

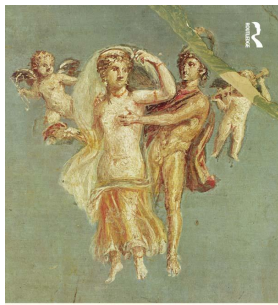
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On: 05 Dec 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

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ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION
EDITED BY GRAHAM OPPY AND N. N. TRAKAKIS
THE HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Ancient Philosophy of Religion

Graham Oppy, N. N. Trakakis

Xenophanes

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315729633.ch3>

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Published online on: 31 Jul 2013

How to cite :- James H. Leshner. 31 Jul 2013, *Xenophanes from: Ancient Philosophy of Religion*
Routledge

Accessed on: 05 Dec 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315729633.ch3>

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3

XENOPHANES

James H. Lesher

Xenophanes was a poet and singer of epic verse who lived in various parts of the Greek world during the late sixth and early fifth centuries BCE. A number of the surviving fragments of his poetry touch on the usual subjects of Greek sympotic verse: on proper conduct at symposia (21 B 1, 5, 22 DK [= Diels & Kranz 1951–2]), the measures of personal excellence (B 2, 3) and aspects of his life and interactions with various notable individuals (B 6–8, 10, 19–21, 45). But in seven other fragments (B 27–33) Xenophanes follows the lead of the Milesian philosopher-scientists in describing a number of natural phenomena as products of a set of basic physical substances and processes. And in a series of remarks concerning the stories about the gods told by Homer and Hesiod (B 11–12), the true nature of the divine (B 23–6), and the tendency of believers to conceive of the gods as like themselves (B 14–16), Xenophanes explored, so far as we know for the first time, questions central to the philosophy of religion.

While a definitive interpretation of all aspects of Xenophanes' thinking may lie beyond reach, we can hope to develop plausible answers to at least four basic questions: (i) did Xenophanes espouse monotheism; (ii) on what basis did he repudiate anthropomorphism in religion, and did his own positive account of the divine avoid the errors he decried in the views of others; (iii) on what basis did he deny the possibility of knowledge concerning divine matters, and how in the light of that pessimistic assessment should we view his own account of the divine nature; and (iv) how did he understand the relationship between god and the cosmos?

XENOPHANES' MONOTHEISM

The case for crediting Xenophanes with monotheism comprises three main bodies of evidence and reasoning: (i) the view of the divine he presented in fragments B 23–6; (ii) the views about god and nature expressed or implied in his other poems; and (iii) the series of ancient testimonials that credit him with the view

that ‘god is one’. Determining the probative value of these materials requires an assessment of the relevant evidence as well as some specification of the kind of monotheism being considered.¹

In fragment B 23 (on one common translation) Xenophanes speaks of: “One god, greatest (*heis theos ... megistos*) among gods and human beings, / Not at all like mortals in either body or thought ...”. This characterization of the divine as unlike mortals in bodily form squares with the (apparently critical) sentiment expressed in B 14 – “But mortals suppose that gods are born, / Wear their own clothes, and have a voice and a body” – while the claim that god is unlike mortals in thought squares with the contents of B 24 – “Whole he sees, whole he thinks, and whole he hears” – as well as with the striking description of a telekinetic deity in B 25: “But completely without toil he shakes all things by the thought of his mind”. The attributes of a single, special god also appear to be the subject of B 26: “... always he abides in the same place, not moving at all, / Nor is it seemly for him to travel to different places at different times”. These remarks at least suggest that Xenophanes, perhaps uniquely among his contemporaries, affirmed the existence of a god who was in some sense ‘greatest’, capable of perceiving and thinking without the benefit of bodily organs, and able to effect change on a cosmic scale simply through the exercise of his mind. But should we conclude that Xenophanes was an ‘exclusive monotheist’, that is, that he held *both that one god exists and that there are no other gods of any kind or description*? Fragments B 23–6 clearly warrant crediting Xenophanes with a belief in the existence of one god who is in several respects the *greatest* of all, but they do not in any obvious way rule out the existence of other gods.

We might attempt to gain support for such a conclusion from other Xenophanean comments concerning the gods and various natural phenomena long regarded as rich in religious significance. A remark preserved in Eusebius’ *Preparation for the Gospel*, attributed (incorrectly) to Plutarch, says of Xenophanes that: “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 is in any way in need of any of them” (Ps.-Plutarch, *Miscellanies* 4). The Pseudo-Aristotelian treatise, *On Melissus, Xenophanes, Gorgias*, also dating from the beginning of the Common Era, similarly asserts: “And if god is the strongest of all things, he says that it is fitting for god to be one. For if there were two or more, he would no longer be the strongest and best of all things ... for this is what god and god’s nature is: to master and not to be mastered” (3.6.3). And while he does not mention Xenophanes by name, Euripides, ‘the philosopher of the stage’, may well have been following Xenophanes’ lead when he wrote in the *Heracles*: “But I do not think ... that one god is master over another. For god, if indeed he is truly a god, lacks nothing” (1341–6). These passages point back towards an original remark that might have run: “God, if he is truly god, cannot be mastered by

1. Except where noted, all translations of the Greek texts are my own.

another, nor can he be in need". And if we can imagine neither a hierarchy of gods nor a god whose existence depends on that of any other being, then we might wish to regard this as, in effect, the expression of an exclusive monotheism. In addition, in a series of fragments (B 30–32 DK) and testimonia (A 38–46) Xenophanes offers (or is reported to have offered) a set of entirely naturalistic explanations of phenomena long thought of as divinities, or the work of divinities (e.g. the sun, moon, stars, ocean, rainbows, meteors, lightning, St Elmo's fire, etc.). While these observations may not completely preclude a belief in subordinate deities of some description, they do appear to dispense with the usual subordinate deities of Greek popular religion.

A number of ancient writers, moreover, showed no reluctance in crediting Xenophanes with a belief in the existence of a single supreme being of some description. The character in Plato's *Sophist* known as 'The Eleatic Stranger' depicts Xenophanes as a pioneering 'monist' (one who holds that essentially only one thing exists): "our Eleatic tribe, which harkens back to Xenophanes as well as even earlier, relates its stories on the assumption that what are called 'all things' are really one" (242d). And Aristotle similarly reports:

But Xenophanes, the first of these to have been a 'one-ifier' (*henisas*) – for Parmenides is said to have been his pupil – made nothing completely clear, nor does he seem to have touched on the nature of these [attributes or causes], but with regard to the whole universe, he says that the one is the god [alternatively but less likely: that the god is the one – *to hen einai phēsi ton theon*]. (*Metaphysics* A.5, 986b21–5)

A number of later summaries of the views held by earlier thinkers are similar:

For this is what [he says] god is: one and the whole universe.
(Simplicius, A 31 DK)

He says also that god is eternal and one ... (Hippolytus, A 33)

[Xenophanes said that] all things are one, and this is unchanging, and is god ... (Cicero, A 34)

Xenophanes [believed] only that all things were one and that this was god ... (Pseudo-Galen, A 35)

It would not be completely unwarranted to view Parmenidean monism as the end product of a process of thought that had its beginnings in a Xenophanean belief in the existence of one and only one god.

Yet there is another side to the story: in B 23 Xenophanes did not unambiguously affirm the existence of only one god; elsewhere in his poetry he did not

speak of god as a exclusive monotheist might be expected to speak; and a number of considerations serve to *distance* Xenophanes' 'one god' from the Parmenidean 'One' rather than to unite them.

To begin with, while the crucial phrase *heis theos ... megistos* may be translated as "one god, greatest ...", thereby celebrating god's singularity as well as his greatness, it may with equal justice be translated as "one god is greatest" (with *heis* serving to strengthen the superlative, as in "*heis oiōnos aristos*", "one bird [of omen] is best" [*Iliad* 12.243]), thereby celebrating god's greatness, but *not* his singularity. And the reference to 'gods' in the plural (*theōn*) – in this very sentence ("greatest among gods and human beings") – is, at the least, surprising. We might be able to discount the significance of this reference to plural gods as an instance of the 'polar' style of expression characteristic of early Greek writers (meaning essentially "greatest among all sorts of beings"), or as a classic instance of a philosopher who was willing to 'speak with the vulgar' while simultaneously adopting a contrasting philosophical point of view. Yet we must still ask, as Michael Stokes (following Freudenthal) put it, "whether a convinced monotheist in an unreceptive polytheistic society would cloud the issue by a mention of plural gods which is at best ambiguous, in the very context where he is firmly stating his revolutionary view" (Stokes 1971: 76). The appearances of the plural form *theōn* in Xenophanes' B 1 and B 34 are also problematic, especially when in B 1 Xenophanes concludes his account of a high-spirited symposium with the sober reminder that "It is good always to hold the gods (*theōn*) in high regard". Unless we can somehow relegate this remark to a pre-monotheistic stage of Xenophanes' life and thought (which we have no basis for doing), we must acknowledge that the case for viewing Xenophanes as an exclusive monotheist, based on the fragments of his poetry that have come down to us, is more suggestive than definitive.

One might more plausibly hold that Xenophanes expressed the rudiments of a monotheistic view, or made a partial advance toward monotheism, or that one might be able to construct an exclusive monotheism by drawing out one or more logical consequences of the remarks he is reported to have made. Among these might be the lost verses ascribing maximal power and self-sufficiency to the divine, as well as the surviving fragments (B 30–32) and testimonia (A 38–46) that dispense with the various minor deities of Greek popular religion. Yet when we attempt to go beyond a claim of 'rudiments' or 'partial advance' we risk committing what Richard Robinson once called "misinterpretation by inference" (1953: 2): claiming that in so far as an author affirmed that *p*, and *p* implies that *q* (or *r* or *s* ...), then our author must also have believed that *q* (or *r* or *s* ...). No author, and no person for that matter, is properly credited with believing every proposition implied by the other things he or she believes.

A similar difficulty faces those who would seek to credit Xenophanes with an exclusive monotheism on the basis of an assumed historic Xenophanes–Parmenides connection. It is true, as many early writers noticed, that Xenophanes employed a form of the adjective 'one' (*heis*) in speaking of god, just as Parmenides

employed a form of the adjective ‘one’ (*hen*) in speaking of *to eon* or ‘what is’ (B 8.6). Xenophanes also spoke of god as ‘unmoving’ (*kinoumenos ouden*; B 26) just as Parmenides spoke of ‘what is’ as ‘changeless’ (*akinēton*; B 8.26, 8.38). Xenophanes, moreover, spoke of some ‘whole’ being (*oulos*; B 24) who sees, hears and thinks, just as Parmenides spoke of ‘what is’ as a ‘whole’ or ‘entire’ being (*oulon*; B 8.38). Yet Xenophanes spoke specifically about ‘god’ (*theos*) rather than about ‘what is’ (*to eon*). So far as we can tell, he simply affirmed his view of the divine rather than attempting to establish its truth by evidence or argument, as Parmenides famously did; and while it is clear that Xenophanes called for decent conduct and a respectful attitude towards the gods, Parmenides did neither of these in connection with ‘what is’. So while one can understand how the idea of a Xenophanes–Parmenides (or monotheism–monism) connection gained wide support among early historians of Greek thought, there are significant dissimilarities at various points.

One might plausibly speak of Xenophanes as a ‘henotheist’ or ‘kathenotheist’ in so far as he commented on the attributes of *one* special god while appearing to acknowledge the existence of other gods. He might also be regarded as an ‘inclusive monotheist’ (in so far as he might have considered other deities aspects of, or elements within, a single divine being), although we have no way telling how the gods he spoke of in the plural related to the ‘one greatest god’ he spoke of in B 23. It would be problematic, however, to view Xenophanes as a ‘pluriform monotheist’ (i.e. one who regards other gods as phases, subsequent stages or manifestations of a single divine substance) in so far as two fragments (B 25, 26) appear to place god (or at the least ‘the greatest god’) beyond the possibility of all motion and change.

XENOPHANES’ CRITIQUE OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN RELIGION

As we have seen, in fragment B 14, Xenophanes speaks of mortals who believe, apparently incorrectly, that “gods are born, wear their own clothes, and have a voice and body”. Although we are nowhere told that mortals are mistaken in so believing, the fragment’s opening word ‘But’ (*alla*, which appears frequently in the surviving fragments) at least suggests that this belief contrasted with the view that Xenophanes himself held. (Our source for B 14, the late-second- and third-century Christian apologist Clement of Alexandria, placed B 14 after B 23, which affirmed the existence of the “one greatest god ... not at all like mortals in body or thought”.)

In another famous remark, Xenophanes comes very close to criticizing the tendency of believers to think of the gods as like themselves: “Ethiopians <say that their gods are> snub-nosed and black; / Thracians <say that their gods are> blue-eyed and red-haired” (B 16). While it has often been thought that these lines contain an element of ridicule, it is not obvious precisely where and how that ridicule is expressed. Taken just by themselves these lines impute no patent absurdity to either the Ethiopians or the Thracians. That there would have been nothing

inherently ridiculous, at least to the ancient Greek mind, in the idea of a god possessing a particular bodily feature is evident from the frequent references in early Greek poetry to gods such as ‘grey-eyed Athena,’ ‘blond-haired Apollo’ and ‘dark-haired Poseidon.’ And since the bodily features mentioned in B 16 are all different (nose shape and skin colour in the case of the Ethiopians, eye colour and hair colour for the Thracians), technically speaking, no inconsistency is being imputed to any mortal believer or believers. Yet there is at least the suggestion of a suspicious degree of coincidence in this set of beliefs: the gods turn out to have the very same features their human believers typically possess. So B 16 at least implicitly raises the possibility that human beings have created the gods in their own image, rather than the other way around. And when we bear in mind that for the ancient Greeks Ethiopia represented the southernmost civilization in the world, while Thrace was located in the far north, we can read Xenophanes’ remark not as a characterization of practices in two individual cultures, but rather as a generalization of literally global dimensions: if all human beings (in effect, ‘all people from pole to pole’) depict the gods as like themselves, we may reasonably conclude that believers credit the gods with having certain features *because those are the features the believers themselves happen to possess*.

Aristotle expressed just such a thesis in a passage in his *Politics* (which may itself be a reminiscence of an earlier Xenophanean remark) concerning the notion of ‘a king of the gods’: “Wherefore people say that the gods have a king because they themselves either are or were in ancient times under the rule of a king. For they imagine not only the forms of the gods but also their ways of life to be like their own” (1252b23–36). The same message is conveyed in Xenophanes’ striking (perhaps even jocular) analysis of the manner in which other kinds of living creatures might depict their gods if they had the physical means of doing so:

But if oxen and horses 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 as similar to oxen,
And they would make the bodies of the sort which each of them had.
(B 16 DK)

We may conclude that Xenophanes put forward a genetic explanation of at least one central aspect of religious belief: the manner in which believers conceive of or depict the divine. As such, Xenophanes was an ancient forerunner to modern thinkers such as Feuerbach and Freud who found the root causes of religious belief in certain features of the human psyche. And in so far as the divine traits Xenophanes had in mind were all identifiably human, we may also credit him with a pioneering critique of anthropomorphism in religion.

It is not yet clear, however, whether Xenophanes was led on the basis of his analysis to *repudiate as erroneous* all anthropomorphic aspects of religion: that is,

whether he held that in so far as religious believers have acquired their conceptions of the divine as they have, they were wrong to do so. To make such a claim, of course, would be to commit a solecism. To reject a view as false or mistaken on the grounds that it was adopted on the basis of factors or conditions that have nothing to do with its truth would be to commit the genetic fallacy. Even a belief adopted on the basis of entirely irrelevant considerations may still enshrine the truth. It is, moreover, not essential that a finding of anthropomorphic tendencies among religious believers be regarded as inherently problematic; one might find reason to regard anthropomorphism as a benign, perhaps even positive aspect of religious belief (cf. Allport 1960).

In any case, we are under no compulsion to saddle Xenophanes with the indefensible thesis that in so far as mortals have fashioned their views of the gods on the basis of irrelevant considerations, those views are all in error. In his reflections on the nature of the distinction between knowledge and true belief (B 34), Xenophanes allows that a person may “happen to speak truly concerning what is brought to pass” but not possess the kind of experience that would warrant the attribution of knowledge. Thus the notion of the ‘lucky guess’ or ‘accidental truth’ lay well within his reach. It is also clear that the positive account of the nature of the divine (or perhaps the ‘one greatest god’) provided Xenophanes with all the foundation he needed in order to repudiate popular conceptions of the divine. Fragments B 23–6 may be read as maintaining that there are specific features the divine must possess or lack in light of what is ‘seemly’ or ‘fitting’ to its nature (cf. the phrase *min epiprepei*, “seemly for him”, in B 26). Once Xenophanes developed this account, he would have been fully justified in repudiating popular conceptions of the gods at odds with the truth, irrespective of the aetiology of those conceptions.

Some readers, however, have been troubled by the way in which Xenophanes appears to want to have it both ways: on the one hand criticizing the attribution of *some* human attributes to the divine (namely, being born and having a human body, voice and clothing) while simultaneously ascribing *other* human attributes (seeing, thinking, hearing, having a mind, and, at least implicitly, moral perfection). However, what Xenophanes specifically criticized, on several occasions, was the tendency of human beings to think of the gods as *like* themselves. In B 16 he reflects on the possibility that horses and oxen had the capacity to depict their gods as being of “the same sort as themselves” (*toiath’ hoionper*), while by contrast B 23 speaks of the one god as “not at all (*outi ... omoiios*) like mortals in body or thought”. What Xenophanes specifically rejected, then, was a view of god, or the gods, as *like* mortals in various respects. Nothing he states in any of the surviving fragments prevents him from employing terms that apply to both human beings and gods, so long as he is careful not to use those expressions to affirm a significant degree of likeness between the two. He may consistently think of the divine as possessing a body of some (extremely unusual) sort, or a mind of some (extraordinary) kind, as well as a will of some (superlative degree of) goodness.

XENOPHANES' DENIAL OF KNOWLEDGE CONCERNING THE GODS

In fragment B 34 Xenophanes offers a rather somber assessment of the prospects for human knowledge:

And indeed no man has been nor will there be one
 Who knows the sure truth (*to saphes*)
 Concerning such things as I say about the gods and all things.
 And even if at best he succeeded in speaking of what is brought to
 pass
 Still he himself would not know. Yet opinion is fashioned for all.

The 'sceptical' character of these remarks has been a matter of debate ever since they were quoted, and thereby preserved for posterity, by Plutarch and Sextus Empiricus, but recent discussions have served to narrow the range of plausible alternative readings. The mention in line three of "such things as I say about the gods and all things" indicates that these remarks date from a time in Xenophanes' life when he had already developed a set of views of the divine nature and the make-up of the physical universe. As a result, we can make use of our understanding of those aspects of Xenophanes' thought in order to grasp the rationale that may have lain behind these pioneering observations concerning the limits of human knowledge.

But first a brief comment about *to saphes*: 'the sure truth' that represents the focus of Xenophanes' concern here in B 34. Forms of *saphēs* appear throughout Greek literature of the archaic and classical periods, often in connection with knowing and saying. Quite commonly those who know 'the sure truth' do so on the basis of their direct or personal experience of the relevant circumstances. Thus when in B 34 Xenophanes denied that anyone has known or ever will know *to saphes*, what he probably meant was that no mortal being has been or ever will be in a position to gain a sure grasp of the truth *based on his or her direct experience of the relevant circumstances*. This reading makes good sense in this context in so far as nothing could be at a greater remove from the personal experiences of mortal beings than the actions of the gods and the totality of events that take place throughout the cosmos.

When we turn to consider which of Xenophanes' teachings might have lent some support to the thesis that mortals live far removed from those who dwell in a divine realm, we find many relevant remarks. As we have seen, fragments B 23–6 describe a supreme being unlike mortals in either body or thought, which is able to effect change throughout the cosmos by the exercise of its mind, while remaining always in the same place. Nowhere does Xenophanes indicate precisely why the divine must of necessity possess these attributes, but if by 'greatest' Xenophanes meant something like 'greatest in honour and power' (the usual measures of the greatness attributed to the gods in Homer; cf. *Iliad* 2.350, 2.412, 4.515; *Odyssey* 3.378, 5.4; Hesiod, *Theogony* 49, 534, 538), then the basic premise underlying his

view of the divine nature would have been that *any* attribution of a physical or material attribute, process or activity would entail a degree of limitation that is strictly incompatible with the divine nature. With this conception of the divine Xenophanes undercuts at a single stroke the credibility of the countless tales of localized epiphanies and dramatic interventions found in Homer, Hesiod and other early writers.

Fragments B 14–16 serve to reinforce a view of the gods as ‘wholly other’ by explaining how the attributes typically assigned to the gods by mortal believers are properly regarded as projections of their own physical attributes. In addition, in fragments B 27–33 (as well as in the views reported in testimonia A 1, 32, 33, 36, 38–46) Xenophanes explains why a wide range of natural phenomena should be regarded not as signs or messages sent to humankind by the gods, but simply as clouds, earth and water that appear, disappear and change in form as a result of perfectly regular (hence understandable) physical processes. Included among these are his characterization of earth and water as the dual sources of all things (B 29, 33), the sea as the source of all clouds, winds and rain (B 30) and – perhaps most significantly – the rainbow as a purple, red and greenish-yellow kind of cloud, rather than as Iris, the messenger deity (B 32).

A view of the divine as wholly inaccessible to mortals would also serve to explain Xenophanes’ rebukes of various claimants to knowledge or expertise in religious matters. These would include his ridiculing of Pythagoras for claiming to be able to recognize the soul of a departed friend in the yelping of a puppy (B 7), his comment on the practice of placing pine branches about the house, perhaps in an attempt to extract something of their ‘evergreen’ nature as a form of protection (B 17), his rebuke of Epimenides (A 1), as well as his blanket and emphatic (*outoi*) denial that “from the beginning, gods have intimated all things to mortals” (B 18). In addition, two ancient sources (A 52) report that Xenophanes, alone among ancient thinkers, repudiated the practice of divination (*mantikē*), the set of techniques or ‘art’ that ancient peoples (and some modern ones) believed enabled human beings to penetrate the obscurities of the past, present and future. A scepticism concerning divination would also serve to explain the dismissive reference in B 34 to one who may “succeed better than others in speaking of what is brought to pass (*tetelesmenon eipōn*)”.

To sum up, as Xenophanes understood it, the divine cannot possibly speak to human beings in a language they can understand, nor can it vacate its heavenly abode and move about in their midst. In reality, popular conceptions of the gods tell us more about the attributes of believers than they do about the gods, and the amazing events that take place in the heavens are merely natural phenomena to be accounted for strictly in terms of natural substances and regular physical processes. As Hermann Fränkel aptly summarized Xenophanes’ position: “he made the chasm between the here and the beyond unbridgeable” (1974: 130). About the gods, therefore, as about the nature of things at all times and places, no mortal being has known or ever will know the sure truth, but all may have their opinions.

Yet B 34 contains at least one unresolved puzzle: if indeed there never has been nor ever will be anyone who knows the sure truth about the gods, how are we supposed to regard Xenophanes' own understanding of the nature of the divine? The distinction between knowing and believing (or having an opinion, *dokos*) so clearly articulated in B 34 offers us an initially attractive answer: Xenophanes could easily have viewed his own account of the nature of the divine as governed by the broad pessimism he expressed in B 34, as representing his 'opinion' and nothing more. Similarly, when, in B 35, he proclaims, "let these be accepted as like the realities", we may understand this admonition to apply to his own teachings on both natural and supernatural subjects.

This manoeuvre, however, gains us consistency on one front at the price of creating new difficulties elsewhere. For if Xenophanes regarded his own view of the divine as 'merely his opinion', and if the phrase "opinion is fashioned for all" in B 34.4 means something like 'all are entitled to their own opinions' then it is difficult to see how he could have considered himself entitled to decry as erroneous the views of the gods promulgated by Homer and Hesiod, to belittle popular superstitions and to ridicule Pythagoras and Epimenides as fraudulent claimants to an expertise in divine matters. So while our first response may render B 34 internally consistent, it creates serious tensions between B 34 and remarks Xenophanes makes in a number of other fragments.

It is possible, of course, that the surviving fragments of Xenophanes' poetry date from different stages of his intellectual development. Perhaps Xenophanes, like Kant, had an earlier 'dogmatic' period in which he confidently set out his views as the sure truth while decrying all competing accounts as mistaken, and then entered a later 'critical' period in which he came to recognize that his convictions, like those of his opponents, represented *dokos* and nothing more. It might also be possible to distinguish those aspects of the divine about which we might gain sure knowledge from others about which this would not be possible. But, however one may attempt to resolve it, there is a clear tension between the pessimistic outlook Xenophanes expressed in B 34 and the many strongly worded assertions made elsewhere in his poems.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN XENOPHANES' GOD AND THE PHYSICAL UNIVERSE

As we have seen, Plato included Xenophanes among those who had held that 'all things are one'. Similarly, Aristotle stated that "with regard to (or turning his eye toward, *apoblēpsas*) the whole universe, [Xenophanes] says that the one is the god" (*Metaphysics* A.5, 986b24–5), and a series of ancient writers (A 31, 33–5) claimed that Xenophanes identified god with "the One", "the whole heaven" and "the universe". Perhaps, then, in much the same manner in which Anaximander had previously characterized his basic reality ('The Indefinite') as divine, Xenophanes

identified his god (or at least ‘the one greatest god’) with the entire physical universe. Modern scholarly opinion on the merits of this view of Xenophanes remains sharply divided, but its defenders face two major challenges.

First, we are required to embrace a series of strained (although not completely impossible) readings. We would not be able to regard Plato’s characterization of Xenophanes in the *Sophist* as yet another of his many fanciful renderings of the views of his predecessors, but as an unvarnished statement of fact. We would have to understand Aristotle’s phrase *apoblēpsas to holon ouranon* along the lines of ‘having turned his gaze toward the whole physical universe’ rather than the more usual ‘with reference to the whole physical universe.’ We would have to read each of Xenophanes’ various statements about ‘god’ or ‘the one greatest god’ as a characterization of the entire physical universe (rather than of a special supernatural being). Somewhere in Xenophanes’ poems (perhaps in the *oulon* of B 24 or in the unmoving – hence in equipoise – god of B 26?) we would have to find an implicit reference to god’s spherical nature. And if we are to trace this idea back to Parmenides we would have to believe that when Parmenides likened ‘what is’ to “the bulk of a well-rounded sphere” (B 8.43) what he meant was not that ‘what is’ is *in some way* ‘like the bulk of a sphere’ (e.g. fully developed in every respect), but rather that ‘what is’ is quite literally spherical.

The second challenge to this reading is that the two comments Xenophanes actually makes about the cosmos and its relationship to the divine tend to count against the traditional view. Fragment B 25 states that “completely without toil he shakes all things by the thought of his mind” thereby suggesting that in so far as god shakes the cosmos he is not identical with it. And B 28 holds that “This upper limit of the earth is seen here at our feet, pushing up against the air, but that below goes on without limit”, suggesting that Xenophanes did not believe that the cosmos was shaped like a sphere. But here, as elsewhere in the interpretation of Xenophanes’ teachings, our conclusions will reflect not only what we take to be his *ipsissima verba* but also the standards for credibility with which we choose to operate. Those who insist on finding clear and convincing evidence before accepting the traditional view will almost certainly demur. Yet others, perhaps of a more adventurous nature, will recognize the gaps in the evidence, acknowledge the possibility of error, yet conclude that, almost certainly, Xenophanes identified god with the cosmos.

FURTHER READING

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On DIVINATION see also Chs 7, 8. On MONOTHEISM see also Ch. 4. On THE ONE see also Chs 11, 14, 16, 19; Vol. 4, Ch. 9; Vol. 5, Ch. 15.