

Xenophanes of Colophon

ΞΕΝΟΦΑΝΗΣ

Xenophanes
tr. Arthur Fairbanks (1898)

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The wandering rhapsode and founder of the Eleatic school (c. 570 – c. 478 BCE). His surviving fragments preserve the earliest sustained Greek critique of anthropomorphic religion — if oxen and lions had hands, they would paint their gods like oxen and lions — and the first articulation of a single god “supreme among gods and men, not like mortals in body or in mind.” He is also the first known Greek skeptic of knowledge itself: even when a man chances upon the truth, he says, he does not know that he knows it. Translated by Arthur Fairbanks, *The First Philosophers of Greece* (London: Kegan Paul, 1898).

I. Xenophanes: The Eleatic School

XENOPHANES of Kolophon, son of Dexias (Apollodoros says of Orthomenes), was the founder of the Eleatic School. After a careful review of the evidence, Zeller (*Yorsokr. Phil.* pp. 521-522) concludes that he was born about 580 B.C.; it is agreed by all writers that he lived to a great age. The stories of his travels and adventures are very numerous. He speaks of the war between the Ionic colonies and the Persians as beginning in his youth. According to Diogenes he sang the founding of Elea in 2,000 hexameter verses. The reference to him by Herakleitos (Fr. 16) indicates the general respect for his philosophy. He composed poetry of all varieties, and is said to have recited his own poems. His philosophic views were embodied in a poem which was early lost, and to which later ages gave the name 'περὶ φύσεως.'

II. The Fragments

God is one, supreme among gods and men, and not like mortals in body or in mind.

The whole [of god] sees, the whole perceives, the whole hears.

But without effort he sets in motion all things by mind and thought.

It [i.e. being] always abides in the same place, not moved at all, nor is it fitting that it should move from one place to another.

But mortals suppose that the gods are born (as they themselves are), and that they wear man's clothing and have human voice and body.

But if cattle or lions had hands, so as to paint with their hands and produce works of art as men do, they would paint their gods and give them bodies in form like their own—horses like horses, cattle like cattle.

Homer and Hesiod attributed to the gods all things which are disreputable and worthy of blame when done by men; and they told of them many lawless deeds, stealing, adultery, and deception of each other.

For all things come from earth, and all things end by becoming earth.

For we are all sprung from earth and water.

All things that come into being and grow are earth and water.

The sea is the source of water and the source of wind; for neither would blasts of wind arise in the clouds and blow out from within them, except for the great sea, nor would the streams of rivers nor the rain-water in the sky exist but for the sea; but the great sea is the begetter of clouds and winds and rivers.

This upper limit of earth at our feet is visible and †touches the air,† but below it reaches to infinity.

She whom men call Iris (rainbow), this also is by nature cloud, violet and red and pale green to behold.

Accordingly there has not been a man, nor will there be, who knows distinctly what I say about the gods or in regard to all things, for even if one chances for the most part to say what is true, still he would not know; but every one thinks he knows.

These things have seemed to me to resemble the truth.

In the beginning the gods did not at all reveal all things clearly to mortals, but by searching men in the course of time find them out better.

The following are fit topics for conversation for men reclining on a soft couch by the fire in the winter season, when after a meal they are drinking sweet wine and eating a little pulse: Who are you, and what is your family? What is your age, my friend? How old were you when the Medes invaded this land?

Now, however, I come to another topic, and I will show the way. . . . They say that once on a time when a hound was badly treated a passer-by pitied him and said, 'Stop beating him, for it is the soul of a dear friend; I recognised him on hearing his voice.'

But if one wins a victory by swiftness of foot, or in the pentathlon, where the grove of Zeus lies by Pisas' stream at Olympia, or as a wrestler, or in painful boxing or in that severe contest called the pancration, he would be more glorious in the eyes of the citizens, he would win a front seat at assemblies, and would be entertained by the city at the public table, and he would receive a gift which would be a keepsake for him. If he won by means of horses he would get all these things although he did not deserve them, as I deserve them, for our wisdom is better than the strength of men or of horses. This is indeed a very wrong custom, nor is it right to prefer strength to excellent wisdom. For if there should be in the city a man good at boxing, or in the pentathlon, or in wrestling, or in swiftness of foot, which is

honoured more than strength (among the contests men enter into at the games), the city would not on that account be any better governed. Small joy would it be to any city in this case if a citizen conquers at the games on the banks of the Pisas, for this does not fill with wealth its secret chambers.

Having learned profitless luxuries from the Lydians, while as yet they had no experience of hateful tyranny, they proceeded into the market-place, no less than a thousand in number all told, with purple garments completely covering them, boastful, proud of their comely locks, anointed with unguents of rich perfume.

For now the floor is clean, the hands of all and the cups are clean; one puts on the woven garlands, another passes around the fragrant ointment in a vase; the mixing bowl stands full of good cheer, and more wine, mild and of delicate bouquet, is at hand in jars, which says it will never fail. In the midst frankincense sends forth its sacred fragrance, and there is water, cold, and sweet, and pure; the yellow loaves are near at hand, and the table of honour is loaded with cheese and rich honey. The altar in the midst is thickly covered with flowers on every side; singing and mirth fill the house. Men making merry should first hymn the god with propitious stanzas and pure words; and when they have poured out libations and prayed for power to do the right (since this lies nearest at hand), then it is no unfitting thing to drink as much as will not prevent your walking home without a slave, if you are not very old. And one ought to praise that man who, when he has drunk, unfolds noble things as his memory and his toil for virtue suggest; but there is nothing praiseworthy in discussing battles of Titans or of Giants or Centaurs, fictions of former ages, nor in plotting violent revolutions. But it is good always to pay careful respect to the gods.

For sending the thigh-bone of a goat, thou didst receive the rich leg of a fatted bull, an honourable present to a man, the fame whereof shall come to all Greece, and shall not cease so long as there is a race of Greek bards.

Nor would any one first pour the wine into the cup to mix it, but water first and the wine above it.

Already now sixty-seven years my thoughts have been tossed restlessly up and down Greece, but then it was twenty and five years from my birth, if I know how to speak the truth about these things.

Nor is this (an oath) an equal demand to make of an impious man as compared with a pious man.

Much more feeble than an aged man.

Bacchic wands of fir stand about the firmly built house.

From the beginning, according to Homer, since all have learned them.

If the god had not made light-coloured honey, I should have said that a fig was far sweeter.

Holy water trickles down in thy grottoes.

As many things as they have made plain for mortals to see!

III. Sayings of Xenophanes

Arist. Rhet. ii. 23; 1399 b 6 (Karsten, Fr. 34). Xenophanes asserts that those who say the gods are born are as impious as those who say that they die; for in both cases it amounts to this, that the gods do not exist at all.

Ibid. 1400 b 5 (K. 35). When the inhabitants of Elea asked Xenophanes whether they should sacrifice to Leukothea and sing a dirge or not, he advised them not to sing a dirge if they thought her divine, and if they thought her human not to sacrifice to her.

Plutarch, de vit. pud. p. 530 F (K. 36). When Lasos, son of Hermiones, called that man a coward who was unwilling to play at dice with him, Xenophanes answered that he was very cowardly and without daring in regard to dishonourable things.

Diog. Laer. ix. 20 (K. 37). When Empedokles said to him (Xenophanes) that the wise man was not to be found, he answered: Naturally, for it would take a wise man to recognise a wise man.

Plut. de comm. not. p. 1084 E (K. 38). Xenophanes, when some one told him that he had seen eels living in hot water, said: Then we will boil them in cold water.

Diog. Laer. ix. 19 (K. 39). 'Have intercourse with tyrants either as little as possible, or as agreeably as possible.'

Clem. Al. Strom. vii. p. 841. And Greeks suppose the gods to be like men in their passions as well as in their forms; and accordingly they represent them, each race in forms like their own, in the words of Xenophanes: Ethiopians make their gods black and snub-nosed, Thracians red-haired and with blue eyes; so also they conceive the spirits of the gods to be like themselves.

A. Gellius, Noct. Att. iii. 11 (K. 31). Some writers have stated that Homer antedated Hesiod, and among these were Philochoros and Xenophanes of Kolophon; others assert that he was later than Hesiod.