

# *Xenophanes' Scepticism*

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Xenophanes of Colophon (fl. 530 B.C.) is thought to have been the first sceptic in the history of western philosophy, but the character of his scepticism was the subject of dispute as early as the fourth century B.C., and the central statement of his position, Fragment 34,<sup>1</sup> has been variously interpreted ever since. Much of recent discussion has concerned the severity and scope of his sceptical thesis, but it would be of equal philosophical interest to know what Xenophanes' reasons were for maintaining scepticism, or what features of Xenophanes' life and times may have contributed to his sceptical outlook. It is the contention of this paper that Xenophanes' scepticism is best understood as a response to traditional religious and poetic ways of thinking, and is therefore closely tied to his criticism of Homeric religion, and that the key to a proper understanding of his sceptical remarks lies in an often mentioned but seldom discussed aspect of his writings: the attack on divination.

## I – ANCIENT ACCOUNTS

The following extract from Xenophanes' poetry was widely quoted and discussed in antiquity ( B 34):

καὶ τὸ μὲν οὖν σαφὲς οὐτις ἀνὴρ ἴδεν οὐδέ τις ἔσται  
εἰδὼς ἀμφὶ θεῶν τε καὶ ἄσσα λέγω περὶ πάντων·  
εἰ γὰρ καὶ τὰ μάλιστα τύχοι τετελεσμένον εἰπών,  
αὐτὸς ὅμως οὐκ οἶδε· δόκος δ' ἐπὶ πᾶσι τέτυκται.<sup>2</sup>

While a full translation requires argument and cannot be assumed at the outset, it is clear that the basic elements of Xenophanes' view are (in some sense of these terms): truth (τὸ σαφὲς), knowing (ἴδεν, εἰδὼς, οἶδε), speaking of the real (τετελεσμένον εἰπών), and belief or seeming (δόκος). Any adequate interpretation of Xenophanes' scepticism, while it can be supplemented by reference to other fragments and background information, must make sense of these notions, and their inter-connections. Sextus mentions two alternative interpretations: in the first,<sup>3</sup> Xenophanes is thought to have held that everything is incomprehensible (πάντα ἀκατάληπτα), and this is supported by reading σαφὲς as 'true' or 'known':

Yet the true and known — at least in respect of non-evident things — no

human being knows; for even if by chance he should hit upon it, still he knows not that he has hit upon it but imagines and opines.

As the context of Sextus' discussion (VII, 46-52) makes clear, the sceptical dispute concerns not so much the attaining of true belief, but a criterion (*κριτήριον*) for determining which beliefs are true or which appearances are veridical. Xenophanes is taken here to be denying the existence of a criterion since he holds that even if someone were to say what is real or true, he would not know that he had done so, and hence would have only belief or opinion.

But this interpretation of the fragment is implausible. Not only does it restrict, without justification, the scope of the sceptical thesis to what is 'non-evident', but it translates Xenophanes' simple "he knows not" (*οὐκ οἶδε*) into "he knows not that he has hit upon it" (*οὐκ οἶδεν ὅτι ἐπιβέβληκεν αὐτῷ*), and requires that we attribute to Xenophanes the rather subtle doctrine that knowing the truth entails knowing that one knows the truth, or at least that knowing the truth entails being convinced that what one believes is true. It is doubtful, at least in English, that either entailment holds, but they are not so far fetched as to exclude being attributed to Xenophanes. The difficulty is simply that both are more complex formulations than the original "even if he says what is true, he does not know". Further, since *σαφές* and *ἀληθής* are not synonyms,<sup>4</sup> Xenophanes' scepticism could be directed toward 'certain', 'absolute', or 'sure' knowledge, rather than knowledge of the truth *simpliciter*.

Sextus mentions a second, less sceptical, interpretation of this sort: Xenophanes does not deny all comprehension or apprehension (*κατάληψις*) of the truth, but only that which is *ἐπιστημονικὴν* and *ἀδιάπτωτον* (Bury: "cognitive and inerrant"). Men can apprehend the truth, even if they cannot attain it with certainty — or without reservations (*παγίου*) — and we can adopt probable reasoning as a criterion for determining what is true (VII, 110). This reading gains some support from Fr. 35: "let these things be believed as resembling the truth (*ἔοικότα τοῖς ἐτύμοισι*)". Yet we must still assume that Xenophanes' concern was also that of the later sceptics: the existence of a criterion for distinguishing between truth and falsity (or reality and deceptive appearance) and we are also required to attribute to Xenophanes some general notion of apprehension of which knowledge and belief are distinct species. Both interpretations given by Sextus constitute expansions in the language of a later period, and in the context of a dispute of which, for all we know, Xenophanes may have been wholly ignorant. So far we may reasonably conclude only that Xenophanes denies that men have knowledge (or perhaps that men have knowledge of

*τὸ σαφές*) while he allows that men have beliefs which, in some cases, may resemble what is true or real (*ἐτύμοισι*).

Later writers tell us that Xenophanes coupled the distinction between knowledge and mere belief with a contrast between divine and human capacities: god knows the truth, but belief is allotted to men,<sup>5</sup> and Alcmaeon begins his work with a similar remark, perhaps following Xenophanes: "concerning the non-evident, concerning things mortal, the gods have a clear understanding (*σαφήνειαν*), but men merely conjecture from signs."<sup>6</sup> As Snell has shown in detail, there was by Xenophanes' time a well established poetic tradition contrasting divine knowledge and human ignorance,<sup>7</sup> and the attribution of this view to Xenophanes is supported by the frequent, and often disparaging, remarks about the beliefs of *mortals* (B14: *βροτοὶ*, B18, B36: *θνητοῖσι*), and by his conception of the one God, superior to gods and men, unlike them in body and mind (B23), who moves things by his mind (B25), and who enjoys, in some sense, a whole or complete seeing, thinking and hearing (B24). We have so far no reason to think that B34, taken by itself, reflects this religious context (although I shall argue for this in Section III following), but we can reasonably conclude on the basis of the evidence already cited, that Xenophanes' scepticism has this feature: as Guthrie puts it, "men could have no certain knowledge, that was reserved for God" (*ibid.*, p.398).

## II – RECENT ACCOUNTS

In Karl Popper's famous "Back to the Pre-Socratics",<sup>8</sup> Xenophanes is alleged to have held that "all our knowledge is guesswork, yet that we may nevertheless, by searching for that knowledge 'which is the better' find it in the course of time." Popper sees Xenophanes, as did the early Greek sceptics, as an early proponent of his own theory of knowledge: "that knowledge proceeds by way of conjectures and refutations", and not according to the Baconian myth of induction. Popper concedes that it may sound incredible, but asserts anyway, that there is a clear recognition of this "theory of rational knowledge almost immediately after the practice of critical discussion had begun." (*ibid.*) But even conceding for the moment that Xenophanes did think of human understanding as progressing toward but never attaining knowledge of the 'final truth', we are still very far from being told that knowledge is obtained not simply from observation and experiment, but from the construction and criticism of theories.<sup>9</sup> According to Diogenes Laertius, Xenophanes held opinions which were opposed to (*ἀντιδοξάσαι*) those of Thales and Pythagoras, and we know that he

criticized the accounts given by Homer and Hesiod. There is no evidence that he held, as Aristotle clearly did hold, that inquiry was best conducted by a review and criticism of previous doctrines and theories.<sup>10</sup> Nor do the remaining fragments reveal that he implicitly followed this principle; apart from one allusion to the Pythagorean doctrine of metempsychosis (B7) and a suggestion that he admired Thales for his ability to predict eclipses (B19), there is no sign that he practiced, much less preached, Popper's principle of 'rational knowledge'.

Yet Popper's account raises an issue that has clear relevance for an interpretation of Xenophanes' scepticism: how can Xenophanes be a proponent of scepticism if he holds also (in B18) that "mortals in time, through seeking, discover what is better (or the better)"? Can one consistently deny the possibility of knowledge and at the same time affirm that discovery is possible? Further, as Fränkel asks, how can we consistently think of Xenophanes, "this investigator and portrayer of reality who took delight in the gathering and contemplation of facts" as one who was also "a sceptic, a tired doubter or a deft but unconvinced dialectician, and that he had no real confidence in the reality of the world of appearances?" (p. 122). Neither of these considerations poses an unavoidable dilemma. Xenophanes does not say, as Popper has it,<sup>11</sup> that men find "that *knowledge* which is the better", but only that they discover what is better, and as Guthrie explains, the replacement of divine revelation with human inquiry, which is the full thesis of Fr. 18, may represent Xenophanes' rejection of a primitive 'golden race', and the promotion of a conception of human progress or improvement 'both morally and in the conditions of life' (p. 400). In any event, there is no inconsistency generated by holding that men fall short of certain knowledge, or even knowledge *simpliciter*, while also conceding that men discover arts, skills, values, or beliefs which are better than previous ones. Similarly, one need not, in order to be justly termed a sceptic, affirm a universal doubt, or a rejection of the evidence of the senses. Fränkel's argument rests on the frequently adopted but mistaken assumption that a sceptic, worthy of the name, must be a pyrrhonian sceptic, that is, must call for a suspension of belief, or perhaps even a rejection of all beliefs as false. There have however been sceptics, as ancient as Carneades and as recent as Keith Lehrer, who deny that we ever know anything, but insist nonetheless that much ought to be believed as true, not the least of which are the beliefs about the world based on the obvious evidence of sense experience. There is no contradiction in asserting that p is true, or ought to be believed, even though p is not something which should be claimed to be known, or known with certainty.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, we

cannot hope to show that Xenophanes was not really a sceptic simply on the grounds that *one* form of scepticism would be incompatible with other aspects of his philosophy.

Fränkel's interpretation is however based largely on linguistic considerations involving B34 itself, and since Fränkel's account is shared, at least in part, by Snell, Guthrie, and Untersteiner, and presents a detailed exegesis, it deserves careful consideration.

Fränkel views B34 as an expression of a 'robust empiricism', and, far from denying the possibility of knowledge, it holds that knowledge which is empirically grounded, based on first-hand observation and experience, can be certain and exhaustive (*σαφές*). To know, as can be seen in Herodotus' notion of *ιστορία*, is to have seen, and this close connection of knowing with seeing is borne out by the etymology of *οἶδα*, literally "I have seen", but commonly simply "I know". Thus Xenophanes is not rejecting knowledge, but only the pretensions to knowledge of one who has not seen things for himself (*αὐτὸς οὐκ οἶδε*). Since we have no first-hand experience of divine attributes and operations, we can have no reliable knowledge of them, but there are plausible suppositions that can be made.

This interpretation makes *some* sense, and we are indebted to Fränkel for his careful rendering of the subtle nuances of many of the terms in the fragment (e.g. *τὰ μάλιστα τύχου*) which went un-noticed in earlier commentaries, but his rendering is not without difficulties. Let us assume for the sake of argument that *ἴδεν* in line 1 (*καὶ τὸ μὲν οὖν σαφὲς οὗτις ἀνὴρ ἴδεν οὐδέ τις ἔσται*) does mean seeing, and in particular non-metaphorical 'seeing' — i.e. visual sense perception,<sup>13</sup> and also that this justifies reading *εἰδῶς* in line 2 (*εἰδῶς ἀμφὶ θεῶν τε καὶ ἄσσα λέγω περὶ πάντων*) as "designating only a knowing rooted in vision" (p. 123).<sup>14</sup> We must then take Xenophanes' thesis to be that 'what is clear or precise (*σαφές*) no man has ever perceived, nor will there ever be anyone who knows on the basis of empirical observations about the gods and about everything else of which I speak'. We can understand why Xenophanes might have held that the gods could not be perceptually known, and hence why it was not possible to have perceptual knowledge about *everything* of which he spoke, but why should he have thought that no man has ever had perceptual knowledge of what is *σαφές*, especially if he is willing to allow that sense perception is the source of that knowledge which is certain and exhaustive? The problem is that while the second line discusses knowledge specifically about the gods and everything else of which Xenophanes speaks, the first line is unrestricted: no man has ever seen *τὸ σαφές*. To repair the interpretation, and to over-rule what is the *prima facie* sense of the passage, we must find some

basis for thinking that Xenophanes wishes to restrict his scepticism to *σοφές* knowledge of some particular province, and Fränkel maintains that it is the non-evident or supersensible that is the implicit subject throughout. Apart from the suggestion that the preceding context might have already supplied a concrete referent and content for *σοφές*, the only *argument* that Fränkel gives is that the “closely resembling postscripts in the quotations by Areius Didymus and Varro give a good indication of the wider context: ‘but God has a genuine knowledge even of transcendent things’” (p. 128). But what these postscripts provide is simply a contrast of divine knowledge with human opinion, and as Guthrie notes, the dichotomy between transcendent and non-transcendent things is “not in the originals” (p. 396n.).

A similar difficulty for Fränkel’s interpretation emerges from the generality of Xenophanes’ conclusion in line 4: *δόκος δ’ ἐπὶ πᾶσι τέτυκται*: belief (or supposition) is allotted to all things. This remark is at odds with Fränkel’s contention that Xenophanes is concerned to deny only knowledge of the supersensible world, and counts as well against thinking that Xenophanes allows for the possibility of knowledge based on sense experience. If Xenophanes meant to deny only knowledge of the supersensible, one would expect him to claim that belief is allotted to *these* things (and not *all* things), and if he did think that men could gain reliable knowledge in some manner, one would not expect him to conclude “but belief is allotted to all things”. In short, although lines 2 and 3 might by themselves suggest that Xenophanes’ scepticism was directed only against second-hand ‘knowledge’ of the supersensible world, lines 1 and 4 indicate a general scepticism about the capacity of human beings to see the clear and certain truth, and a willingness to concede only that men can attain true beliefs. Xenophanes was probably not the extreme sceptic that Sotio took him to be, but he still seems more of a sceptic than Fränkel would have us believe.

### III – XENOPHANES AND EARLY GREEK RELIGION

We have so far been thinking of Xenophanes as the originator of a cryptic epistemological theory, and have considered that theory through the accounts given by later writers, both ancient and modern. It is however very unlikely, as Charles Kahn has observed, that either of these ways of viewing a pre-Socratic philosopher, will provide a complete picture:

The very possibility of understanding sixty-century ideas, where the documentation is so sadly lacking, depends upon our fuller knowledge

of the older poetic outlook. It is only by placing the Milesians in between two regions of light provided by archaic poetry on one hand and classical philosophy on the other – by thus illuminating them, as it were, from above as well as from below – that we may have any hope of seeing a bit deeper into this dark period of transition and creation.<sup>16</sup>

It is true that Kahn’s inquiry concerns the origins of Milesian cosmology, and he may not have intended these remarks to apply to other pre-Socratics, but there is ample justification for adopting this approach in our investigation of Xenophanes’ scepticism. Xenophanes was after all a wandering poet who criticized the stories about the gods told by Homer and Hesiod (A1, B11), and testified to the extent of Homer’s influence on common opinion (B10: *ἐξ ἀρχῆς καθ’ Ὀμηρον ἐπεὶ μεμαθήρασι πάντες . . .*). In what ways might the poetic tradition of Homer and Hesiod have influenced Xenophanes’ thinking, and especially, how might the religious outlook of the older poets link up with his views on human knowledge?

We have already noted that B34 probably embodies, or at least is connected with, a traditional poetic contrast between divine wisdom and human ignorance, but there are other features of Homeric religion which were repudiated by Xenophanes. He rejects the conception of gods in human form (B11, B14) and conceives of one god, greatest among gods and men who is unlike men both in body and mind (B23). One insufficiently appreciated feature of Xenophanes’ critique of religion is his repudiation of religious practices, and not simply religious conceptions. He expresses scorn for the practice of placing pine branches around the house in the belief that these branches are somehow themselves *βάκχοι* – divine powers (B17), and we are told by Diogenes Laertius that he rebuked (*καθάψασθαι*) Epimenides, a man who enjoyed a reputation as a prophet and miracle worker.<sup>17</sup> According to Aetius<sup>18</sup> and Cicero<sup>19</sup> Xenophanes denounced the practice of divination (*μαντική*), the attempt to acquire knowledge through the use of omens and portents of various sorts.<sup>20</sup> This feature of Xenophanes’ writings, the attack on divination and related superstitious practices, furnishes, I believe, a basis for a coherent account of his general philosophical outlook, and his scepticism. If I am right about this, then we can not only make sense of some troublesome fragments, we can also appreciate the origins of his sceptical outlook, and the significance of the intellectual revolution which was effected by Xenophanes, and by the pre-Socratic philosophers generally.

Xenophanes’ rejection of divination is, first of all, not unconnected with other aspects of his thought. It is a reasonable inference from his conception of god as unlike mortals in raiment, voice, or body, that the gods do not

appear in mortal form, nor do they speak directly to us. Nor, since it is unfitting for the god to be in different places at different times (B14, 26), is possible for god to 'come or go in our midst' (μετέρχεσθαι in B26). Yet, as Flacelière states "... genuine μαντική, in the original sense of the word (mania: madness) [is] caused by possession, by the literal presence of the god in the soul of the prophet or prophetess, who thus receives the revelation direct from heaven." Fränkel observes that in the attack on divination, Xenophanes "made the chasm between the here and the beyond unbridgeable" (p. 130), but the chasm had already been provided for in Xenophanes' positive account of the one god.

Nor is the attack on divination unconnected with Xenophanes' cosmology in which celestial phenomena are explained in terms of water and earth (B29), or perhaps simply earth (B27). Nilsson's account of the conflict between religious and philosophical ways of thinking which was a general feature of pre-Socratic philosophy, and which led to the diminished influence of seers and oracles, serves equally well as an explanation of the connection between Xenophanes' critique of divination and his cosmology:

The real clash took place between that part of religion which interfered most in practical life and with which everyone came into contact every day, namely, the art of foretelling the future, and the attempts of natural philosophy to give physical explanations of celestial and atmospheric phenomena, or portents, and other events. Such explanations undermined the belief in the art of the seers and made it superfluous. For if these phenomena were to be explained in a natural way, the art of the seers came to naught.<sup>21</sup>

That Xenophanes' cosmology had this anti-divinational flavor is indicated by several isolated remarks about traditional portents, as well as the subjects of his cosmological interest. So far as I know, only Dodds has noticed the connection: [Xenophanes gives] "naturalistic explanations of the rainbow (Fr. 32) and St. Elmo's fire (A39), both of which are traditional portents."<sup>22</sup> Rainbows are among the most striking and suggestive of all natural phenomena, and have been taken as harbingers of good fortune, but for Xenophanes, "she whom they call Iris, she too is actually a cloud, purple, and flame red, and yellow to behold" (B32). St. Elmo's fire, the freak electrical phenomenon sometimes seen on ships' masts during storms, was considered a portent of good fortune, and was thought of in antiquity as two brothers (Dioscuri, later Cabiri) who were the guardian saints of mariners in distress,<sup>23</sup> but to Xenophanes, "those which some call the Dioscuri are little clouds glimmering in virtue of the kind of motion

that they have" (A39, Guthrie trans.).

Flacelière presents the following brief summary of the phenomena which were taken as omens or portents:

Atmospheric phenomena, meteora, were obviously signs of the will of the gods; especially of Zeus, the god of the atmosphere and the sky. The weightiest presage of all, the one that could negate or confirm all others, was thunder. In the Iliad, whenever Zeus wishes to encourage one of the Greek or Trojan heroes he does so by hurling a thunderbolt to the right of him. Rain also comes from Zeus, and was regarded as a sign of his will, a diosemeion. But beyond the clouds and all other atmospheric phenomena were the stars: in Homer, Sirius, 'Orion's Dog', was a star of ill-omen; the Spartans would never embark on a campaign before the full moon, which appears to be the reason why they did not arrive at Marathon until the battle was over.<sup>24</sup>

Among other celestial phenomena thought of as omens or portents were eclipses, shooting stars, and the phases of the moon. The industrious mantic seer could find significance in dreams, sneezes, volcanic eruptions, the sounds of gongs and rustling branches, the entrails of sacrificed animals, birds, and the casting of dice or bones.<sup>25</sup> While the explanations which Xenophanes gives are neither detailed nor always consistent, they do focus on many phenomena involved in the practice of divination:

- (1) "He says that the sun and the stars come from clouds" (A32, Plut. *Strom.* 4, cf. A33, 38, 40).
- (2) "Xenophanes said there are many suns and moons according to regions, sections, and zones of the earth, and that at a certain time the disc is banished into some section of the earth not inhabited by us, and so treading on nothing, as it were, produces the phenomenon of an eclipse" (A41a, Aetius, *Placita*, II, 24, 9).
- (3) "Eclipses occur by extinction of the sun (σβέσσω ἡλίου) and the sun is born anew at each of its risings" (A41, Aet., II, 24, 4).
- (4) "The moon disappears each month because it is extinguished" (A43, Aet. II, 25, 4).
- (5) "Comets (κομήτας) are groups or motions of burning clouds" (A44, Aet. III, 2, II).
- (6) "Lightnings (ἀστραπὴς) take place when clouds shine in motion" (A45, Aet. III, 3, 6).
- (7) "The phenomena of the heavens come from the warmth of the sun as the principle cause. For when the moisture is drawn from the sea, the sweet water separated by reason of its lightness becomes mist and passes into clouds, and falls as rain when compressed, and the

winds scatter it" (A46, Aet. III, 4, 4).

Epicurus, whose naturalistic explanations of these phenomena resemble both in content and terminology those given by Xenophanes,<sup>26</sup> states explicitly what seems to me to be an implicit conclusion of Xenophanes' account:

We are bound to believe that in the sky revolutions, solstices, eclipses, risings and settings, and the like, take place without the ministrations or command, either now or in the future, of any being who at the same time enjoys perfect bliss along with immortality.<sup>27</sup>

In short, Xenophanes' cosmology, as well as his conception of the one god, probably served to support his attack on divination through signs. Men personify natural phenomena and think of them as visible signs of the will of the gods, but they are in reality only changes due to the motion of clouds and the kindling and extinction of fires. The true divinity exists elsewhere.

These inter-connections do not, taken in isolation, show that Xenophanes' epistemological remarks have anything to do with the practice of divination but they do suggest that his rejection of divination was not devoid of philosophical importance. Further, since divination is essentially a means for acquiring knowledge we ought at least to consider the possibility (though this has never, to my knowledge, been attempted) that these two aspects of Xenophanes' thought are related in some important way to one another. The crucial question is whether B34 is itself illuminated by drawing attention to the attack on divination, and to the significance attached to divination in the poetic tradition.

We can begin by considering Xenophanes' *reason* for concluding that no man has seen or known what is *σαφές* (and that there never will be anyone who knows about the gods and everything else of which he speaks):

εἰ γὰρ καὶ τὰ μάλιστα τύχοι τετελεσμένον εἰπών, αὐτὸς ὄμως οὐκ οἶδε.

As Fränkel has argued, we need not think of *τύχοι* (*εἰπών*) simply as 'chanced' (to say) or 'accidentally' (said), but rather as 'succeeded' (in saying), or 'correctly' (saying). Thus (taking *τὰ μάλιστα* as 'especially' or 'more than others') *τὰ μάλιστα τύχοι εἰπών* means 'succeed above others in saying'.<sup>28</sup>

What then can be made of *τετελεσμένον*: "for even if someone should succeed above all others in saying what is *τετελεσμένον*, still he would not know"? *Τετελεσμένον* has been understood as the 'complete truth' or 'what is completely true' (Kirk and Raven, Freeman, Burnet) or simply as 'true' (Guthrie), or 'what is completely true' (Kirk and Raven, Freeman, Burnet) or simply as 'true' (Guthrie), or 'what is really present' (Fränkel), but the

literal meaning of *τετελεσμένον*, 'what is completed, accomplished, brought about' (from *τελέω*) has been largely ignored.<sup>29</sup> So far as I can determine, *τετελεσμένος* occurs twenty-three times in Homer.<sup>30</sup> In eighteen of these passages, it is linked with speaking or saying, and the following passages illustrate this repeated formulaic expression, "speaking of that which has been brought about or will be brought about" (Murray trans.):

- (1) "for this will I speak and verily this thing shall be brought to pass" (*τὸ δὲ καὶ τετελεσμένον ἔσται*), *Il.* I, 212 = II, 257; VIII, 401, VIII, 454; *Od.* II, 187, XVII, 229, VIII, 82.
- (2) "He arose and spoke a threatening word, that hath now been brought to pass" (*ὁ δὲ τετελεσμένος ἔστί*), *Il.* I, 388.
- (3) "I will declare to thee as it verily shall be brought to pass" (*ὡς καὶ τετελεσμένον ἔσται*), *Il.* XXIII, 410 = XVI, 440, XXIII, 672, XIX, 487.
- (4) "I would that this word of thine might be fulfilled" (*ἔπος τετελεσμένον εἶη*), *Od.* XV, 536 = XVII, 163, XIX, 309.

This passage from the *Odyssey* (XVII, 153 ff.) gives an indication of the sort of context in Homer in which someone speaks of what is *τετελεσμένον*:

Then among them spoke also the godlike (*θεοειδής*) Theoclymenus, saying:

'Honored wife of Odysseus, son of Laertes, he truly has no clear understanding (*οὐ σάφα οἶδεν*); but do thou hearken to my words, for with certain knowledge will I prophesy to thee (*ἀτρεκέως γάρ σοι μαντεύσομαι*), and will hide naught. Be my witness Zeus above all gods, and this hospitable board and the hearth of noble Odysseus to which I come, that verily Odysseus is even now in his native land, resting or moving, learning of these evil deeds, and he is sowing the seeds of evil for all the wooers. So plain a bird of omen did I mark as I sat on the benched ship, and I declared it to Telemachus' [*Od.* XV, 536].

Then wise Penelope answered him: 'Ah, stranger, I would that this word of thine might be fulfilled (*ἔπος τετελεσμένον εἶη*).'

These passages, and others in Homer<sup>31</sup> provide ample justification for reading *τετελεσμένον εἰπών* as "speaking or saying what is brought to pass". This fits well in the context of line 3 of B 34, since it is obvious that one kind of thing that one might succeed in saying is a true prediction about future events. One can also connect this with *τὰ μάλιστα* since some persons might be thought to 'succeed above all others in saying what comes to pass'.<sup>32</sup> The full message of lines 3-4 is that even if one succeeded above others in speaking of what is brought to pass, still he himself does not know, but belief or opinion is allotted to all things.

It is not yet clear whether B 34, in its entirety, espouses a general scepticism or simply scepticism about the claims to knowledge of those who succeed in correctly predicting events, but this latter scepticism is present in lines 3-4 and does serve as the basis for Xenophanes' claim in lines 1-2. Xenophanes' scepticism then involves, at least in part, an implicit repudiation of a central figure in Greek religion, the oracle or prophet, and a repudiation as well of the stature enjoyed by these figures in the Homeric epic. Yet doubts about the infallibility of prophets had already appeared in Homer, and the trustworthiness of divination was a re-current theme in classical literature.<sup>33</sup> So while Xenophanes' scepticism about divination is revolutionary as a repudiation of the entire enterprise, it is not wholly without precedent.

It should also be noted that the passage quoted at length from *Od.* XVII, 153 ff. not only links up prophecy with saying what is τετελεσμένον, but also displays a connection, found elsewhere in Homer, between the gift of prophecy possessed by the mantic seer and 'sure' or 'clear' knowledge (Theoclymenus claims that Telemachus οὐ σάφα οἶδεν, but that he himself will give an exact or certain (ἀτρεκέως) prophecy). The form σαφές which appears in line 1 of B34 does not appear in Homer, but σάφα knowing and σάφα speaking do occur. To say or know in a way which is σάφα is, at the very least, to say or know what is true (cf. *Il.* IV, 404: "Son of Atreus utter not lies (μὴ ψεύδε) when thou knowest how to speak truly (σάφα εἰπεῖν)", but it commonly carries a special emphasis on knowing or saying the full, clear, and detailed truth (cf. *Od.* XVII, 106: "tell me σάφα of the return of thy father"). On occasion it serves to characterize not what is known but rather the manner in which something is known, and designates a knowing that is sure, certain or expert (cf. *Il.* XV, 632: "unskilled (οὐ σάφα εἰδώς) to fight a wild beast"; *Il.* XX 201 = 432: "I know well of myself (σάφα οἶδα καὶ αὐτὸς) how to utter taunts"; *Il.* VII, 226: "Hector, now verily shalt thou know of a surety (σάφα εἴσεαι) man to man what manner of chieftans there be among the Danaans"). It is such certain knowledge that is claimed by Pulydamas (*Il.* XII, 228 ff.: "on this wise would a soothsayer interpret, one that in his mind had clear knowledge (σάφα θυμῷ εἰδείη) of omens, and to whom the folk gave ear"), Athene, disguised as Mentis, speaks to Telemachus (*Od.* I, 200 ff.): I will now prophesy to thee as the immortals put it in my heart, and as I think it shall be brought to pass (τελέεσθαι), though I am in no wise a soothsayer (μάντις), nor one versed in the signs of birds (οἰωνῶν σάφα εἰδώς). Although Athene is not portrayed as claiming to be σάφα εἰδώς in such matters (indeed any claim of prophetic wisdom would be at odds with her disguise in purely mortal form), the fact that she

claims to be neither a prophet nor one skilled in signs of birds indicates that such skill is typically claimed by the prophet.<sup>34</sup> Thus when Xenophanes asserts in B34 that no man has seen or known τὸ σαφές it is quite possible that he had in mind a sure or certain knowledge of this sort. Since lines 3-4 concede that someone might succeed in saying what comes to pass, it is unlikely that Xenophanes wishes to deny that men sometimes attain truth. Since these lines serve as Xenophanes' reason (γάρ) for denying that men apprehend what is σαφές, or in a manner which is σαφές,<sup>35</sup> it is likely that he intends to deny that men ever enjoy sure or certain knowledge of the truth, even if they do sometimes succeed in saying it (and can, as in line 4, believe or suppose that it is true).

It is now possible, I believe, to see Xenophanes' remarks as a reflection of, and in part as a reaction against, some basic ways of thinking that were embedded in archaic poetry and religion. While adopting the traditional contrast between human and divine capacities, especially the capacity to know, he rejected the belief that this gulf is bridged by the intervention of divine beings in mortal form, or that the gods somehow speak to men through signs or inspired prophets. Xenophanes' repudiation of divination was probably based on his own positive theology and his de-anthropomorphized cosmology, and is one facet of his attack on the religion of Homer and Hesiod. He denied that men who correctly predict events thereby possess knowledge, and this repudiation of knowledge by divination seems to have led him to adopt a general scepticism about the capacity of mere mortals to attain sure or certain knowledge about the gods and everything else of which Xenophanes speaks.

But there is a remaining problem. The inference is monumentally fallacious: diviners who claim to know the future really do not know, therefore no man has had certain knowledge of the truth nor will there ever be anyone who has knowledge about the gods and everything else of which I speak. How could Xenophanes have reached a general sceptical position simply from the failure of *some* men to know *some* things?

#### IV – THE GROUNDS FOR XENOPHANES' SCEPTICISM

Since σαφήνειαν was thought to be possessed by the gods alone (as in Alcmaeon B1), it might be argued that B34 does not reject the possibility of *all* human knowledge, but simply asserts that no man ever enjoys the clear and certain knowledge, possessed by the gods, especially the one god who is greatest above gods and men. If so, then the failure of seers and oracles to gain knowledge even when they speak truly, could be viewed as a reason-



able basis on which to doubt that any man ever shares in the synoptic and certain knowledge of the gods. So the argument is not: since some men don't know some things, no one knows anything, but rather: since those who could be most expected to share in the knowledge of the gods fail to do so, then no man ever does so (even if they can acquire knowledge by their own inquiry).

This proposal has some merit, but it falls short of being a convincing account, for reasons that became clear in our discussion of earlier attempts to restrict the scope of Xenophanes' scepticism: while line 1 denies knowledge of what is *σφέες*, line 2 denies knowledge (without specification of type) of the gods and everything else of which he speaks; line 4 asserts only that belief or seeming is allotted to all things, and B18 does not say that men acquire *knowledge* through their own seeking. It is simply unreasonable to think that a man who says *no* man knew or will know with respect to *everything*, and that belief or seeming is assigned to *everything* means to say implicitly that some men do know something. The proposal must be rejected. What is useful however in this first attempt to mitigate the fallaciousness of Xenophanes' inference is its recognition of seers and oracles as paradigms of a sort: they, if anyone, could be expected to share in the knowledge of the gods.<sup>36</sup> To complete the account, we must explain how, in two different respects, Xenophanes argues for a general sceptical thesis on the grounds that since the conditions necessary for knowledge are not met even in the most promising or favorable circumstances, they are never satisfied.

The first paradigm is referred to in line 3 of B34 — even if someone should succeed above others in saying what is brought to pass, still he does not know. What must be remembered is the rather obvious point that the most favorable or promising case that could be made for the art of divination is its track record, i.e. a citation of instances where the predictions made by seers and oracles turned out to be right. This was in fact the kind of 'proof' supplied on occasion by those who claim to possess prophetic powers.<sup>37</sup> Thus, although *μαντική* is not explicitly mentioned in line 3, Xenophanes is challenging what is in fact the most favorable case to be made for knowledge through divination, and claiming that even when someone succeeds in saying truly what comes to pass, he still does not know. His reason for this claim is not stated but as I have already suggested, it is likely tied to his own conception of the gods and his alternative naturalistic explanation of omens and portents of various sorts. Since divination does not supply knowledge, given even the most favorable outcome, it can be reasonably concluded that we cannot acquire knowl-

edge by means of its techniques.

It should also be noted that while foreknowledge was perhaps the most characteristic claim of the diviner, and successful prediction its strongest support, divination was by no means confined to the future. The most famous seer in Homer, Calchas, is described as "the best of diviners who knows things that were, and were to be, and that had been before" (*Il.* I, 70). We do not generally know the sorts of questions put to the famous oracles at Delphi and elsewhere, but the leaden tablets excavated at Dodona display a variety of topics on which the oracle was consulted. These include questions about the past and present, as well as the future.<sup>38</sup> Epimenides, who received Xenophanes' rebuke, is described by Aristotle as one "who did not practise divination about the future, only about the obscurities of the past" (*Rhet.*, 1418 a 21 ff.). Thus, a repudiation of *μαντική* would result not only in a scepticism about the diviner's capacity to know the future, but an equal scepticism about their capacity to penetrate the obscurities of the present and past.

But why would it follow from the failure of these men to know anything, that no man has known or will know anything? The answer lies in the status of seers and oracles as paradigm cases, and in the background assumptions about knowledge which were well established in the poetic tradition both preceding and enduring after Xenophanes' time. Part of this background has been already stated: 'men could have no certain knowledge, that was reserved for God'. What needs to be added is only, as Guthrie puts it, "a commonplace of poetry, expressed in invocastions to the muses and elsewhere, that mankind had no sure knowledge unless the gods chose to reveal it."<sup>39</sup> This conception of knowledge through divine revelation or inspiration is explicit in Homer (e.g. in the introduction to the Catalogue of Ships at *Il.* II, 484-493: the gods know everything and mortals know nothing unless the gods choose to reveal it) and Hesiod (*Theogony*, 26 ff.), and it occurs in the writings of later philosophers. Parmenides presents his way of truth as a revelation from "the goddess who leads the man who knows through every town" and Parmenides "will learn all things" even though "there is no truth in the beliefs of mortals" (*D-K* B1). Empedocles also dismisses the claims of mere mortals to have comprehended the truth (*D-K* B2), but he invokes the muse to lead him on to the heights of wisdom (*D-K* B3). Not uncharacteristically, Empedocles linked his special insight with the attainment of semi-divine status (*D-K* B112). In short, given the 'poetic epistemology' of Xenophanes' time, the attainment of certain knowledge requires either an ascent of mortals to the level of the gods or a descent of the gods into human affairs, and Xenophanes denies that either of these



ever occurs. The first of these is made clear by Xenophanes' refusal to think that someone could be both mortal and immortal (cf. A13: if they are gods, do not lament for them, if they are men, do not sacrifice to them), and the second possibility is ruled out as 'unfitting' for the true divinity. If one views certain knowledge as the prerogative of the gods, and makes, as Fränkel puts it, "the chasm between the here and the beyond unbridgeable" (*ibid.*, p. 130), a scepticism concerning human knowledge becomes logically inescapable.

Given these assumptions, B34 becomes clear and coherent: mankind has no certain knowledge unless the gods impart it to us, or some men succeed in attaining the status of the gods. But the gods do not come among us and they do not speak to us either in their own voices or through signs and oracles. Those who might be most thought to enjoy revealed knowledge of the truth do not do so, for even if they succeed above others in saying what comes to pass, still they do not know, and belief is allotted to all things. So the certain truth no man has seen nor will there ever be anyone who has knowledge about the gods and everything else of which I speak.

I have argued that a clear, consistent, and coherent interpretation of Xenophanes' scepticism can be provided by attending to the religious and poetic tradition in which he stood, and we can now also gain a more realistic appreciation of his achievements. His scepticism is not likely to appeal to contemporary philosophers; it rests on assumptions about knowledge and divine revelation which are no longer widely believed, and it is closely tied to aspects of Homer's religion which are now mainly of historical interest. Nor can he, without exaggeration, enjoy the status of being an early proponent of the theories of later Greek sceptics or modern philosophical views of the nature and growth of scientific knowledge. There are similarities between his sceptical thesis and the conclusions of the later sceptics, but the grounds for his scepticism are very different from theirs, and there is no good reason to think that he espoused Popper's 'principle of rational knowledge'.

What is noteworthy in Xenophanes' thought is his articulation of the contrast between belief and knowledge, and his contention that whatever truth is to be gained must come as a result of human initiative and inquiry. While he remained too much a traditionalist to think that this could result in certain knowledge, for that was reserved for the gods, he did believe that men could discover what resembled the truth, or what was at least likely to be true. None of this, it seems to me, constitutes the emergence of a 'robust empiricism'. But Xenophanes' call for investigation, his repudiation of divination, and his related demythologized cosmology, constitute a

departure from earlier ways of thinking that is justly thought of as revolutionary.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Except where noted to the contrary, the Greek text of the fragments is taken from Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th edition rev. W. Kranz, 3 vols (Berlin 1952). Hereafter cited as *D-K*. Selections from Xenophanes are cited by number and letter (A: *Leben und Lehre*, B: *Fragmente*).

<sup>2</sup> It is quoted by Sextus Empiricus in this form on three occasions (*Adv. Math.* VII, 49, 110; VIII, 326, and *dókos δ' ἐπι πᾶσι τέτυκται* is quoted at *Pyrrh. Hyp.* II, 18). Plutarch has γένετ' for ἔθεν in the first line, but this has been rejected in *D-K*, following Fränkel's argument in "Xenophanesstudien", *Hermes* 60 (1925) since γένετ' requires a separation of τὸ σαφές from εἰδὼς that is impossible in genuine Archaic style. Further textual sources are listed in Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge U. P., 1967), Vol. I, 395. Fränkel's paper has been translated by M. R. Cosgrove and A. P. D. Mourelatos and included in the latter's *The Pre-Socratics: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York, 1974), pp. 118-131. Subsequent references to Fränkel are to this translation of his paper.

<sup>3</sup> According to Diogenes Laertius (*Lives* IX, 20), "Sotion says that he was the first to maintain that all things are incognizable, but Sotn is in error" (Hicks trans.).

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Fränkel: "σαφές unites the notion of completeness . . . with that of reliable, faithful, and unadulterated apprehending" (*ibid.*, p. 127). A fuller discussion appears later in this paper (Section III).

<sup>5</sup> *D-K* A24 (Arius Didymus in Stobaeus, *Ecl.* II, 1, 17) ὡς ἄρα θεὸς μὲν οἶδε τὴν ἀλήθειαν, δόκος δ' ἐπι πᾶσι τέτυκται, and Varro in Augustine, *De Civ. Dei* 7, 17: *hominis est enim haec opinari, Dei scire*.

<sup>6</sup> *D-K* 24B1: *περὶ τῶν ἀφανέων, περὶ τῶν θνητῶν σαφήνεια μὲν θεοὶ ἔχουσι, ὡς δὲ ἀνθρώποις τεκμαίρεσθαι*. The text is not certain. While a contrast between divine knowledge and mortal conjecture is clear, it might be read with equal sense, "concerning the non-evident, the gods have a clear understanding, concerning things mortal, men merely conjecture from signs", or perhaps "concerning things mortal, the gods have a clear understanding, concerning things non-evident, men merely conjecture from signs."

<sup>7</sup> Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, trans. T. G. Rosenmeyer (Oxford & Boston, 1953), esp. Ch. 7 "Human Knowledge and Divine Knowledge Among the Early Greeks". See, for example, the prelude to the 'catalogue of ships' in the *Iliad*: "for you are goddesses, you are at hand and know all things, but we hear only a rumor and know nothing" (485-486); Theognis, *Elegiac Poems* (141-2): "we men practise vain things, knowing nought, while the gods accomplish all to their mind." For further examples, see Guthrie, pp. 398-399. This contrast, coupled with a conception of λόγος as human contrivance, forms the basis for Untersteiner's view of B34 (cf. Mario Untersteiner, *Senofane* (Firenze, 1967), esp. pp. ccix-ccxxvi).

<sup>8</sup> *Studies in Presocratic Philosophy*, ed. D. J. Furley and R. E. Allen (London, 1970), 152. Popper's paper appeared originally in *P.A.S. (N. S.)* 59 (1958-59); a similar account is given in his *Conjectures and Refutations* (London, 1963).

<sup>9</sup> To make Popper's thesis even remotely plausible, we must read τετελεσμένον εἰπῶν in B34, as 'saying the final or complete truth', but (as will be developed in detail later) τετελεσμένον has an ordinary sense of that which is completed, made actual, or brought

about, and perhaps also, following Fränkel, that which is real or present. In neither case can τετελεσμένον εἰπών be taken as 'saying that which is the complete or final explanation or theory'.

<sup>10</sup> Even so, Aristotle's view is that knowledge is gained not through the refutation of previous conjectures, but, so far as possible, their confirmation. Just prior to the discussion of incontinence Aristotle states, "Here as in other cases we must set down the phenomena and begin by considering the difficulties, and so go on to vindicate if possible all the common conceptions about these states of mind, or at any rate most of them and the most important" (*NE VII 1 1145 b 2-6*). We are indebted to G. E. L. Owen's "Tithenai ta Phainomena" (in *Aristote et les problèmes de la methode*, Louvain, 1961) for an appreciation of the extent to which *phainomena* means not 'the observed facts', but "common conceptions" (ἐνδοξα).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152. Snell (*ibid.*) also assumes that what men discover is knowledge, and, though he seems not to realize it, this makes his characterization of Xenophanes' doctrine dangerously close to an explicit inconsistency. He attributes the following views to Xenophanes "human knowledge is in its essence deceptive" (p. 139), "only apparent knowledge" (p. 140), "fallacious" (p. 141), and "men acquire knowledge through their own striving (p. 140), "man's own initiative, his industry and zeal, become crucial for the acquisition of knowledge" (p. 140), "knowledge consists of the data gained from inquiry and search" (p. 140). I find his one attempt to reconcile these two positions exceptionally opaque "knowledge as such is obscure, but it is illumined by searching" (p. 140).

<sup>12</sup> See for example, Lehrer's "Why Not Scepticism?" *Philosophical Forum 2* (1971), 283-98.

<sup>13</sup> I do not think we can exclude the possibility of ἴδεν beng a kind of 'mental seeing'. Homer had already spoken of 'mental seeing' (ἰδέσθαι ἐν φρεσίν) and what is σαφές (clear, certain, true) is more naturally thought of as propositions, accounts, stories, rather than the objects of sense perception.

<sup>14</sup> It is at least worth noting that εἰδέναι, although etymologically connected with verbs of seeing, had already by the time of Homer acquired a broader sense in which one could consistently say, "I know (οἶδα) even though I have not seen". The following passage is from Bk. XX of the *Iliad*, 203 ff.

... we know (οἶμεν) each other's parents and lineage, for we have heard tales told in olden days by mortal men, but with sight of eyes hast thou never seen [known] my parents nor I thine (ὄψει δ' οὐρ' ἴδες) (Murray trans.).

Cf. also, Heitsch, "Das Wissen des Xenophanes", *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie 109* (1966) 193-235, and *Iliad VI*, 150; Hesiod, *Theogony 53-62, 915-17*.

<sup>15</sup> Fränkel's later paraphrase indicates that he does not adhere to his early translation ("and what is precise no man has seen") and adopts the expansion I have suggested: "τὸ μὲν σαφές ἄνθρωπος οὐδεὶς γνοίη ἂν πάντων γε πραγμάτων περὶ: a reliable knowledge with respect to all of the objects spoken of here, particularly concerning the gods, is not possible for men" (p. 128).

<sup>16</sup> Charles H. Kahn, *Anaximander and the Origins of Greek Cosmology* (New York, 1960), p. 134.

<sup>17</sup> Plato tells the story of Epimenides' visit to Athens and his prophecy about the Persian invasion (*Laws*, 642d-e, see also the *O. C. D.*, p. 331). Aristotle also refers to him as a seer at *Rhet.* 1418 a 21 ff.

<sup>18</sup> "Ξενοφάνης καὶ Ἐπίκουρος ἀναιροῦσι τὴν μαντικὴν," Aetius, *Placita*, V, 1, 1 (*D-K A52*).

<sup>19</sup> "Of these — to mention the most ancient — Xenophanes of Colophon, while asserting

the existence of gods, was the only one who repudiated divination in its entirety (*divinationem funditus sustulit*)", Cicero, *De Divinatione*, Falconer trans. (Loeb), I, iii, 5.

<sup>20</sup> The most detailed and comprehensive study of Greek divination is still Bouché-Leclercq, *Histoire de la Divination dans l'Antiquité*, 3 Vols. (Paris, 1879-82). His discussion of Xenophanes (Vol. I, 33-34) treats the attack on divination as a consequence of Xenophanes' conception of god's majesty, and influential primarily in the Sicilian comedians' (Aristoxenes, Epicharmus) attacks on *les devins de carrefour*. Other valuable accounts of the extraordinary techniques employed by professional and amateur seers are provided by W. R. Halliday, *Greek Divination* (Chicago, 1913); R. Flacelière, *Greek Oracles*, D. Garman trans. (New York, 1965); and M. P. Nilsson, *Greek Folk Religion* (New York, 1948), esp. "Seers and Oracles", pp. 121-139.

<sup>21</sup> Nilsson, *ibid.*, 136. Sophocles expresses a scepticism about divination (*O.T.*, 499-512) which closely parallels what I think is Xenophanes' thesis: the gods have perfect knowledge, but there is no sure test (κρίσις ἀληθείης) that a mortal seer (μάντις) attains knowledge even if he excels above others in his skill of interpreting omens (σοφία). Cf. the summary by J. C. Kamerbeek, "The contrast between divine and human knowledge μὲν — δέ] explains their scepticism as to the truth of Teiresias' words, based on their faith in Oedipus." (*The Plays of Sophocles* (Leiden, 1967), p. 120.). The summary statement of 499-512 given above is based on the translation by Richard Jebb, *Sophocles, The Plays and Fragments* (Amsterdam, 1966).

<sup>22</sup> @ E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1951), p. 196, n. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Nilsson, *ibid.*, p. 92, 121.

<sup>24</sup> Flacelière, *ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Flacelière, *ibid.*, "Divination by Signs". Xenophanes is said to have visited Etna and commented on the periodic frequency of volcanic eruptions (Aristotle, *De Mirab.*, 833 a 15). We are also told, though the reason is not given, that Xenophanes disapproved of dice (A16). These fragments are however not obviously related to his attack on divination.

<sup>26</sup> Epicurus' naturalistic explanations of celestial phenomena consistently follow those given by Xenophanes, though he is not mentioned by name: "the rising and setting of the sun, moon, and stars may be due to kindling and quenching (ἀναψω καὶ σβέσω)"; or it may be due to "their coming forward above the earth or by its intervention"; eclipse of the sun may be due to the quenching of its light (κατὰ σβέσω); lightning may be due to the motion of atoms in the clouds; comets are due to fires in the heavens, etc. (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, X, 91-93, 96-98, 101, 111). While Epicurus concedes that the facts allow for a plurality of explanations, he insists that the exclusion of myth is a necessary condition (μόνον ὁ μῦθος ἀπέστω) for understanding and peace of mind (103).

<sup>27</sup> Letter to Herodotus in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, X, 76. Following Epicurus, Lucretius attacks religious superstition on the basis of alternative physical explanations of the motions of heavenly bodies, eclipses, lightning, clouds, rain, volcanic eruptions, the seasons, plagues, rainbows, etc. (*De Rerum Natura*, V, VI).

<sup>28</sup> Fränkel, *ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>29</sup> At one point Fränkel translates τετελεσμένον εἰπών as "saying something which turns out to be true", but he later discards this in favor of 'articulating what is really present' (*ibid.*, 126-127). Guthrie (*ibid.*, 395, n. 4) characterizes τετελεσμένον as 'a typically Homeric word' but does not indicate what it typically means in Homer.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. R. J. Cunliffe, *A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect* (1924), 337. A great many more

examples could be provided by broadening the criterion to include variant verbs for 'speaking' (e.g. ἀγορεύω – to speak publicly) and other forms of τελέω (e.g. the prediction of Calchas at *Il.* II, 330).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. the predictions of Melantheus (*Od.* XVII, 299), Antinous (*Od.* XVIII, 82), Odysseus (*Od.* XIX, 547).

<sup>32</sup> Seers and oracles are of course the paradigm cases, but the description could refer to anyone who succeeds in correctly predicting the future. According to Diogenes Laertius (*Lives*, I, 23) Xenophanes admired Thales for his ability to predict eclipses and set the solstices. B. L. van der Waerden (following an explanation given by M. Schramm) accounts for Thales' prediction by pointing out that Thales predicted only that an eclipse would occur in a certain year (Herodotus, I, 74) and, given enough background information about preceding lunar and solar eclipses, it was possible to discover that in some years solar eclipses were likely to occur (*Science Awakening II: The Birth of Astronomy* (New York, 1974), pp. 120-122). Xenophanes' admiration for Thales (assuming the accuracy of the story) need not be at odds with his scepticism about divination, since he may have credited Thales with 'skill in conjecture', not knowledge. Euripides adopts this position when he says that "the good prophet is the man skilled in conjecture" (*Hel.*, 744-757), Plato credits the oracles and prophets with 'well-aimed conjecture' (εὐδοξία) but insists that this is still only true opinion, not knowledge (*Meno*, 99c).

<sup>33</sup> In Book II of the *Odyssey*, Eurymachus tells the prophet Halitherses to go home and prophesy to his children, for 'many are the birds who under the sun's rays wander; not all of them mean anything' (181-2), "Nor do we care for any prophecy (θεσποπίης), which you, old sir, may tell us, which will not happen, and will make you even more hated" (μυθῆαι ἀκράαντον, ἀπεχθάνεαι δ' ἔτι μᾶλλον, 202). See also Hector's scorn for the prophecy from birds given by Pulydamas (*Il.* XII, 228ff.: "one bird only is best, one omen – to fight for our country"). Aristophanes was later to ridicule the soothsayers in *The Knights* and *The Birds*. Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* contains occasional sceptical remarks about the reliability and legitimacy of prophecy (lines 500-515) but since Teiresias' prediction is ultimately confirmed, one cannot suppose that Sophocles' intention was to undermine confidence in divination. Divination was not repudiated by either Plato or Aristotle; at least not in all its forms, and it was defended by the Stoics. The most extensive criticism among later philosophers was provided by the Epicureans, as can be seen in the remarks of the Epicurean Boethos in Plutarch's dialogue, *On the Pythian Oracles*: "... the Sibyls and Bakis have foretold every sort of event and misfortune: if it so happens that a number of them have come to pass, nonetheless at the time they were uttered their prophecies were lies, even if fortuitous circumstances should eventually appear to make them true." Quoted in Flaceliere, *ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>34</sup> So characteristic in fact that it becomes natural to speak of the prophets themselves as σαφής – sure or unerring (cf. Liddell and Scott: σαφής; for example, the description of Teiresias in Sophocles' *Oed. Rex*, 286: σαφέστατα).

<sup>35</sup> The syntax of σαφές (direct object of ἴδεν, accusative of respect, or adverbial accusative) is unclear, but I do not see that a reasonable interpretation of the fragment presupposes a definitive answer. What is σαφές may be what is not known, or it may be the respect in which one does not know, or the manner in which one does not know. The important point is that σαφές, ἴδεν and εἰδώς in lines 1-2 are set in clear contrast (μὲν – δέ) with δόκος in line 4. Denniston cites this fragment as an example of an οὖν (in τὸ μὲν οὖν σαφές) emphasizing a prospective μὲν (*The Greek Particles* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 473). This contrast makes it unlikely that τὸ σαφές functions as an

independent sentence as, for example in Cleve's: "and this is sure by all means" (*The Giants of Pre-Sophistic Philosophy*, p. 28).

<sup>36</sup> The great importance of seers and oracles in both public and private affairs is perhaps sufficiently well known to need no further argument. One need only point to the great popularity of the traditional oracles at Delphi, Dodona, and Claros (near Colophon), and according to Herodotus, the incessant use made of seers in military matters as the clearest evidence of the exalted position which they enjoyed. The major role played by diviners in Greek religion is explained in detail by Nilsson, *ibid.*, 123-139.

<sup>37</sup> In Book II of the *Odyssey*, Halitherses predicts the fate that is to befall Penelope's suitors, and then argues:

"I who foretell this am not untried, I know what I am saying. Concerning him, I say that everything was accomplished in the way I said it would be at the time the Argives took ship for Ilium, and with them went resourceful Odysseus. I said that after much suffering, with all his companions lost, in the twentieth year, not recognized by any, he would come home. And now all this is being accomplished (νῦν πάντα τελεῖται)." (170-176, Lattimore trans.).

A similar defense is offered by Euthyphro, the self-proclaimed theological expert in Plato's *Euthyphro* (3c), when he complains of his reception in the assembly: "When I tell them in advance what will occur they laugh at me, and yet I have never made a prediction that did not come true."

<sup>38</sup> Included among those questions recorded were these: whether a man's wife will bear him a child, whether the child which his wife is carrying is actually his, whether a man will do well by breeding sheep, and, my favorite, "Agis asks Zeus Naios and Dione whether he lost the blankets and pillows himself or whether they were stolen by someone outside the household." For other examples see C. Carapinos, *Dodone et ses ruines* (Paris, 1878) 68 ff., and the *Bulletin de Corr. Hell.*, 83 (1959) 669-73.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 398. It has been thought that Xenophanes rejected the view that mortals derive their knowledge from the gods, and held instead that men gain knowledge through their own inquiry (Snell, *ibid.*, 139-144; John Robinson, *An Introduction to Early Greek Philosophy* New York, 1968, pp. 55-56). But this is not implied by the fragments. Xenophanes denies that the gods revealed all things to mortals from the beginning and he repudiates divination, but he nowhere rejects the assumption that if knowledge is to be attained at all by mortals, it must come by divine revelation. What man can discover through seeking is 'the better' (B18) which can easily be the δόκος of B34, and which may resemble or be similar to what is true (B35). One relevant fragment on this issue is the tantalizingly brief B36: ὀπίσσω δὲ θητοῖσι πεφύρασιν εἰσοράσθαι, "as many as they have revealed to mortals to look upon." But it does not say anything about knowledge. The major obstacle in the path of thinking that Xenophanes espouses knowledge gained through inquiry is one of consistency. Like Snell, Robinson seems untroubled by attributing to Xenophanes the following: "only through patient inquiry does the truth come to be known" and "the truth itself is known only to god" (*ibid.*, p. 56).

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