

4. XENOPHANES OF COLOPHON

Born in Colophon, a city on the west coast of what is now Turkey, near Miletus (home to Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes) and Ephesus (the city of Heraclitus), Xenophanes was an itinerant poet and philosopher. On his own evidence, he lived to a great age, and although the subjects discussed in the surviving fragments and testimonia give evidence of the scope of his travels, the details of his life are hazy. He was born c.570 BCE and seems to have left Colophon after it fell to the Medes in 546/5. He refers to Pythagoras and the doctrine of transmigration of souls in one fragment, and some in the ancient tradition say that he was a teacher of Parmenides (this is most unlikely).

Xenophanes wrote in verse, and while some of the surviving fragments deal with typical poetic topics, he also addressed what would now be called theological and philosophical questions. He rejected the traditional views of the Olympian gods, such as are found in Homer and Hesiod, and claimed that there was a supreme non-anthropomorphic god, who controls the cosmos by thought. Whether or not Xenophanes claimed that there was a single god or only that the supreme god was the greatest of an unnamed number of gods is debated by scholars. He rejected divination and the view that natural phenomena, such as rainbows, have divine significance and claimed that there is no divine communication to human beings. Humans must find out for themselves by inquiry; moreover, Xenophanes raises questions about the possibility of sure and certain knowledge, and suggests that humans must be satisfied with belief or opinion, although he probably thought that this must be backed with evidence. He had a keen interest in the natural world, which is not surprising, given his commitment to inquiry. He noted fossils of sea creatures in the mountains and developed a complicated “cloud astrophysics” to explain the phenomena of the heavens. He argued that the earth is indefinitely broad and extends downwards indefinitely, thus rejecting the view that the sun travels under the earth. Even in “traditional” areas for poets he seems to have held strong views: he gives instructions for a symposium (a drinking party) and laments the over-glorification of athletes. Recent scholarship has come to appreciate Xenophanes as a crucial

figure in early Greek thought, whose views on knowledge and the divine were important for later thinkers.

1. (B1) For now the floor is clean, and the hands of all,
 and the cups. One is putting on the woven wreaths,
 another is offering fragrant myrrh in a bowl,
 a mixing bowl stands full of joy,
 another wine, gentle and scented of flowers, is at hand in
 wine-jars 5
 and boasts that it will never betray us.
 In the middle, frankincense is sending forth its holy scent.
 There is cold water sweet and pure.
 Golden loaves of bread are served and a magnificent table
 is laden with cheese and rich honey. 10
 In the center an altar is completely covered in flowers
 and the rooms are full of song and good cheer.
 Cheerful men should first sing a hymn to the god
 with well-omened words and pure speech.
 When they have poured an offering and prayed to be able
 to do acts of justice 15
 (for indeed these are the first things to pray for),
 it is not going too far (*hubris*) if you drink only as much as
 permits you to reach
 home without assistance (unless you are very aged).
 Praise the man who after drinking behaves nobly
 in that he possesses memory and aims for excellence (*aretē*) 20
 and relates neither battles of Titans nor Giants
 nor Centaurs—the fictions of our fathers—
 nor violent conflicts; there is no use in these,
 but it is good always to have high regard for the gods.
 (Athenaeus, *Scholars at Dinner* 11.462c; tmpc)

2. (B2) If anyone were to achieve a victory
 at Zeus's sanctuary at Olympia by the streams of Pisa
 in a foot race or the pentathlon or in wrestling
 or the painful art of boxing

or the frightful contest they call the pankration,¹ 5
 he would be more glorious in the eyes of the citizens.
 They would grant him a seat of honor at the games,
 he would enjoy meals at public expense
 and a gift from the city for his children to inherit.
 Even if he were to be victorious with horses he would
 obtain these things. 10
 Though he is not as worthy of them as I. For superior to the
 strength
 of men or horses is my wisdom.
 But these ways are misguided and it is not right
 to put strength ahead of wisdom, which is good.
 If an excellent boxer were among the people 15
 or someone excellent at the pentathlon or in wrestling
 or in the foot race (which is the most highly honored
 display of strength of all men's deeds in the contests)
 that would not make a city be any more in a state of
eunomia.²
 A city will find little joy in a person 20
 who wins in the contests by the banks of Pisa,
 since this does not fatten the city's storerooms.
 (Athenaeus, *Scholars at Dinner* 10.413f)

3. (B7) Once he passed by as a puppy was being beaten,
 the story goes, and in pity said these words:
 "Stop, do not beat him, since it is the soul of a man, a friend
 of mine,
 which I recognized when I heard it crying."
 (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 8.36)

4. (B8) Already there are sixty-seven years
 tossing my speculation throughout the land of Greece,
 and from my birth there were twenty-five in addition to these,
 if indeed I know how to speak truly about these matters.
 (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 9.19)

1. *Pankration*: A vicious sport combining boxing, wrestling, and kickboxing.

2. Translator's note: *Eunomia*: the condition in a city where the laws are good and people abide by them.

5. (B10) Ever since the beginning all have learned according
to Homer . . .
(Herodian, *On Doubtful Syllables* 296.6; tpc)
6. (B11) Both Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods all
deeds
which among men are matters of reproach and blame:
thieving, adultery, and deceiving one another.
(Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 9.193)
7. (B12) . . . as they sang of many illicit acts of the gods
thieving, adultery, and deceiving one another.
(Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 1.289; tpc)
8. (B14) But mortals suppose that the gods are born,
have human clothing, and voice, and bodily form.
(Clement, *Miscellanies* 5.109)
9. (B15) If horses had hands, or oxen or lions,
or if they could draw with their hands and produce works as
men do,
then horses would draw figures of gods like horses, and oxen
like oxen,
and each would render the bodies
to be of the same frame that each of them have.
(Clement, *Miscellanies* 5.110; tpc)
10. (B16) Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and dark,
Thracians, that theirs are grey-eyed and red-haired.
(Clement, *Miscellanies* 7.22; tpc)
11. (B17) . . . and bacchantes [garlands] of pine set around the strong
house.
(Scholium on Aristophanes, *Knights* 408; tpc)
12. (B18) By no means did the gods intimate all things to mortals
from the beginning,
but in time, inquiring, they discover better.
(Stobaeus, *Selections* 1.8.2; tpc)

13. (B23) One god, greatest among gods and men,
not at all like mortals in form or thought.
(Clement, *Miscellanies*, 5.109; tpc)
14. (B24) . . . whole [he] sees, whole [he] thinks, and whole [he]
hears.
(Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 9.144; tpc)
15. (B26) . . . always [he] remains in the same [state], changing not
at all,
nor is it fitting that [he] come and go to different places at
different times.
(Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* 23.10; tpc)
16. (B25) . . . but completely without toil [he] agitates all things by
the will of his mind.
(Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* 23.19; tpc)
17. (B27) For all things are from the earth and all return to the earth
in the end.
(Theodoretus, *Treatment of Greek Conditions* 4.5)
18. (B28) The earth's upper limit is seen here at our feet,
touching the air. But the lower part goes down without limit.
(Achilles Tatius, *Introduction to the Phaenomena of Aratus* 4.34.11)
19. (B29) All things that come into being and grow are earth and
water.
(John Philoponus, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* 1.5.125)
20. (B30) Sea is the source of water and the source of wind.
For not without the wide sea would there come to be
in clouds the force of wind blowing out from within,
nor streams of rivers nor rain water from the sky,
but the great wide sea is the sire of clouds and winds and rivers.
(Geneva Scholium on *Iliad* 21.196)
21. (B31) . . . the sun passing high over the earth and warming it.
(Heraclitus Homericus, *Homeric Allegories* 44.5; tpc)

22. (B32) She whom they call Iris, this too is by nature cloud:
purple, and red, and greeny-yellow to behold.
(Scholium BLT on *Iliad* 11.27; tpc)
23. (B33) We all come into being out of earth and water.
(Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 10.314)
24. (B34) . . . and of course the clear and certain truth no man has
seen
nor will there be anyone who knows about the gods and what
I say about all things;
for even if, in the best case, someone happened to speak what
has been brought to pass,
nevertheless, he himself would not know, but opinion is
ordained for all.
(Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 7.49.110; tpc)
25. (B35) Let these things be believed as resembling the truth.
(Plutarch, *Table Talk* 9.7.746b)
26. (B36) . . . however many they have made evident for mortals
to behold.
(Herodian, *On Doubtful Syllables* 296.9)
27. (B38) If god had not fashioned yellow honey, they would say
that figs are far sweeter.
(Herodian, *On Peculiar Speech* 41.5)
28. (A12) Xenophanes used to say that those who say that the gods are
born are just as impious as those who say that they die, since either
way it follows that there is a time when the gods do not exist.
(Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.23 1399b6–9)
29. (A30) Some declared the universe to be a single substance . . . not
supposing, like some of the natural philosophers, that what-is
is one, and generating <the universe> out of the one as out of
matter, but speaking differently. For the others add change, since
they generate the universe, but these people say it is unchange-
able. . . . Xenophanes, who was the first of these to preach monism
(Parmenides is said to have been his student) made nothing

clear . . . but looking off to the whole heaven he declares that the one is god.

(Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.5 986b10–25)

30. (A32) He says that the sun is gathered together from many small fires. . . . He declares that the earth is without limit and is not surrounded by air in every direction, that all things come into being from the earth. And he says that sun and stars come into being from the clouds.

(Pseudo-Plutarch, *Miscellanies* 4)

31. (A40) The sun <is constituted> out of incandescent clouds.³

(Stobaeus, *Opinions* 2.20.3)

32. (A38) <The stars> are constituted out of ignited clouds that die down every day but become fiery again by night, just like coals.

(Aëtius 2.13.13)

33. (A44) All things of this sort [comets, shooting stars, etc.] are aggregations of incandescent clouds.

(Aëtius 3.2.11)

34. (A33) [Xenophanes] says that the sun comes to be each day from the gathering together of many small fires, that the earth is unlimited and surrounded by neither the air nor the heavens. There are unlimited numbers of suns and moons, and everything is from the earth. He declared that the sea is salty because many mixtures flow together in it. . . . Xenophanes believes that earth is being mixed into the sea and over time it is dissolved by the moisture, saying that he has the following kinds of proofs: sea shells are found in the middle of earth and in mountains, and imprints of fish and seals have been found at Syracuse in the quarries, and the imprint of coral [or, "of a laurel leaf"] in the depth of the stone in Paros, and on Malta flat impressions of all forms of marine life. He says that these came about when all things were covered with mud long ago and the impressions were dried in the mud. All humans perish when the earth is carried down into the sea and becomes

3. Translator's note: The translation of this and the following two passages is indebted to Mourelatos.

mud, and then there is another beginning of generation, and this change occurs in all the *kosmoi* [that is, in every such cycle].

(Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 1.14.3–6)

35. (A39) <Concerning the stars that are called the *Dioscuri*>⁴
Xenophanes says that the things like stars that appear on boats are small clouds that glimmer as a result of a certain kind of motion.
(Aëtius 2.18.1)

Suggestions for Further Reading

All of these entries have further bibliographies. Complete bibliographical information for collections may be found in the bibliography in the Introduction, pp. 10–12. See also the relevant chapters in Barnes; McKirahan; Guthrie; and Kirk, Raven, and Schofield.

Classen, C. J. 1989. “Xenophanes and the Tradition of Epic Poetry.” In *Ionian Philosophy*, edited by K. J. Boudouris, pp. 91–103. Athens: International Association for Greek Philosophy: International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture.

Fränkel, H. “Xenophanes’ Empiricism and His Theory of Knowledge,” in Mourelatos, pp. 118–31. (See Introduction, p. 11.)

Leshner, J. H. 2008. “Xenophanes.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/xenophanes/>.

———. 1992. *Xenophanes of Colophon: Fragments: A Text and Translation with Commentary*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. (Greek texts of the fragments; translation, commentary, and notes in English.)

Mourelatos, A. P. D. “The Cloud Astro-Physics of Xenophanes and Ionian Material Monism,” in Curd and Graham, pp. 134–68.

4. Translator’s note: Literally, “sons of Zeus”; the term was used to refer to Castor and Polydeuces (Pollux). The phenomenon referred to is St. Elmo’s Fire.