proverbial locus for this. As Socrates’ friend Protarchus comments explicitly in the Philebus (Phlb. 65e9–66a3):

In the case of pleasures, by contrast [to reason], when we see anyone actively engaged in them, especially those that are most intense, we notice that their effect is quite ridiculous, if not outright obscene; we become quite ashamed ourselves and hide them as much as possible from sight, and we confine such activities to the night, as if daylight must not witness such things.

12 For the night as a time of plotting as well as of vigilance in the Roman Republic, see Pieper in this volume; for the night’s critical value in medical diagnostics, see Rosen’s chapter.
In the context, Protarchus uses the appearance of these pleasures as evidence of the nature of these pleasures themselves: they not only look but are ugly and shameful. Hence confining them to the night is an opportune strategy.

If someone seeks out the night in order to do something, then, it is probably something reproachable. Similar associations of the night with reprehensible action occur, for instance, in the Gorgias and the Republic, where the tyrant is said to prefer the night for his criminal actions. In cases such as these, to say that certain activities happen by night is by itself to deliver a judgement about their ethical value.

But night can be a marker of ethical value also in a positive way. We have seen Socrates’ constancy at night in the Symposium and Crito. Likewise, when Critias praises Solon as a virtuous man, one way he does so is to say that he worked at night, ample evidence of his diligence and seriousness (Ti. 26b2). An interesting elaboration of this principle is in book 7 of the Laws (807e2–808d1). The life that the citizens of Magnesia will lead, and in particular their pursuit of physical and ethical perfection, will demand so much of their time that they must get the maximum out of every day and every night. Hence (Lg. 807e7–808c9, trans. Griffith/Schofield, modified):

For any of the citizens at all ever to spend the whole of any night asleep, rather than being seen by his entire household to be always the first to wake up and get up, must be generally regarded as a disgrace, and not how a free person should behave. ... Staying awake at nights is, for everyone, the key to dealing with a large part of their political or household business—the affairs of the city in the case of the magistrates, or for the mistresses and masters of households, matters within their own private

13 Grg. 471b5 (Archelaus) and R. 574d4 respectively. Compare further two passages from the Laws. In 874b8–c2 the Athenian Stranger stipulates that anyone who kills a burglar in the night will be released as innocent by the authorities. In 824a1–5, the Athenian Stranger speaks of a type of hunt where one can take turns sleeping, using nets, etc.; this type of hunting, he remarks, is called ‘night hunting’ (824a2). Since this is not at all a brave way to hunt, and unworthy of free men, it is to be prohibited in Magnesia.

14 We find this idea elsewhere too, e.g., Hom. Il. 2.24: οὐ χρὴ παννύχιον εὑδεὶν βουλησθόν ἀνδρὸν (‘A man that is a counselor must not sleep the whole night through,’ trans. Murray [Loeb]).
homes. ... In cities, magistrates who do not sleep at night are a terror to evil-doers—external enemies and citizens alike; admired and respected by the just, by those with self-control; and of benefit to themselves and the entire city. Such a way of spending the night will also, quite apart from the benefits we have mentioned, produce, for the various groups in the city, a kind of courage in the soul.

So sleep should be limited as much as possible in order to get the most out of every cycle of day and night. But over and above that, vigilance during the night is also extra effective in two directions. It is a deterrent against malevolent parties, and inspires ‘a kind of courage’ in everyone in the city. These added benefits that result under the cover of night make the good magistrate’s virtue all the more discernible.

The passages discussed in this section, then, feature the night as an ethical marker, not in the sense that all nightly activities are suspect, but because the night gives privileged access to the condition of the people who are active during it. It brings out the worst in bad people and shows good people for what they are. But the night does not only give us insight into people’s characters, as we will see when we turn to the *Timaeus*.

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15 The phrase ἑκάστων τῶν ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν suggests that the wakeful magistrates themselves are among those in whose souls courage is produced, as the anonymous reviewer points out; but it also indicates that other people become more courageous through their watchfulness. This makes one wonder what kind of courage this is, in the latter group, if it is the result of other people’s vigilance—the addition of τινα in the text is probably meant to reflect this.
4.2  Night’s Inward Turn of Perception and Inspiration

In Plato’s *Timaeus*, we are offered an account of the cosmos and of human nature. The night comes into this in two passages, one on visual perception and one on the liver. Connecting these two can yield interesting insights.

According to Timaeus, sight is a process that involves the merging of the light that comes from our eyes with daylight. Daylight is a body that originates in the sun and that hovers above the earth during the day. Its absence is night. Akin to this, but on a much smaller scale, our eyes send out a fire of their own. When these two meet, their kinship allows them to combine into a homogeneous body of light. In other words, when our light leaves our eyes and hits upon daylight, it merges with it, based on its similarity with it. The resulting composite can then meet whatever objects there are to be seen and, based on its homogeneous structure, it can transmit whatever motions this encounter generates back to the eye and to the soul of the perceiver. A primary role, within the perceiver’s soul, is played by the appetitive part of the soul which is located in the belly—even plants which have only this part of the soul, can perceive—even if ultimately the perception reaches the rational part of the soul, allowing for articulation of what we see. This is how we see.

At night, something else happens (*Ti*. 45d3–46a2, trans. Cornford):

> When the kindred fire (of daylight) has departed at nightfall, the visual ray is cut off; for issuing out to encounter what is unlike it, it is itself changed and put out, no longer coalescing with the neighbouring air, since this contains no fire. Hence it sees no longer, and further induces sleep. For when the eyelids, the protection devised by the gods for vision, are closed, they confine the power of the fire inside, and this disperses and smooths out the motions within, and then quietness ensues. If this quiet be profound, the sleep that comes on has few dreams; but when some stronger motions are left, they give rise to images answering in character and number to the motions and the regions in which they persist—images which are copies made inside and remembered when we awake in the world outside.

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16 On perception in the *Timaeus*, see Brisson 1997a and 1997b.

17 See Brisson 1997a, 313–316; Merker 2003, 24–44. The remark about plant perception is in *Ti*. 77b1–6.
The fire inside no longer departs outward during the night, because it lacks a congenial partner in the outside air. Our eyes are, as it were, in an alien environment, exiles in the night.18 As a result, the light coming from inside turns back onto itself, and further into the organism. And here it has an interesting effect: it smooths out motions within, so that sleep results. We dream when this smoothing-out is not complete; otherwise we have a dreamless sleep.19

What are these motions our passage refers to? The motions of the soul are essentially of three types. The first type will not further concern us in this study: these are the rational motions of the soul, which insofar as they are rational are also circular rather than straight. In their circularity these rational motions imitate the perfect motions of the heavenly bodies and of the cosmos as a whole. The second type is equally internal to the soul. These are the irrational motions of fear, anger, and other emotions, but also desires and appetites. The third type covers the motions that constitute perception—we just encountered these in thinking about the process of perception during the day. These motions come from outside the soul, impact it via the senses, and penetrate through to the irrational part around the belly.

According to the account of Ti. 45d3–46a2, all such motions come to rest when the light of the eyes is turned inward, except the very strong ones. We can make sense of this exception as referring to daytime experiences that have made a big impact and that cause us to dream about them at night. But equally as relevant in Plato’s view is the kind of strong motion that results from a failure of the rational part of the soul to tame and control the irrational parts. This would mean that a well-ordered soul will allow for its motions to be completely calmed at night, while one that is not or not sufficiently ordered is harder to calm down.

Let me briefly expand on this difference between well-ordered and badly ordered souls. In a well-constituted soul, the motions of the irrational parts

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18 On the kinship of the light of the eyes and that of the sun, see Johansen 2004, 110–114.

19 On dreams in Plato see Vegléri 1982. See also Rosen’s discussion of dreams in the Hippocratic corpus, this volume (82–86).
are moderate to start with, because they obey the commands of reason. As a result, these motions will keep quiet at night as well. By contrast, in a soul that is only superficially ordered, or not at all, the motions of the irrational parts do not obey reason. They are too strong for it to tame them. While daytime behavior may still look decent because reason finds some way to prevent the worst excesses of desire, our appetites will seize the opportunity when reason is asleep. Take for instance the tyrannical soul of the Republic, in which the ‘lawless’ appetites rear their heads and seek satisfaction at night: it will try to have sex with its mother, commit foul murder, and eat anything at all (571c–d). These are clearly references to dreams and an example of the kind of stronger motion that may still persist after the inner light has smoothed most of the motions of the soul.

In a well-ordered soul, instead, there is room for other kinds of dreams. The Republic mentions the possibility of the rational soul itself seeking out what it doesn’t know, in past, present, or future (R. 571e1–572a3). In the Timaeus (71a3–72a6), it is the appetitive part, located in the belly, that partakes of the gift of divination, by means of the images that appear in the liver as in a mirror. Let us briefly remind ourselves of the function of the liver in the Timaeus.

Normally, during the day, the thoughts of reason project images on the smooth surface of the liver. This is the way reason and appetite can communicate despite the latter’s inability to follow reason. One could say that reason formulates its message in terms that appetite can understand, i.e., in terms of perception. Thoughts get translated, in some way or another, into physical images on the surface of the liver. If reason and appetite are in harmony, reason’s thoughts are sweet and gentle, and the liver is likewise smooth and sweet. If, however, reason is at odds with appetite and has reason to be angry at it, dark thoughts are displayed and the liver becomes bitter and wrinkled as a result. This grim appearance of the liver makes the appetitive part very scared indeed. By this mechanism, reason can keep appetite in check even if appetite is not in concord with it.

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20 See Redfield 2014 for an interpretation of this passage as part of a fourth-century “turn toward the innerness of meaning” (15).
21 As Vegléris 1982, 56–60 points out, the dreams of badly ordered souls also contain truth, though not truth concerning intelligible reality or the future: they make clear (cf. R. 572b7) the condition in which the soul finds itself.
22 See Merker 2003, 64–66 for discussion of this passage which emphasizes the corporeal character of mirror images (against readings which make it a matter of reflection of visual rays, more intuitive for modern readers).
23 Some interpreters have considered this account to be full of irony. There are good reasons, however, to take the passage seriously as a statement of Plato’s (best shot at an) account of
The mechanism I just now described for the day allows for divination during sleep. When reason is asleep, it no longer sends down images to the liver. In a well-ordered soul, the movements of the appetitive part itself have also subsided. The soul is calm and the liver is smooth; the ideal setting for higher powers to inspire the appetitive part by giving it images of things to come. Here is how Timaeus describes the situation of a well-ordered soul (Ti. 71c6–e6):

Using towards it [the liver] a sweetness of like nature to the sweetness of the liver itself, and setting it right till all is straight and smooth and free, [the mind] makes that part of the soul that dwells in the region of the liver to thrive in well-being and gentleness of mood, and by night to pass its time in the sober exercise of divination by dreams, since it had no part in rational discourse and understanding …, that it might have some apprehension of truth …

That divination is the gift of heaven to human unwisdom we have good reason to believe, in that no man in his normal senses deals in true and inspired divination, but only when the power of understanding is fettered in sleep or he is distraught by some disorder or, it may be, by divine possession.

Note that Timaeus finds it important to point out that even our irrational soul has some contact with truth, even if it is unable to interpret what it sees. In the overall narrative of the *Timaeus*, this effect results from the attempt, on the part of the (lower-order) creators of the human body, to make everything as good as possible. For the irrational part it is better to have some contact with the truth...
than to be cut off from it completely. By the same token, however, it is clear that this kind of contact with the truth is, overall, not as good as the kind of contact available to the rational part of the soul.

Nor does its ability to divine things to come put appetite on a par with reason. The appetitive part itself lacks reason and Timaeus insists that it therefore does not understand the images it sees during sleep. Their interpretation is left to reason, when it wakes up again. Conversely, however, reason itself can never partake of this peculiar access to truth which the appetitive part has: ‘no man in his normal senses deals in true and inspired divination, but only when the power of understanding is fettered’ (71ε3–5).

The night, therefore, makes the light of the eye turn inward, producing calm in the soul. This kind of concentration is in turn a precondition for the peculiar capacity of the liver to show images of past, present, and future. Barring special cases of frenzy or divine possession, at no other time does a human being have this kind of access to truth. The night becomes a privileged period for a peculiar kind of access to the truth. We turn now to a wholly different case in which the night nevertheless has a similar role to play as a period of concentration that allows us to access the truth.²⁴

4.3 The Nocturnal Council

We saw above that the night helps us judge people. But the night also helps people judge.²⁵ This is certainly the case in what is probably Plato’s final work, the Laws. It features a peculiar institution called the nocturnal council (νυκτερινὸς σύλλογος, Lg. 909a3–4, 968a7). This council is composed of what Charles Kahn has called “the inner circle of the ruling class.”²⁶ This includes the most

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²⁴ Note that we have two factors that help calm down the liver: reason, as described in Ti. 71α–72α, and the flame of sight, as in Ti. 45δ–46α. Reason calms appetite as a matter of one’s way of life and internal constitution. But at the end of each day, it is the inner fire which produces calm in the whole soul including the soul around the liver. If reason is unsuccessful in calming the liver as a matter of one’s internal constitution, the light of the eyes cannot help but leave major motions restless. Whereas if the internal fire does not induce sleep, nothing prevents moderate desires, calmed by reason, from fulfilling their modest roles in going after representations of food etc.

²⁵ In emphasizing the advantages of nocturnal judging, the Laws expands on a cultural expectation present also, e.g., in Hom. Il. 2.224, cited earlier in n. 14. Eustathius’ commentary to this line includes reference to a proverb present also in Zenobius: ἐν νυκτὶ βουλή (Leutsch-Schneidewin 1.82, no. 97), which may or may not have been current in Plato’s day. Cf. Chaniotis 2018, 37. I thank the reviewer for Brill for bringing this proverb to my attention.

²⁶ In his 1961 review of Glenn Morrow’s Plato’s Cretan City, included in his foreword to the 1993 reissue of Morrow’s book (there on p. xxii). Some resist the term ‘nocturnal council’
senior guardians of the law, the highest education officers and those on whom
the highest honors of the state have been conferred. Their function is to make
sure that the laws of the city stay true to the purpose for which they were ini-
tially laid down, i.e., the promotion of virtue in individual citizens and in the
city as a whole. To this effect the council has at least two formal roles. The first
is to argue with atheists. These have been incarcerated in a special prison so
as not to infect the rest of the citizen body. Members of the council talk to
them over the course of at least five years, in order to convince them of the
existence, benevolence, and integrity of the gods (908a4–909a8). The council's
second role is to hear reports about laws in other places, brought to them by
special observers sent out for this purpose. In view of these reports, the coun-
cillors deliberate about the correctness of the city's own laws. They can confirm
these, or, if a better arrangement happens to have been found elsewhere, adopt
these or adapt the city's laws (951d4–952d4).

The status of this council in the *Laws* is not exactly clear. But two things
are clear: it is an important body, the fullest description of which comes at the
very end of the whole dialogue. And it is clear that they meet at night. In some
passages they are said to meet νύκτωρ (Lg. 908a4, 962c10), in others at dawn
(ἀρσενίς) before sunrise (951d7, 961b6). Note, therefore, that it is not the mid-
dle of the night that is at issue here. It is desirable that there is some light. I
suppose this is because it would be dangerous to meet when there is only dark-
ness without any light. Perhaps a background consideration is that people will
have had the chance to get some sleep (though we saw above that this should
be kept at a minimum for free men). But why should this council meet during
the night at all? Because it is, as the Athenian Stranger puts it in one passage,
the time ‘when everybody is most free from other business.’ We will see in
what sense this is true.

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because of sinister connotations and because it does not meet at the dead of night (e.g.,
Brisson 2001, 162–163, who in my view does not give enough weight to νύκτωρ in 908a4 and
962c10). The literal rendering should nevertheless be preserved; as this section shows, its
meeting time when it is not yet day is important for its functioning.

1988; Morrow 1960, 500–515.

28 In the *Critias*, the royal council in Atlantis also administers justice at night (νύκτωρ, 120b7).
Morrow 1960, 503, n. 5 suggests that the phrase ἀπ’ ἀρχής μέχρι πρωί ἂν ἡλιος ἀνάσχη
refers to the time when the council should start its meetings, not to their duration. But if the
meetings were intended to last into the new day, the pointed references to the nightly
character of their meetings would be inappropriate.

29 δεῖν δὲ ὅρθριον εἶναι τὸν σύλλογον, ἣν οὐκ ἂν τῶν ἄλλων πράξεων ιδίων τε καὶ κοινῶν καὶ μᾶλις ἂν
tί τις σχολὴ παντί (961b6–8).
The night here appears as a place of leisure in which the most important things can get done. We can see that point. But there remains something strange about this. The relegation of these meetings away from the day might suggest that there is something clandestine going on here. Perhaps there is something to this. Remember that the council is responsible for persuading atheists of the falsity of their beliefs. Perhaps it is better not to carry on such conversations with dissidents at a time when other citizens are out and about as well. The reports from the observers from abroad, too, might contain subversive material, which it would be too dangerous to listen to if one were not as philosophically firm as the members of the council.

More importantly, however, the meeting time of the council is strange because it seems that nothing could be more important than these meetings. Why then should it yield, calendar-wise, to less important matters, and not take place at the most opportune moment during the day?

One way to look at this, I think, is to appeal to the idea of concentration and rest which we have already seen operative in the case of divination in the *Timaeus*. The night has very positive value because it allows the councillors to concentrate. Let me briefly expand a little on the role of the council with respect to virtue in order to substantiate this point.

The council is said to be responsible for the preservation of the state and its laws. This is not a matter of fending off any kind of alteration to the laws but rather a matter of adaptation, if the need is there. The councillors should do so in a way analogous to other kinds of expertise. The Stranger explicitly mentions the captain, the doctor, and the general (961e1–962a9), each of whom uses the combination of his senses and his intelligence to stay focused on the one goal of his expertise. In the same way, the council should be informed—it should perceive what happens elsewhere and what happens inside the city—and it should also be capable of intelligent judgement. The goal of that judgement, what guides this intelligence, is the creation of virtue (*Lg*. 961d1–963a5).

The virtue of the city as a whole is the council's fixed goal, even if the way to get there may change depending on circumstances. The reason why the members of this council are suitable for this task is precisely that they are superior to all others in virtue. And in contrast to rulers of other states, the council does not base decisions on ever-changing final ends.30 Those other rulers waver

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30 In 962d8–9, interpretations differ about the exact distribution of ἄλλο ἄλλη; does it claim that each piece of legislation in different cities aims at a range of goals (England 1921, ad loc.), or that for each city, there is one aim of legislation, which differs from city to city (Schöpsdau 2011, 589)? The argument seems to lose its point if we accord other cities a unity of purpose, albeit mistaken, behind their legislation, and the Greek does not force
The members of the nocturnal council, however, are constant and never swerve (μὴ πλανᾶσθαι, 962d3). As Robert Mayhew points out, in so doing, the councillors imitate, as far as possible, the constant, regular movement of the highest beings in our universe, and indeed the universe itself. We saw above, in discussing the *Timaeus*, that the circular movements of the rational part of the soul are most like the circular motions of the heavenly bodies. The councillors, then, try to be as rational as possible, which means that they have only one aim in view. Their job, therefore, is to be constant and never to swerve.31

This firm emphasis on the unity and constancy of the council’s aim may help explain the timing of its meetings. As the Stranger says, there is leisure before the day starts. This leisure does not only concern the contingent fact of people’s calendars being empty. It also applies to the absence of things to perceive. At deepest dawn, black night is over, so people can actually gather without causing injuries; but the risk of councillors becoming distracted is still kept at a minimum. When they meet, nothing is happening yet in the city. Not even their sight will distract them: there is hardly anything to see.

In this way, the night emerges as a privileged period: it allows for more concentration than is possible during the day. In Plato, perception, and sight in particular, is a favored metaphor for knowledge. But of course perception can also be a diversion from knowledge. In the *Phaedo*, it is the fate of an embodied soul that it will never reach knowledge, because it will always be forced to use sight, hearing, and the other senses. Hence the philosopher’s striving to separate his soul from his body. In a perhaps similar way, the night offers the creature of the *Timaeus* and the council of the *Laws* a period of respite from the senses and, in different ways, access to truth.

5 Conclusion

The night, then, plays a number of different roles in Plato and cannot be reduced to something that straightforwardly stands for the ignorance we should all avoid. To return to an observation I made at the outset, it seems that the night has a negative value particularly as a metaphor for ignorance, but this reading on us. Griffith/Schofield’s translation seems sensible: ‘since in any particular city the various pieces of legislation are all aiming in different directions.’

that literal night often has much more positive associations in Plato's work, or at least more complex ones. Plato employs these associations, which are not necessarily exclusive to his work, to suit the form and content of his philosophical project.

We have seen that we can group the majority of the passages discussed under two headings. First, the night appears as a structuring device. On the cosmic level it is part of the regular succession of day and night which allows us to discover and study mathematics and ultimately philosophy. In the cosmos of the dialogue, the night marks the beginning and end of philosophical discussion, at least under normal circumstances. Second, the night is also a place of special insight. It reveals things that go unnoticed by day in people's behavior and character. It reveals things future and things past, which remain inaccessible to those who live by the day. And the absence of daytime perception also allows for the high concentration exercised by Magnesia's philosophical council.

We might wonder why, if the night is such a propitious time for gaining insight in various matters, the philosophical conversations of Plato's dialogues nevertheless take place during the day, as we saw earlier. Note, first, that reading Plato's texts from the perspective of the night brings into view the contrast between the leisure of Socrates' interlocutors and indeed of Socrates himself, as they feature in the Platonic dialogues, and the apparently busy schedules of the citizens of Magnesia. The interlocutors of the *Laws* themselves also enjoy a leisure of the Socratic type in which to conduct their conversation. It is a measure, perhaps, of the idealistic nature of the old men's city that its inhabitants are expected to be active practically around the clock.

But to return to the question, it is important to qualify the type of insight gained in the various circumstances. The dream scenario described in the *Timaeus* applies only to the non-rational part of the soul, and explicitly so. Any insight it may gain is less than rational and does not qualify as knowledge, since it is unable to defend itself and account for itself. This is not to deny the value of such insight. But it may clarify the kind of understanding which the interlocutors of Plato's daytime conversations are seeking. Moreover, it is no simple matter to benefit from the insightful nature of the night. The night is a time of testing. Socrates proves himself able to pass the test, but will his interlocutors? The councillors of Magnesia have been selected on the basis of their strong moral calibre and their successful completion of a demanding trajectory of studies. While they may be able to profit from the night to gain the best philosophical insight and to exercise the soundest political judgement of which they are capable, others may not be as steadfast and for them the night may be a place of darkness more than a place of insight.
The night, therefore, remains a place to approach with caution. Things can become clearer at night than they would ever be in daylight. We can see people’s characters revealed, watch future events, study the best course for the city. But it takes a strong soul to use the night to its full advantage. The night, in its regular alteration with the day, may set us on the path to philosophy. But we need to have advanced far along that path to be immune to the night’s dangers. And so it falls to philosophers to create the right conditions that promote true nights of insight.

**Bibliography**


