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
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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 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. 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 (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) 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
4. XENOPHANES OF COLOPHON

or the frightful contest they call the pankration, 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.

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 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. A city will find little joy in a person 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 bacchants [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 unchangeable. . . . 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.


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.

(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.


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


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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.