

J. H. Lesher, 'A Systematic Xenophanes?' in *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy* (CUA Press, 2009).

A Systematic Xenophanes?

I hasten to point out that my title ends with a question mark. It is not at all obvious that Xenophanes of Colophon was a systematic thinker, i.e. that different aspects of his philosophy linked up with one another in readily identifiable ways. Nevertheless, I believe, and will attempt to show, that Xenophanes achieved a unified understanding on three broad fronts—on the physical makeup of the cosmos, the nature of the divine, and the prospects for human knowledge—and that in at least some respects he connected his findings in one area with those in others. This seems to me a point worth making, partly because Xenophanes stands so early on in the Western philosophical tradition, barely two generations after the first philosopher-scientists of ancient Miletus, and partly because he has not always been considered a significant thinker. Aristotle dismissed his views as 'a little too naïve' to merit detailed discussion, and in our own time Harold Cherniss described Xenophanes as 'a poet and rhapsode who [became] a figure in the history of philosophy by mistake'. In any case, a lecture series devoted to 'the nature of the rationality represented by the advent of philosophy in the West' seems an appropriate venue in which to explore such a question.

First, a few basic facts. Xenophanes was indeed 'a poet and rhapsode'—a performer of Greek epic verse—who left his hometown of Colophon when the Medes invaded western Ionia (modern Turkey) in 546 BCE. By his own account (fragment B 8) he spent most of his long life 'tossing his thought around the Greek land', living for a period in Greek-speaking communities in Sicily and southern Italy, including Elea where he may have met Parmenides. Thirteen of the approximately 45

surviving fragments of Xenophanes' poetry touch on the standard topics of Greek sympotic poetry—on how to behave at a symposium (B 1, 5, and 22), the true measures of personal excellence (B 2 and 3), and the virtues and vices of various well-known individuals—Thales, Pythagoras, and the poet Simonides, among others (B 6-8, 10, 19-21, and 45). In a group of seven fragments (B 27-33) Xenophanes followed the lead of his Milesian predecessors in linking various natural phenomena with one or more basic physical substances and natural processes. In the well known fragment B 34 he appears to set limits on how much any mortal being can know, in the process drawing the fundamental distinction between knowledge and mere true opinion. In B 18, however, he sounds a more optimistic note when he sets aside divine revelation in favor of a form of 'seeking' that leads, in time, to the discovery of 'something better'. In Fragments B 11 and 12 he rebukes Homer and Hesiod for their attributions of shameful conduct to the gods, and in B 23-B 26 he sets out a contrasting account of 'one greatest god not at all like mortals in either body or thought'. In two of his best-known remarks he appears to discredit all anthropomorphic conceptions of the divine (text # 1):

Ethiopians <say their> gods <are> snub-nosed and black,

And Thracians <say theirs are> blue-eyed and red-haired. (B 16)

If horses or oxen or lions had hands

Or could draw with their hands and accomplish such works as men,

Horses would draw the figures of the gods as similar to horses,

And the oxen similar to the oxen,

And they would make the bodies of the sort which each of them had. (B 15)

On the basis of just these remarks one would have to regard Xenophanes as an unusually independent-minded thinker—an outspoken critic of the leading poets of ancient Greece, a proto-epistemologist, and an active participant in the Ionian *Aufklärung* which marks the onset of scientific inquiry in the West.

But what reason is there to think that Xenophanes' thinking was to a significant degree *systematic*?

In at least one respect, the prospects for a systematic Xenophanes seem unpromising; the inferential particles that as early as Parmenides serve as the hallmarks of logically organized prose are largely absent from the surviving Xenophanes fragments. The inferential particle *gar*—‘for’ or ‘because’—occurs just five times (at B2.13, B2.15, B27, B30.2, and B34.3), the inferential *epei*--‘since’ only once (in B10), and the inferential *oun*—‘therefore’, not at all. One connective that does appear frequently is *alla*—‘but’—which reflects the fact that Xenophanes typically set himself in opposition to the views held by others. B 14 provides a good example (text # 2):

But (*alla*) mortals suppose that the gods are born,

Wear their own clothes, and have a voice and body

At least suggesting that the true story lies elsewhere. We should remember, however, that the portions of Xenophanes' poetry that have come down to us from antiquity are really just snippets—in most cases just a few hexameters, sometimes just a single word, that one or more later writers chose to quote. Early Greek writers, moreover, often adopted a paratactic style of presentation even when a subordinate relationship was intended. Anaxagoras, for example, will say of the cosmic Mind that it is ‘the finest and purest of all things and has every decision about everything and the greatest power and rules all things...and ruled the whole rotation...and Mind decided all things...and Mind set in order all things’ (B 12), when what he almost certainly means is that *since* Mind is the finest and purest of all things it has the greatest power and *therefore* holds every decision, and since Mind holds every decision it *therefore* set all things in order’. So the absence of the inferential particles that serve to structure later philosophical prose actually tells us very little about the character of Xenophanes' thinking.

A more telling consideration, I would argue, is that within each of three different areas of Xenophanes' thought—in his accounts of the workings of the cosmos, his views of the divine nature, and his reflections on the sources and limits of human knowledge—the different elements link up with one another in readily identifiable ways.

In fragments B 27 and B 29 (text # 3) for example, Xenophanes identifies earth and water as the basic substance or substances from which all things come into being and into which all things perish. Similarly, the sea is said to be salty because of the many mixtures that are contained in it (A 33), and the sea combines with earth within an ongoing cycle of destruction and recreation of the dry lands (A 32, 33). *Testimonium* A 50 (from Macrobius) states that Xenophanes held that the soul consisted of earth and water, while (in text # 4) B 37 notes that 'in certain caves water drips down'—perhaps a comment on the way in which water both emerges from and leads back to the formation of rocks; B 30 identifies 'great sea' as the source of all clouds, winds, rainwater, and rivers, and B 32 in turn identifies 'she whom they call Iris/rainbow' not as the messenger deity whose travels were reported by Homer and Hesiod, but as a certain kind of cloud:

She whom they call Iris this also is by nature a cloud,

Purple, red, and greenish-yellow to behold.

As we might expect in light of the characterization of the rainbow as 'also...a cloud', Xenophanes linked a number of other meteorological or celestial phenomena to the presence of clouds of one type or another. The Pseudo-Plutarchian *Miscellanies* credits him with holding that 'the sun and stars come into being from clouds'. The massive doxography credited to Aëtius reports that 'Xenophanes says that the stars come into being from burning clouds' (A 38), that 'the sorts of fires the appear on ships,

whom some also call the Dioscuri [the phenomenon we know today as St. Elmo's fire] are tiny clouds glimmering in virtue of the kind of motion they have' (A 39), that 'the moon is compressed cloud' (A 43), that 'all things of this sort [comets, shooting stars, meteors] are either groups or movements of clouds' (A 44), and 'that flashes of light come about through the shining of the clouds because of the movement' (A 45). The upshot is a thoroughly earth-and-water way of thinking about natural phenomena and processes, with clouds playing the leading role in accounting for atmospheric as well as celestial phenomena. In retrospect it seems clear that Xenophanes' choice of clouds as the basic explanatory factor was an entirely natural one, partly because of their in-between, half-solid and half-liquid nature and partly because of their in-between, half-earthly and half-celestial location. It also happens that a number of the phenomena Xenophanes attempted to explain just look very much like clouds of one kind or another—whether shining, sparkling, colored, or compressed. One might hesitate to speak in terms of anything so grand as a 'unified cloud theory', but the fact is that Xenophanes succeeded in linking clouds with a sizeable group of meteorological and celestial phenomena. In his recent study Alexander Mourelatos concludes that Xenophanes' astrophysics:

...is internally coherent, that it can be attractively connected to intelligent observation of celestial and atmospheric phenomena, that it has significant connections with other parts of Xenophanes' philosophy, and that it does not at all have the vices of stultifying empiricism some modern scholars have found in it.

When we turn to Xenophanes' comments on divine attributes and operations we encounter a parallel situation—a set of striking individual remarks, with no logical connectives in evidence, yet with much that suggests a thoroughly integrated view (text # 5):

One god is greatest among gods and men,

Not at all like mortals either in body or in thought. (B 23)

Whole he sees, whole he thinks, and whole he hears. (B 24)

But completely without toil he shakes all things by the thought of his mind (B 25)

Abiding always in the same place, he moves not at all,

Nor is it seemly for him to travel to different places at different times. (B 26)

Each of these famous ‘theological fragments’ takes the form of a simple declarative sentence, with only a single connective particle, the strongly adversative *alla*—‘but’, appearing in B 25. However, as soon as we ask ‘why?’ with respect to each of these assertions, a broad and coherent outlook begins to emerge. Why must there be just ‘one greatest god’? Why would such a god have to ‘see, think, and hear as a whole’? Why would such a god shake all things by the thought of his mind alone? And why would it be unseemly for him to move about from place to place?

One clue to the logical structure embedded in these remarks is provided by a reminiscence of Xenophanes’ teachings in Euripides’ *Heracles* (text # 6):

But I do not think the gods desire to have illicit relations

And I never believed nor will believe that chains are

Fastened on their hands,

Nor that one god is master over another.

For god, if indeed truly he is a god, lacks nothing.

Such ideas are the sorry tales of singers.

Two later restatements of Xenophanes’ teachings echo the same basic idea (text # 7)

For it is inherent in the nature of the divine not to be mastered (*MXG*, 3.4)

He declares also that there is no one of the gods in single command over them, for it would be

impious for any of the gods to be mastered; and not one of them is in any way in need of any of them. (Pseudo-Plutarch, *Miscellanies* 4)

Lying behind these three reports was almost certainly an original Xenophanean observation to the effect that ‘the divine is, of necessity, un-mastered and lacking in nothing’, or to put the point in more positive terms: god, simply *qua* god, must be unlimited in power. The members of Xenophanes’ audiences would have been familiar with the idea of a god pre-eminent in both power and honor, in the figure of Olympian Zeus, the father of gods and men. But, as we are about to learn from B 24-26, the powers possessed by Xenophanes’ ‘greatest god’ exceeded even those ascribed to the chief deity of Greek popular religion. According to Homer, all Olympus shakes whenever Zeus seats himself on his throne (*Il.* VIII, 443) and nods his bushy brows in approval (*Il.* I, 530); but Xenophanes’ god ‘shakes all things’ by the thought of his mind alone. In addition, the gods whom Homer and Hesiod depict have only a partial awareness of events taking place in the world below, and must frequently leave their Olympian heights to familiarize themselves with the local situation and set things straight. But ‘the whole’ of Xenophanes’ ‘one greatest god’ sees, hears, and thinks, i.e. he is both perceptive and conscious in all his parts, without employing any physical organs. He is, moreover, able to affect ‘all things’ simply by means of ‘thought of his mind’ (*noou phreni*) and to do so without moving about from place to place, since that would be unseemly for him. Thus, while the members of Xenophanes’ audience would have appreciated that Xenophanes’ ‘one greatest god’ was in some ways like the Zeus whom they revered, if they gave the matter some thought they would soon realize that the god Xenophanes described differed in important respects from the shaggy-haired deity who looked down upon the world from his Olympian home.

In the same reforming spirit, and at about the same time, Heraclitus declares that ‘the one and

only wise thing, is both willing and unwilling to be called by the name of Zeus', (B 32) suggesting that in some respects the power that controls the entire cosmos is like Zeus in some respects but unlike him in others. And when it comes time for Anaxagoras to explain how the cosmos came to be in its present form he will also follow Xenophanes in asserting the existence of a divine mind who, as Anaxagoras would have it, started the great mass of disorganized cosmic material to rotate. Toward the end of the 5th century one of the characters in Aristophanes' *Clouds* who has enrolled in Socrates' 'Thought Shop' or 'Thinkateria' will sum up the teachings of the 'new science' with the proclamation that 'Zeus is out and Vortex is King.' But none of the early Greek philosophers would have expressed their views in such provocative language. Xenophanes and his Ionian cohort were seeking not to overthrow belief in the gods but rather to correct popular misconceptions of the gods' nature and roles. For Xenophanes, this would require, among other things, a different and more complex understanding of what is meant by the traditional epithet 'greatest among gods and men'.

In the third major area of his thought, Xenophanes offers a series of remarks on the topics of human inquiry, opinion and the prospects for knowledge. In what are the earliest recorded epistemological reflections in Western thought (B 34, text # 8) he states:

And no man has been nor will there be anyone who knows the sure truth (*to saphes*)

About such things as I say about the gods and all things.

For even if one succeeded better than others in speaking of what comes to pass,

Still he himself would not know. But opinion (*dokos*) is fashioned for all.

These difficult lines have been variously interpreted ever since antiquity, but their core message, which is to say, Xenophanes' distinctive brand of 'skepticism', is signaled by the appearance of the term *to*

saphes in line one. In archaic Greek speech *saphês* designated what is ‘surely known’ to an individual in so far as he or she has been put in a good position to observe it first-hand. In the generation following Xenophanes, Herodotus will also speak of direct experience as the key to achieving ‘clear or sure knowledge’ (text # 9):

Moreover, wishing to get clear knowledge (*saphes ti eidenai*) of this matter whence it was possible to do so I took ship to Tyre in Phoenice where I heard there was a very holy temple of Heracles. There I saw it (*eidon*), richly equipped with many other offerings...At Tyre I saw (*eidon*) yet another temple of that Heracles called the Thasian. Then I went to Thasos, too, where I found a temple of Heracles built by the Phoenecians... Therefore, what I have discovered by inquiry plainly shows (*ta men nun historêmena dêloi saphêôs*) that Heracles is an ancient god (*History* II, 44, trans. Godley)

Thus when Xenophanes denies in B 34 that anyone has known or will ever know *to saphes*, we should understand him to be saying that no one has grasped, or ever will grasp, the sure truth (concerning the nature of such things as he discusses) on the basis of his or her own personal experience. The scope of the topic as described in line 2—“what I say about the gods and all things”—immediately confirms this reading in so far as nothing could be at a greater remove from the direct experience of mortal beings than the actions of the gods and the totality of events taking place throughout the cosmos. As Xenophanes elsewhere explains (B 14—16), mortals fashion their understanding of the gods not as a consequence of direct experience of divine operations but on the basis of their own generic human traits. The considerations mentioned in lines 3 and 4 reinforce this negative conclusion by pointing out that even if, in ‘the best case scenario’, one were to speak truly about events as they happen, that person would still lack knowledge, since no one’s experience of events as they occur can justify a claim concerning the nature of things as they exist at all places and

times. In B 34, then, Xenophanes appears to have embraced the traditional view that during their brief lifetimes mortal beings witness only a small portion of a vast cosmos, assumed the usual connection between having direct access to events and knowing *to saphes* about them, and drew the logical conclusion.

Other Xenophanean remarks are entirely consistent with what I take to be the empiricist spirit expressed in B 34. A *testimonium* from Hippolytus (A33, text # 10), for example, gives us a picture of Xenophanes the scientific inquirer who draws on the discovery of fossilized remains of sea creatures at widely separated inland locations to support a theory of periodic worldwide flooding and drought:

...Xenophanes thinks that a mixture of the land with the sea comes about, but that in time (the land) becomes freed from the moisture. And he asserts that there are proofs for these ideas: that shells are found inland and in mountains, and he says that in quarries in Syracuse imprints of fish and seals were found; and in Paros the imprint of coral in the deep of the marble and on Malta slabs of rock containing all sorts of sea creatures.

Other fragments and *testimonia*—concerning Ethiopian and Thracian conceptions of the gods (B16), Egyptian religious practices (A 13), the invention of coinage by the Lydians (B 4), mountains and volcanoes in Sicily (B 21a and A 48), and eclipses reported in different regions of the world (A 41a)—fill out our picture of Xenophanes the Ionian scientific inquirer, a practitioner of what Plato would call *historia* (*Phaedo* 96a) or ‘inquiry in the form of travel and direct observation, or the knowledge gained from such inquiry’. In the well-known fragment B 18, sometimes read (implausibly, I think) as an early expression of a faith in human progress, Xenophanes identifies ‘inquiry’ or ‘seeking’, rather than divine revelation, as the source of human understanding (text # 11):

Indeed not from the beginning did gods reveal all things to mortals,

But in time, as they seek, they discover something better.

On a more negative note, in B 38 Xenophanes appears to be commenting on the extent to which human opinion is shaped by local conditions (text # 12):

If god had not made yellow honey, they would think

That figs were much sweeter.

The remark is about figs and honey, but the implicit message might well have been much broader, to the effect that no perceptual judgment, perhaps no human judgment of any kind, can be wholly free of subjective bias. Xenophanes' overall assessment of the prospects for human knowledge, then, seems decidedly mixed: as mortal beings undertake wide-ranging inquiries they will, in due course, 'discover (a) better', but no one will ever achieve sure knowledge, at least concerning matters that lie beyond our direct experience.

We have seen that in each of three areas—the basic constituents of the physical universe, the nature of the divine, and the sources and limits of human knowledge—the individual elements of Xenophanes' thought link up with one another in readily identifiable ways. I do not claim, however, that we confidently credit Xenophanes with each and every one of the theoretical connections I have identified. There is, after all, the fallacy Richard Robinson once termed 'misinterpretation by inference'—the mistake of thinking that in so far as some author S held that p, and p implies q, that S must have held that q. The truth of 'Xenophanes believed that p and p implies q' does not guarantee the truth of 'Xenophanes believed that q'. At the same time, it is most unlikely that Xenophanes was wholly unaware of all the implications I have identified. He was, after all, far more familiar with his own thoughts than we moderns will ever be. We also know that from time to time he reflected on how the views he expressed in one area related to assertions made in another. In B 34.1-2, for example, he

reflects on how far any mortal being can hope to know the sure truth concerning ‘such things as I say about the gods and all things’, which is to say, how far his epistemological conclusions have some bearing on the outcome of his theological and scientific inquiries. At a minimum, he would also have realized that his explanation of ‘all things’ in terms of earth and water put him in a good position to explain a wide range of phenomena (his use of the term *kai* (‘also’) in the ‘this also is cloud’ part of B 32 reveals that the rainbow was only one of many meteorological phenomena being linked to clouds); that the various capacities attributed to the one greatest god were direct consequences of an attribution of supremacy in power; and that gaining information about events and states of affairs in different regions of the world was fully in keeping with the empiricist manifesto he had delivered in B 34.

I suspect that it has not escaped your notice that Xenophanes’ epistemology was grounded in a keen sense of the gap between human and divine capacities: the only things we mortals can know for sure are the events or states of affairs we happen to meet with over the course of our brief lifetimes, all else must remain a matter of opinion or conjecture. In addition, whatever degree of understanding we can achieve will come about only gradually (‘in time’), and through our own labors (i.e. ‘by seeking’ in the form of travel and direct observation), resulting in the discovery of only ‘something better’. The general impression we are given is that *human* knowledge, to the degree it comes at all, does so only gradually and after considerable expenditure of effort. Just the opposite, of course, holds true for the ‘one greatest god’, who as B 23 put it, is ‘completely unlike mortals in either body or thought’. Unlike human beings who are stuck with their bodily organs of sense and thought, ‘the whole (of it) sees, thinks, and hears’; and unlike human beings who have to travel about to different corners of the globe in order to acquire their knowledge, the divine never ‘moves about from place to place.’ In short, the ultimate reason why we mortals have to acquire our knowledge as we do, and why we know as little as

we do, is that we are mortals and not gods. Xenophanes' contemporary Alcmaeon had already explicitly drawn the contrast (text # 13):

The gods possess knowledge of the sure truth (*saphêneia*) but [it is given] to men to conjecture from signs (*tekmairesthai*).

Xenophanes' epistemology, in short, appears to have been shaped by his theology.

Xenophanes' theology also appears to have had important implications for his way of understanding the nature of the cosmos. What Xenophanes put forward, as we have seen, was a view of the physical cosmos in which a single pair of physical substances (earth and water, more specifically: clouds) and a small set of regular forces or principles (i.e. movement, evaporation, and compression) account for a wide range of phenomena. Many celestial objects and events long regarded as rich in religious significance—the sun, moon, comets, meteors, eclipses, lightning, thunder, the rainbow, St. Elmo's fire—are identified as clouds of different kinds, moving and being moved about in different ways. And again, in sharp contrast with all these, there is the divine who is 'greatest among gods and men', 'unlike mortals in body', wholly unmoving and unmoved, who is able to impart movement to the cosmos in its entirety by means of his thought alone. One might say (as I have said elsewhere) that 'the demythologized naturalism of Xenophanes' scientific outlook neatly complements his denaturalized theology', but there is a more basic point to be made: to a significant degree Xenophanes' cosmology and epistemology *appear to have been driven by his theology*. Since the divine must be absolutely supreme in its power, then any merging or mingling of the divine with the physical would represent a diminution of its powers and a narrowing of its range of action that would be wholly out of keeping with its inherent nature. And a realization of the necessary non-physical character of the divine would have reinforced Xenophanes' view of the conditions that constrain

human knowledge: the divine must be unlike mortals in both body and thought, having neither mortal voice nor clothing, and therefore not from the outset would truth have been revealed to mortals.

Moreover, since the events taking place in nature are really only so many different rearrangements of earth and water, created and destroyed in accordance with a set of physical forces, we cannot expect to find embedded in these physical phenomena any hidden indications of divine intentions and wishes.

Both directly and indirectly, then, we human beings are left to carry on as best we can with the resources the gods have put at our disposal. As he puts it in the final line of B 34: *dokos d'epi pasi tetuktai*: 'opinion has been fashioned for all'.

As I read them, then, the surviving portions of Xenophanes poetry embody an integrated understanding of the cosmos, the divine, and how far human beings can discover the sure truth concerning matters in either domain. I do not claim, however, that every one of Xenophanes' views can be linked up with one or more of a surrounding matrix of ideas. In particular, so far as I can tell, his critical observations on the behavior of his fellow citizens (the texts in # 14) were unrelated to his science, theology, and epistemology. His invitation to his fellow symposiasts to 'hold always the gods in high regard' (B 1) may reflect his belief in a god of maximal goodness (as well as power), but his assertion that 'there is no use' in the poets' stories of divine misconduct seems rather to reflect a social concern: tales of divine misconduct tend to legitimize and thereby encourage antisocial conduct among the folk. Similarly, his criticisms of the practice of showering victorious athletes with gifts and free dinners (in B 2), his disparaging references to the gold-ornamented and perfume-drenched Colophonians (in B 3) and his call for modest food and drink while celebrating models of civic virtue (in B 22), all reflect his concern for the continued well being of his city. These sentiments stand in no obvious relationship with any of Xenophanes' scientific, theological, and epistemological views—

although I am open to suggestions. So far as I can see, what we observe in these remarks is Xenophanes the moralizing poet, heir to the didactic tradition of Hesiod and Solon, rather than Xenophanes the philosopher, predecessor of Heraclitus, Parmenides, and all the rest of us.

Now I would be happy to hear your questions and comments. Thank you very much.