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UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
GRADUATE COLLEGE

THE EPISTEMIC ORIGINS OF XENOPHANES' NATURAL THEOLOGY

A Dissertation
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

By
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2002

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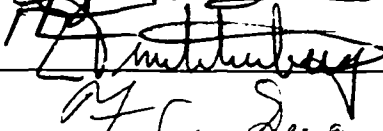
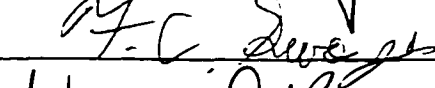
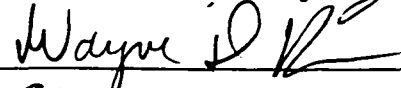
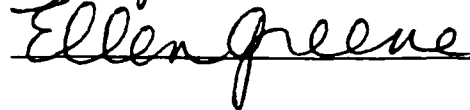
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A Dissertation APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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This work could not have been accomplished without the assistance of others. While no one except the author bears responsibilities for its shortcomings, there are several individuals who helped create whatever intrinsic worth it has. Naturally foremost among these is Dr. Hugh Benson, whose direction, patience, and extraordinary willingness to work “a la distance” were greatly appreciated and undoubtedly necessary. This work in no way rises to the level of his philosophical scholarship, but it was nevertheless aided by his inspirational example. There were many others, less involved in this work, but of great academic encouragement. Among these are the other members of my dissertation committee (Ellen Green, Chris Swoyer, Zev Trachtenberg, and Wayne Riggs) and those who stood cheering at a further distance: Dr. Bob Clarke and Dr. Mack Roark of Oklahoma Baptist University.

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ABBREVIATIONS

A	Testimonia (followed by a Diels-Kranz number)
DK	Diels-Kranz
BCE	Before the Common Era dating
F	Fragment (followed by a Diels-Kranz number)
KRS	Kirk, Raven, and Schofield
LSJ	Liddell, Scott, and Jones
MXG	Melisso, Xenophane, Gorgia of pseudo-Aristotle

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ABSTRACT

Xenophanes was the first ancient Greek to make explicitly philosophical statements about epistemology. He was also the first Pre-Socratic to attack traditional and popular religion, eventually forming a rudimentary natural theology. This monograph attempts to show the clear connection and mutual dependency of these two streams of thought. In the process of this demonstration, however, it is necessary to give an interpretation of both streams.

Initially the extant fragments relating to Xenophanes' epistemology or theology are translated with a brief commentary when a translation issue is paramount. Then a view of Xenophanes' epistemology is developed, based upon this textual exegesis and two millennia of scholarship. It is argued that Xenophanes is not the empiricist, rationalist, or sceptic that he is sometimes portrayed as being. Rather he best fits the model (indeed a mold he helped create) of a naturalistic fallibilist.

The same interpretive enterprise is attempted with his natural theology. A number of misunderstandings of Xenophanes' beliefs are laid aside and a "minimalist" vision of his theological convictions is developed. It is found that Xenophanes is not a committed monotheist, or monist, as has sometimes been taught. His philosophical razor trims excessive adumbrations and speculations, and trims theology of many of its traditional aspects.

The monograph continues by looking at how these two streams emerge from one single – albeit complex – commitment to a proto-scientific commitment to the observance of nature. It is this consistent, coherent, and widely cast observational activity that forms the basis of the Xenophanean revolution. The fifth chapter is an attempt to demonstrate the continuity between the scientific methodology of Xenophanes and ours today.

In the end Xenophanes appears to be quite influential. This document ends by showing the evident appreciation that Socrates held for this thinker. It was primarily through Socrates that Xenophanes would extend his formidable ideas through centuries of western civilization.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

*εἰ μὴ χλωὸν ἔφυσε θεὸς μέλι, πολλὸν ἔφασκον γλύσσειν σῦκα πέλεσθαι.*¹

If it is true that when the pre-Socratics are read with an open mind and sensitive ear that the reader cannot help being struck by the religious note in much of what they say, then Xenophanes is no exception.² In fact he epitomizes the rule. This is one rare example of agreement among contemporary historians of early Greek Philosophy. Xenophanes' primary contribution was in the area of religious thought. His attack on anthropomorphism, his polemic against Homer's immoral gods, his refusal to countenance a god that moved hither and thither like a divine butler, were a revolutionary, even if primarily critical, contribution.³

¹ From Diels, H. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, (Berlin: Weidemann, 8th edn, 1974), pp. 113 - 138. Following convention, all fragments will be numbered after Diels' work. "A" will refer to the testimonia, "F" to the actual fragments. The translation of the fragments will be my own. Where I am dependent upon the work of others (as I will be particularly so of Leshner, 1992) for help in translation and interpretation it will be so noted. Here: "If god had not made honey, men would think figs were sweeter."

² I am making allusions to Vlastos' opening line in his famous "Theology and Philosophy in Early Greek Thought" reprinted most recently in *Studies in Greek Philosophy* (Princeton: University Press, 1995), pp. 3 - 31. Vlastos made some well supported claims against Jaeger, but his first objection, i.e., that it is wrong to use of the word "theology" to describe the activity of the Pre-Socratics, clearly does not apply to Xenophanes.

³ By "critical contribution" I mean that Xenophanes main emphasis was in countering established concepts. The contrast is between the philosopher/theologian who is seeking to establish something altogether new with new concepts (e.g., a new religion based on a recent "revelation"), and the one who is seeking to refine the old by stripping away outmoded ideas which can no longer be supported in light of new evidence. It will be argued that Xenophanes was seeking to do the latter, and his "new" ideas, and positive theology can only be understood in light of the old tradition which he was seeking to refine.

The other significant note that the reader cannot help being struck by is an epistemological one. This is a secondary, but nevertheless significant, area of Xenophanean influence. His statements on the limits of, relativity of, and potentiality of, human knowledge marks the beginning of an attempt to study knowledge, *per se*. Some have rightly traced epistemological concerns to Homer,⁴ but the very first philosophical statements ever recorded are by Xenophanes. This man, who likely lived between 570 and 470 BCE,⁵ apparently found that the clash of culture claims, and the collision of incoherent theological statements, sparked a drive towards finding what represented “truth” and what represented mere opinion. This distinction drawn by Xenophanes is still at the heart of epistemological arguments 2,500 years later.

However, what strikes *this* reader as he tries to read the Xenophanean fragments with an open mind and sensitive ear is the harmony of the two notes. In this reader’s ear there is a clear syncopation between Xenophanes’ epistemic concerns and his theological reformation. The two notes were meant to be played together and moreover (at risk of carrying the metaphor too far) the integrity of the sound is dependent upon recognizing both the harmony of the two notes as well as the background melody of pre-Socratic inquiry in Ionian culture in the 6th century BCE. If this reader is “hearing” correctly there is, then, no justification for treating Xenophanes’ natural theology apart from his writings on epistemology. And at the same time one can best comprehend the reason for Xenophanes’ epistemological

⁴ One example is Edward Hussey’s article “The beginnings of epistemology: from Homer to Philolaus” in *Epistemology* ed. by Stephen Everson (Cambridge: University Press, 1990).

⁵ See page 15 where I address the issue of Xenophanes’ dates.

concerns in light of his theological ones. This “syncopation,” or to use a more live metaphor “symbiotic relationship,” is both the key to Xenophanes’ thinking, and the core of his philosophical influence. For this symbiosis gave birth to a method of understanding the world that we might broadly think of as “Socratic;” that is the testing of traditional concepts by the limited light of human reason while recognizing the potential fallibility of the latter, and the need for evidence and argument for the former.

Opinions about Xenophanes identity and significance run the spectrum from “essentially a minstrel” who is to be regarded “chiefly as a poet”⁶ to the “father of epistemology” who is partly responsible for the “birth of western philosophy.”⁷ Karl Popper who attempts to establish the “greatness” of Xenophanes quotes in contrast Harold F. Cherniss who says that Xenophanes has become a figure in the history of Greek philosophy “by mistake.”⁸ While W. K. C. Guthrie hesitates to call Xenophanes a philosopher, C. M. Bowra says that Xenophanes is responsible for one of the most “far-reaching revolutions which have ever taken place in human thought.”⁹

The differing convictions about Xenophanes’ significance to Greek philosophy are partially caused by the limited number and the limited type of original

⁶ W.A. Heidel, “Hecataeus and Xenophanes” in American Journal of Philology 64 (1943) pp. 277 and 276 respectively.

⁷ Richard D. McKirahan, Jr., Philosophy Before Socrates (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., Co., 1994) pp. 66 and 68.

⁸ Karl R. Popper, The World of Parmenides. (London: Routledge, 1998) p. 23.

⁹ For the former see W. K. C. Guthrie, A History of Greek Philosophy (Cambridge: University Press, 1962) I, p. 362. For the latter see C. M. Bowra, Early Greek Elegists (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960), p. 116.

fragments we possess. Like other pre-Socratic philosophers his philosophical statements are to a large extent pithy, unsupported by arguments, and cover a broad range of topics. The testimony from the doxographers on Xenophanes is of little help to this dearth of original material. Much of what is said of him is either contradicted by other sources or are remarks that appear to conflate his opinions with Parmenides.

In addition to the brevity and difficulty of the fragments, and the testimony of doxographers, there is another - albeit closely related - reason that Xenophanes' place in the history of Western Philosophy is not confirmed. There is little agreement in contemporary secondary sources on what he believed.¹⁰ Depending on the source, he is known to be a monotheist, or a polytheist. His god is either round or shapeless. He is concurrently understood to be an empiricist, sceptic, and a rationalist. Obviously if we had more original sources we would have a much broader foundation upon which to erect a interpretive edifice. Of course, there are innumerable differing interpretations on a prolific writer like Plato. Nevertheless, it is a commonplace that in the middle dialogues, for example, one finds a relatively clear philosophical orientation. Interpreters will argue into infinity about hermeneutical specifics, but the foundation has been broadly and solidly laid, with extensive dialogues, containing

¹⁰ Michael Stokes says, "Xenophanes is one of the most vexed of the early Greek thinkers, and any attempt to explain even what he was talking about, let alone what he had to say, must *inevitably* be controversial." (emphasis mine) One and Many in Pre-Socratic Philosophy, (Cambridge Mass: 1971), p. 66. Regardless of the fact that at the outset we are aware of the (almost certain) tentative nature of the conclusions, such studies of historical philosophers are essential. I think that what Anthony Kenny says is apropos: "[the task of the philosopher] as historian forces the historian of philosophy to offer reasons why the thinkers he studies held the opinions they did, to speculate on the premises left tacit in their arguments, to evaluate the coherence and cogency of the inferences they drew. But the supplying of reasons for philosophical conclusions, the detection of hidden premises in philosophical arguments,

explicit arguments. Xenophanes left no such mark. The limited material left to us, has allowed not only for questions about his “greatness”, but doubts about his capacity as a philosopher.¹¹

While the Xenophanean foundation may not be grand and broad it runs deep enough to erect a viable interpretation. The topics of Xenophanes penetrate to the very heart of philosophy in the western tradition. What are the limits of human knowledge?¹² Who/what is God? What is the nature of Nature? While it might overburden the evidence to portray Xenophanes as the father of western philosophy, it is nevertheless the case that his convictions were in the tradition of the first philosophers: amazingly counter-cultural and stunningly original. But here we are ahead of ourselves. It is foolish to argue about Xenophanes place in the history of western philosophy without first using the best hermeneutical tools available to understand what he taught. There is good reason to hope that a thorough understanding of Xenophanes’ fragments would allow us to discard even Aristotle’s comment that Xenophanes can be “completely ignored” as being “somewhat too

and the logical evaluation of philosophical inferences are themselves full-blooded philosophical activities.” Cited by S. Everson in Epistemology, pp. 1 - 2.

¹¹ I have found that sometimes people even seem to disagree with themselves about Xenophanes. Or so it appears. In Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture (2nd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954) Jaeger says, “Xenophanes was not an original thinker” (p.174) and that in his theology “not one of all these ideas was new” (p. 171). But in another work, The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers (Oxford, 1967), he calls Xenophanes an “intellectual revolutionary” (p.41) and argues against those who would think of him as a rhapsode (pp. 40-41). While the two accounts may not be contradictory, they are two separate portraits. Or maybe Jaeger would term Xenophanes an “unoriginal intellectual revolutionary.”

¹² “Human knowledge” almost sounds redundant in the 21st century (i.e., what other kind is there?). However, to Xenophanes and his contemporaries it would not have sounded so at all. It was often juxtaposed to “divine knowledge”, particularly by the poets, who were quite pessimistic about the former.

crude in [his] views.”¹³ Given the limitations of textual material, the contentious debates, and the dearth of reliable testimony, the task may seem impossible. While it must be admitted at the outset that the conclusions will certainly be open to revision, what follows seems to the author to rest on solid textual and philosophical evidence.

It is, of course, beyond the scope of this monograph to accomplish a comprehensive critical interpretation of *all* of Xenophanes’ fragments, however brief they may be.¹⁴ Rather I will attempt to lay another stone in the foundation of a Xenophanean hermeneutic that has recently been under construction. This metaphorical “stone” will hopefully fill a significant gap in Xenophanean scholarship, which in my view, makes this foundation shaky. Many commentators write eloquently about his proto-scepticism in the field of human knowledge. In turn they or other commentators write extensive comments about his theological convictions, some of which seem at odds with his negative epistemology. However, the two fields of inquiry are often left in separate categories. It is as if the ancient Greek thinker had a modern-day departmental division in his mind. I trust that two examples will suffice for this introduction. The first is Jonathan Barnes who ends his introduction on Xenophanes by saying: “I shall reserve Xenophanes’ remarks on the nature and extent of human knowledge for a later chapter; here I deal with his theology” as if

¹³ Aristotle, Metaphysics (Loeb Classical Library, Harvard: University Press, 1993) at 986b33.

¹⁴ A very good commentary on the complete Xenophanean corpus is J. Leshner’s Xenophanes of Colophon (1992).

there is no connection.¹⁵ The second is Kathleen Freeman who notes that there are two ways Xenophanes influenced the metaphysical side of philosophy: “on the nature of deity; and on the nature of knowledge.” While this is true, it is doubtful that Xenophanes would have thought of the two areas of inquiry being as unrelated as she treats them.¹⁶ It is a possibly unintended, but undoubtedly harmful, anachronism to divide Xenophanes’ epistemology from his theology.¹⁷

So this discussion of Xenophanes’ natural theology is motivated by two claims. The first is the relatively weak and less significant claim that often (possibly out of a proper motivation, e.g., pedagogical) contemporary secondary sources leave one with the impression that at best Xenophanes would have understood and embraced a division between his theology and epistemology and at worst he saw no relationship between the two. This is an unfortunate reality, but overcome by the astute reader who reads the fragments themselves and perceives that all of Xenophanes’ “epistemological” fragments were theologically directed and that his theological ideas are sceptically rooted. Undoubtedly many do note that the typology is nothing more than a convenient way to explore Xenophanes’ thinking. But those dependent upon a few secondary sources are susceptible to an incomplete picture that

¹⁵ Barnes, p. 84. Fortunately Barnes does reveal connections between his epistemology and theology, but in so doing he often imputes ideas in Xenophanes that I find anachronistic, or simply unlikely. Moreover, his connections are not as explicit as I hope to make them here.

¹⁶ Freeman, p. 95 ff.

¹⁷ H. A. T Reiche in “Empirical Aspects of Xenophanes’ Theology” refers to this same problem, although his solution will not be found acceptable. His empirical interpretation of Xenophanes epistemology leads him to an empirically based theological vision, which inadequately explains all of the philosopher’s comments. Nevertheless the attempt to note the clear and obvious connection of Xenophanes epistemology and his theology should be applauded. See p. 89 ff (in Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy: Albany: SUNY Press, 1972).

makes Xenophanes look like a theologian who happens to make some epistemological statements, or an epistemologist who liked to talk about God.

The second motivating claim is both stronger and more significant. Few contemporary thinkers have given much thought to (or expression of) the causal relationship between Xenophanes' epistemological views and his "rational-natural theology." Some who have have not provided an interpretation consistent with the fragments. Indeed it would seem reasonable to ask: if Xenophanes had revolutionary ideas in natural theology (even if lacking the support of a consistent and systematic web of beliefs) then where did they come from? Were they the product of his unique and singular imagination? Were they historical accidents? Were they the combination of Xenophanes' personality with his particularly historical-cultural context? Were they, as Jaeger believes, the result of his reverence for God? Moreover, what motivated Xenophanes to express his revolutionary ideas in such a public fashion? Why would he have been concerned about the immoral conduct of the gods? Upon what system of ethics did he base his harsh judgments of the gods? How did he *know* that things weren't just as the poets said? Was he the first to utter these harshly critical statements, and support them with arguments?¹⁸

All of these questions call for an examination of origins. This is notoriously dangerous territory. Proof of intellectual dependence is difficult for any historian, but

¹⁸ Admittedly there are times when the argument over "who's first" is almost comical. However what this argument recognizes is the often understated power of context. Humans are creatures of culture, society, and intellectual influence. Ideas rarely generate in a vacuum. There are exceptions. Xenophanes may be one of these uncommon thinkers who rose above his context, spoke out against the common voice, and swam against the presuppositional current.

this is particularly so, where the original sources are so few, where earlier histories are so undependable, and where our own knowledge of the context is so opaque. And in doing historical philosophy of this type, we must be continually conscious of the temptation to impute our own biases into Xenophanes' internal thought process. It would be wise to keep in mind Xenophanes warning about creating the gods in our own image - we often do the same with philosophers. But fear of tentative conclusions should not deter one from addressing the questions; particularly ones of such historical and philosophical import.

So the underlying concern of this monograph is that the interpretation of Xenophanes' theological fragments leads one to seek the roots of this revolutionary tree. At a glance, it seems to have sprung up from nowhere. This is not the case. The roots are found in the cosmopolitan culture and in the perceptive and inquisitive mind of one exceptional man who could find no justification for many of the knowledge claims being made in that culture. Those claims were countered by claims made in other cultures and by the emerging science of his day. Consequently the causal relationship between Xenophanes' theology and epistemology is bi-directional. In looking for the causes of Xenophanes' epistemological quandaries one needs to look closely at the corrupt, confusing and inconsistent mythology of Xenophanes' day. In seeking the foundation for Xenophanes' attack on Homeric religion, the place to begin is in his rejection of certain forms of unacceptable foundationalism: e.g., an undue reverence of Homer and, the acceptance of divination.

As implied above, one *prima facie* reading of the fragments could leave one with the impression that Xenophanes was an early sceptic who also happened (contradicting his claim to no knowledge) to make grandiose theological statements. One supposes it is possible to presume such compartmentalization of a “rhapsode and poet”.¹⁹ Short epigrams could have been thrown around with impunity, and might have possessed no logical consistency. But this is not likely of the person we find under philological and historical examination. Xenophanes was one of the first persons in history to draw explicit and strict limits upon human knowledge, while being one of the first Greeks to be critical of Homer’s anthropomorphic deities.²⁰ It is unlikely that the two areas are unrelated in his mind. Moreover it would seem surprising if an explicit link between the new found limits of human knowledge and his newly formed theological convictions is not found in his fragments. Fortunately not all twentieth century historians make an error of unwittingly creating a compartmentalized Xenophanes. Unfortunately the interpretive effort often creates

¹⁹ Indeed Gomperz has gone so far as to say that Xenophanes was a rhapsode by day, and a cynic by night. He would spend his days singing in the market-place reciting Homer and eulogizing him, and his evenings at the banquets of the rich and mighty where he would voice “his own enlightened views and castigated the very gods to whom he was forced to render public allegiance in order to earn his daily bread.” Jaeger is undoubtedly right in his conviction that Xenophanes’ character is incompatible with such “hide and seek games.” See Jaeger (1967) pp. 40 - 41.

²⁰ There is of course a long standing tradition in Hebrew culture of prophets criticizing corrupt anthropomorphisms. This pre-dates Xenophanes by at least 2 centuries. While there is no evidence that there was any direct influence, by 556 BCE the Persians had conquered Jerusalem, so cross fertilization is not impossible. Of course it is important to keep in mind that the source of criticism is entirely different in the two cases. In Hebrew culture it is based upon oral, and later written, tradition that Yahweh is the one and only God of the Hebrews, and who by Mosaic law forbid any animal image used to represent divinity. Xenophanes convictions, or so I will argue, were based on reason. These two strains of theological orientation (one answering to revelation, the other to reason, or to at least more universal criteria) have subsequently run through the history of western Christianity.

something that is incompatible with other areas of Xenophanes' philosophy.²¹ As mentioned above this study cannot deal in detail with every fragment, but it will attempt to ensure that the interpretation developed is consistent with what is found in the extant fragments - or if not, that an adequate explanation of the inconsistency is provided. The best explanation of Xenophanes' radical religious reformation of Homeric religion is that it stands upon the fledgling foundation of epistemology with its new-found limits of human reason. Furthermore I will demonstrate that these epistemic notions were most likely generated because of Xenophanes' cosmopolitan experience combined with his unique commitment to, and early version of, scientific observation.²² This experience combined with this commitment led him to question both the theological teachings of the poets and the claims to knowledge by his contemporaries.

I will seek to take to heart and bring to the pen, the methodological advice given by Jaeger who rightly said that while it is possible with later Greek philosophy to separate theology from the other branches of thought, "in the oldest Greek thought there is no such differentiation."²³ Jaeger believes that if we seek to understand "the isolated utterances of Anaximander or Heraclitus on God or the Divine," we must always take their philosophy as a whole, as an indivisible organism, never considering

²¹ One example of this is Fränkel's famous paper: "Xenophanes' Empiricism and his Critique of Knowledge." This is a very nice attempt to lend coherence to Xenophanes' thought, but ultimately falls short of the goal. Reasons for this will become clear in the course of this study, see particularly chapter 2.

²² I do not mean to imply that Xenophanes had fleshed out a full and adequate scientific methodology. I do mean to supply evidence for those who would argue that Xenophanes was a significant part of the pre-Socratic "intellectual revolution" and that his mark is as significant as Thales.

²³ Jaeger, *Theology*. p. 7.

the theological components apart from the physical or ontological.²⁴ Herein it will be the goal to swallow this “methodological difficulty” and to give our attention to Xenophanes’ natural theology without losing sight of the epistemological and cultural context.²⁵

The first task at hand is to provide a translation of all of the fragments relevant to theology or epistemology. Along with the specific translation, which in some cases will be argued for, we will introduce the relevant debates. As will be mentioned in the introductory section of this first chapter, the material chosen for discussion can scarcely escape the charge that it is arbitrarily picked. A fuller explanation of the methodology of that chapter will be explained there.

The next task will be the reconstruction of Xenophanes’ epistemological views.²⁶ If Xenophanes’ epistemology is causally related to his theology, as I argue here, then it is also important to settle on a model for understanding his

²⁴ Jaeger, p. 7.

²⁵ This methodological agreement will lead us to a theological disagreement. Jaeger finds that in Xenophanes we have a “new motif, which is the actual source of his theology.” He locates his source, not on logical proof, nor on epistemological ideas, but on “an immediate sense of awe at the sublimity of the Divine.” It is this feeling of reverence that leads Xenophanes to deny the shortcomings and limitations of Homer’s gods. Although this sounds much more like nineteenth century Otto’s “mysterious tremendum” (in his famous The Idea of the Holy) than Xenophanes to me, I do not wish to deny that Xenophanes had genuine reverence for his god. But I find more textual evidence to locate the “source” of his theology on major epistemological qualms, which (possibly combined with a quasi-Kantian reverence) led him to his radical revolution in religious thought. See Jaeger, p. 49. The argument here will align much closer to Snell’s statement: “[Xenophanes’] hinges his theological speculation not upon the omnipotence of the god, but on his cognitive capacity.” B. Snell, The Discovery of the Mind, p. 141.

²⁶ In the light of contemporary epistemology Xenophanes’ thinking seems unlikely to provide much contribution. In response see Everson’s argument for historical studies. He quotes M. Frede: “It is difficult to see how one would not benefit philosophically when, in doing the history of philosophy, one tries to find as good a philosophical reason as possible to take the most diverse, if not perverse, philosophical views.” Moreover, Everson is correct that “...without such study it is that much more difficult to maintain a proper perspective on the intricacies of contemporary debate.” See Everson, pp. 3ff.

epistemological views. Is Xenophanes a proto-sceptic, empiricist, rationalist, naturalist, or fallibilist? What viable model, if any, can we construct from the fragments we possess? While at first glance it seems reasonable to side with commentators who ascribe to him the status of first epistemologist, at the same time there is no debate that Xenophanes has left us with mostly sketchy views, and unsupported statements. However some arguments are implicit, and with a charitable but not overly generous reading I see evidence that Xenophanes developed a naturalist epistemology, leaning towards fallibilism. His views were an outgrowth of empirical observation, but not an early version of empiricism. His views were sceptical in nature but did not lead to an absurd view that discouraged inquiry by reducing every opinion to equal status. His views were both the result of his religious and culturally cosmopolitan experiences²⁷ and the partial foundation of his religious reformation. His scientific, and rigorously rational, epistemological convictions forced him to embark on a philosophical quest that would prove to undermine major contemporary cultural assumptions. While it is true, as Jaeger says, that Xenophanes' theology is not so radical when seen in the light of Anaximander's cosmology - nevertheless, it is

²⁷ So while we can trace a tight and "symbiotic" relationship between Xenophanes' theology and his epistemological views, it cannot be said that his ideas were developed in an epistemic vacuum. He may have believed that there was an infinite nothing below the earth (as a scientific fragment testifies), but he was on top of the earth in the midst of a cosmopolitan culture. Xenophanes could very well have had influences from the east. That he did not "adopt" any eastern cosmology seems clear enough. From my survey of secondary literature on the pre-Socratics in general, and Xenophanes in particular, the possibility of Persian-Babylonian influence is seldom addressed. Recent work (Burkert 1992, West 1994) addresses this potential for oriental influence. Regardless of the exact origin of those cultural influences, one thing is certain: Xenophanes' epistemological limits are partially founded upon his awareness of the diversity of human thinking, i.e., of its cosmopolitan nature.

still a radical departure for his day. Moreover, it has always been the case that it is more difficult, and demands more courage, to reform religion than to renounce it.

Thirdly I will seek to construct a philosophically and philologically viable interpretation of Xenophanes' natural theology. One would not expect after a century of argument to find an interpretation that will settle all of the hermeneutical questions. However, new philological research (i.e., Palmer 1998, Mansfeld 1987, Finkelberg 1990) and new philosophical insights (Leshner 1992, Di Marco 1998) sifted through historical interpretations (Guthrie, Barnes, Jaeger, Steinmetz, etc.) will lend credence to an interpretation which, if not indisputable, will be philosophically plausible. As implied above, the road to establishing a view of Xenophanes' philosophical theology is marred with the potholes of inaccurate doxographical reports, fragmented sources, and biased interpreters. I will steer a course avoiding the inaccuracies of the doxographical reports, partly by good philological research; keeping in mind Xenophanes' own dictum that God has not revealed all to humanity, but that human effort (seeking) is involved in the search for knowledge (F 18). It is hoped that the danger (too often not averted by contemporary commentators) of building too much on too little, will be circumvented by a healthy Xenophanean scepticism. Finally as we work our way toward a viable interpretation, it is hoped that by thorough examination of the major interpreters we can avoid the biases of some who seek to see in Xenophanes their own reflection.

The nature of this study is such that the very process aids the conclusion. A thorough discussion of Xenophanes' theology is quite difficult without encountering

his rigorous epistemic views, and when seeking to understand his epistemology one is forced to face Xenophanes' theological understanding, which he consistently uses to illustrate the limits of human knowledge. It will hopefully become apparent that the only way to avoid this "causal connection" is by imputing a theological sophistication and epistemological metaphysical world-view unlikely of this early philosopher.

Section 2 - Xenophanes' Dates

That Xenophanes was born in Colophon (a Greek Ionian city) is generally accepted; when he was born, like many things about Xenophanes, is under contention. Since it is unlikely that the precise dating of Xenophanes' life will affect this argument, we can consider it sufficient to summarize the primary points.²⁸ Diogenes Laertius says that Xenophanes flourished in the 60th Olympiad which would mean a birth-date at about 575 BCE (A 1).²⁹ According to Clement of Alexandria Timaeus, the historian of Sicily (where Xenophanes most certainly visited, if not lived for a substantial amount of time), lists Xenophanes as a contemporary of Heiron and Epicharmus (A 8). Hieron's rule is dated from 478 to 467 (Epicharmus was also there). Given that we have it from Xenophanes' own testimony that he was alive and well at the age of ninety two these accounts may be reconciled (F 8). It is also the

²⁸ Two scholars deal with this issue in some detail. One is L. Woodbury in, "Apollodorus, Xenophanes, and the Foundation of Massilia" in Phoenix v. 15 (1961) pp. 134 - 155 and the other is Thesleff's in, On Dating Xenophanes, 1957. The former argues for a birth date which seems to be accepted by the majority, i.e., at 570 BCE.

case that a relatively late source (Censorinus) says that Xenophanes lived to be more than 100. The two accounts leave us with a birth-date around 570. Evidence for this date is compiled by tying his departure from Colophon to the conquest of Ionia by Harpagus the Mede in 546. It is certain that he knew Colophon before the invasion as he refers to the corruption of the Colophonians by Lydian luxury (F 3). By his own account Xenophanes “tossed about” the Greek land as a traveling bard for sixty-seven years, after leaving Colophon at the age of twenty-five (F 8).

On the other hand Clement quotes Apollodorus as having put the date of Xenophanes’ birth at about 620 - 617, adding that he survived to the time of Darius and Cyrus. Guthrie notes that this is a “strange phrase” given the order of the names (Cyrus died in 529 and Darius succeeded to power in 521).³⁰ He is correct to suggest that the phrasing gives rise to the suggestion that the sources have become distorted, and indeed he may be right to suggest that Clement has probably copied a mistaken report of Apollodorus’s estimate. He also notes that Diels explained the order of the names as due to exigencies of meter, as Apollodorus wrote in iambic trimeters.³¹ It is possible that the mention of the two names is connected to Clement’s motivation to connect Xenophanes’ history with two figures that play such an important role in biblical history. Possibly he is the source of the error in order.

Most contemporary scholars favor the later (570) over the earlier one. The weight of evidence is greater for this later date, and there is a tendency to accept

²⁹ As mentioned in n. 1, all references to fragments and testimonia will be given following the well utilized Diel - Krantz numbers, in *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 113 - 138.

³⁰ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* v. 1 (Cambridge: University Press, 1997), p. 362.

Xenophanes' testimony that he left Colophon at 25, and that this departure happened at, or immediately before, the Medeian invasion of Ionia. So we can dismiss the earlier date, with a degree of certainty that the most likely dates for Xenophanes rather long life are 570 to 470.³²

If one assumes he spent the first twenty-five years in Colophon, then the natural question is where is home post-Colophon? Unfortunately this too is shrouded in mystery. Diogenes says that being exiled from his country he lived in Sicily at Zancle³³ and Catana. His name became associated with Elea because of the common assumption that he founded the "Eleatic school". Kirk, Raven, and Schofield trace this assumption from Simplicius to Theophrastus to Aristotle (Met. 986b18) which in turn comes from Plato's association in the Sophist at 242D.³⁴ Plato says there: "But our Eleatic tribe, beginning from Xenophanes as well as even earlier, relates its stories on the assumption that what are called 'all things' are really one." Diogenes Laertius says that Xenophanes was supposed to have written two-thousand lines on the founding of Colophon and the settlement at Elea (A 1). This association is generally rejected by scholars reading the doxographical reports as conflating Xenophanes' and Parmenides' views. We will deal a bit more below with the accuracy of the doxology and particularly Pseudo-Aristotle's On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias which

³¹ Ibid., p. 362, n. 1.

³² This is Guthrie's conclusion at p. 363, and Barnes The Pre-Socratic Philosophers is not far off (580 BCE) p. 82. Leshner Xenophanes p. 3 as well as Kirk, Raven, and Schofield The Pre-Socratic Philosophers (Cambridge: University Press, 1995, hereon as KRS) agree that this is the best we can do.

³³ A name for Messina until about 480 BCE, Burnet points out that this use of the older name is evidence for an early source for this statement - "probably the elegies of Xenophanes himself." See Burnet, p. 114 n. 5.

³⁴ KRS, p. 165.

draws a close philosophical connection between Xenophanes and the Eleatic school.³⁵

Let it suffice for now to say that it is not improbable that Xenophanes was temporarily connected with Elea, but that his association with its founding is unwarranted.

Guthrie sums up well by saying:

he was an Ionian who lived many years among the Western Greeks, that on his own testimony his life was a wandering one, and that according to tradition his sojourn included Messana, Catana, Elea, and late in life, the court of Heiron at Syracuse.³⁶

Section 3 - Xenophanes' Writings

Of course the difficulty of such a long life, such a long time ago, is that it makes dating any of his writings very difficult. We do not know when, much less where, he would have written the vast majority of his poetic philosophy. Beyond this, we don't possess any work by Xenophanes, only fragments collected primarily from sources of the first few centuries after Christ. Added to this difficulty is the commonly acknowledged problem of the inaccuracies of the doxographical authors. However, light has been cast upon this dark reality by a century of philological work, beginning of course with H. Diels famous Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker. Albeit the light that has shown since Diels' work reveals a maze of difficulty, as much as a way out of the darkness.

The extant fragments which are in our possession are in hexameter and elegiacs, except for fragment 14 (iambic trimeter). The very fact that he wrote in

³⁵ See Chapter 3, section 1. Here on this work will be abbreviated as: MXG.

meter helps to date him in that era when there were no clear divisions between philosopher and poet, but it of course gives us no specific help in contextualizing the fragments. Leshner points out that in his elegiac poetry he touches on characteristic topics for poetry of his time: “on the gods and how they ought to be honored, on personal excellence and the well-being of the city, on moderation in the pursuit of wealth and pleasure, on proper conduct at symposia, and so on.”³⁷ However, in his satires (silloi) of fragments 10 - 22, and in other views ascribed to him, he branched out into new territory. He attacked religious ideas such as the conduct of the gods and “de-mythologized” many of the Greek gods or goddesses (e.g., “This that you think is Iris, is only a cloud.” F 32).

Two works of some import are attached to Xenophanes by the doxographers. One is mentioned as the fourth or fifth work of the Silloi. Guthrie thinks it likely that most of our current fragments come from this work.³⁸ The second work is also referred to by writers of the Christian era which is Xenophanes’ work “on nature”. Scholars have debated the existence of this work, with no clear result. Zeller, Diels, and Reinhardt seem assured that one did exist, while Burnet and Jaeger doubt it. J. Barnes argues convincingly that there is good reason to believe that if such a work did not exist, then “at least a fairly systematic and comprehensive parcel of scientific and philosophical verses” did.³⁹ His claim that F 34 (“the gods and everything about which I speak”) *implies* its existence may be rather weak, but compiled with the

³⁶ Guthrie, p. 364.

³⁷ Leshner, Xenophanes, p. 4.

³⁸ Guthrie, p. 366.

testimony of the doxology which three times refers to such a work, it makes a feeble argument stronger than the contrary (for which there seems little evidence, except presuppositions that Xenophanes was “only” a poet).⁴⁰

Of course the only motivation for arguing for a lost book which may have never existed, and of which there is no hope of finding, is that the probable existence of the book says something of significance about the author. In this case it says that Xenophanes was more than a simple poet who happened to say things philosophically (Burnet’s view). Barnes’ motivation for mounting such an argument is clearly centered in the desire to counter Burnet’s excessive thesis that Xenophanes could not have written such a work. While there is reason to think that Barnes is right, it isn’t necessary to place much weight in the postulation of such a work.⁴¹ Interpreters since Burnet have convincingly demonstrated that an engaged reading of the extant fragments, with a critical study of the doxographical reports lends plenty of evidence that Xenophanes was a philosopher worthy of the name. Though this is not the primary intention of this monograph, I hope that it will lend evidence to such a view.

³⁹ Barnes, (1996) p. 84.

⁴⁰ See Burnet p. 115-116 for the contrary view. His strongest evidence is that there is no internal evidence (refuted by Barnes) and that “Simplicius tells us he had never met with the verses about the earth stretching infinitely downwards” which he takes to mean that the Academy likely never possessed a copy of such a poem. But this is hardly evidence that another work “concerning nature” never existed.

⁴¹ I am a bit more positive than D. Babut on the possibility, but it is not without reason that he says: “...et bien que les arguments avancés à ce sujet ne semblent pas décisifs, il serait imprudent d’affirmer aujourd’hui que Xénophane était bien l’auteur d’un poème philosophique portant ce titre [Sur la nature].” See “Sur la << théologie >> de Xénophane” in Revue Philosophique 164 (1974) p. 402.

CHAPTER II

RELEVANT FRAGMENTS: TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY

Section 1 - Introduction

Given that our interpretation of Xenophanes is going to be built upon relatively limited textual evidence, it is important that diligent exegesis precede the interpretation. J. H. Lesher has recently completed an excellent translation and commentary. However, as there are areas where I will argue for a different rendering and a distinct interpretation, this effort seems worthwhile. Both the need for thorough exegesis and the attempt to offer an alternative textual interpretation make the translation and commentary an essential part of this enterprise. It is occasionally the case that different interpretations hang on a word or phrase. While these “words” could be introduced in the course of the argument, it seems more thorough, more methodologically clean, to approach the text with an attempt at sensitivity and openness first. By offering the translation, and in some cases arguing extensively for a particular reading, the study will rest solidly on a textual foundation.

However, as positive as this opening chapter may prove to be, I will admit that it is difficult to avoid the charge that it will be somewhat arbitrary. Knowing where textual commentary ends and a philosophical construction begin is not always easy. This demarcation is muddled with the same obscurities as concepts like self-

knowledge: opaque motivations and hidden intentions. While it is disingenuous to insinuate that one's translation and textual interpretation are not influenced by the philosophical interpretation in view, it would seem a more grievous error to begin without paying very close attention to the text itself. The methodology intended to make this opening enterprise, both faithful to the text and solid as a foundation upon which to build the interpretation is as follows: first the text and translation will be provided. When there is a significant translation issue, the goal will be to provide a plausible rendering and an argument which supports it. There are a few philological issues that relate to the interpretation of a particular fragment. These will be explored with a view towards adequate comprehension if not always an absolute conclusion. When there is not, in my view, a textual or translation issue that weighs on the argument, the translation will be provided without comment. Secondly when the fragment is the primary source of a philosophical debate which does bear on our thesis, the debate will be introduced. The resolution, or attempt, will be left until subsequent chapters. Because of the close textual correspondence it will be helpful to have the issues introduced as the translation is developed.

Section 2 - Translation and Commentary

Fragment 7: Diogenes Laertius 8.36

καί ποτέ μιν στυφελιζομένου σκύλακος παριόντα φασὶν ἐποικτῖται
καὶ τόδε φάσθαι ἔπος Παῦσαι μὴδὲ ράπις, ἐπεὶ ἡ φίλου ἀνέρος ἐστὶν ψυχὴ,
τὴν ἔψνων φθεγξαμένης ἁτων.

And they say that as he was passing by a dog being beaten, he felt compassion
and said this: “Stop, don’t beat it, since indeed it is the soul of a friend
whom I recognized upon hearing it cry out.”

The significance of this fragment for our present inquiry is in his critical and sarcastic tone, also evident in many of the following fragments. Scholarly consensus is that this represents Xenophanes’ ridicule of Pythagoras’ view of metempsychosis. This is true for Guthrie, Burkert, Barnes, KRS, and Fränkel. Leshner writes: “We may take two points of interpretation as fairly well settled: in this fragment Xenophanes alludes to a belief in metempsychosis or the transmission of the soul, and second, his story is intended as ridicule.”¹ The basis for this critical tone may be Xenophanes’ unique personality, his negative spirit attested to by several ancient commentators, but the philosophical basis for his reproach of metempsychosis is not as obvious. Did he think the soul mortal? Did he assume that the transference of the soul into another form was *prima facie* absurd? The possibilities are numerous, but the line of inquiry which seems most promising is the one being pursued here. There is good reason to

think that whatever Xenophanes believed about the soul is connected with what he thought about theology. The afterlife is almost always the purview of the gods for the Greeks. If our argument below holds, i.e. that Xenophanes' naturalist epistemology is intimately connected with his uniquely critical and negative theology, then we may develop at least an inkling as to why he would have thought something ridiculous which Plato some generations later, seems (at least in the middle dialogues) to find not so funny. A philosopher committed to scepticism, empiricism, or some naturalistic epistemology would find belief in "soul transfer" to be ill founded (e.g., based on the myths of the poets and/or superstitious stories of popular culture). We will see that Xenophanes does not hesitate to challenge both poetic assumptions and popular convictions in several fragments below.

Fragment 10: Herodian 296.6

ἐξ ἀρχῆς καθ' Ομηρον ἐπεὶ μεμαθήκασι πάντες

Since from the beginning all have learned according to Homer ...

There is an ambiguity as to whether "ἐξ ἀρχῆς" refers to the beginning of Greek culture or to the beginning of a person's education. Lesher argues for the latter, believing that this comment is best understood as complaining about the extent of Homer's influence on thought, conduct, behavior, and theology and that it is "natural"

¹Lesher, Xenophanes, p. 79.

but not “mandatory” to understand “from the beginning” this way.² This would seem a plausible reading given the thematic content of the other fragments, and the fact that in Greek the use of “learning” is often connected to the early stages of human development.

However “ἐξ ἀρχῆς” does often refer to “the beginning” as the starting point of the cosmos, human life, or culture.³ Xenophanes could have been making a broader point about the historical depth of Homer’s influence in Greek society. From the very outset of civilization, Homer has held sway. This is also consistent with Xenophanes’ other concerns, and would undoubtedly be seen by him as having a damaging impact on the Greek city states. Some of his other criticisms (F 11 and 12 on Homer’s corrupt influence on the understanding of the gods) and his philosophical context (e.g., the pre-Socratic emphasis on understanding the beginning) make this a plausible reading also. This interpretation would also interface with a major pre-Socratic concern: *arche* as a theoretical concept used in scientific inquiry.⁴

² Leshner, p. 81.

³ See for example Xenophon’s use in Memorabilia 1, 4, 5. It may also be significant that in other places Xenophanes used the more common prefix *απρ* when referring to the beginning. See, for example, F 18 where this is the case. If Xenophanes meant to make a strong statement about the beginning of education, and not the beginning of Greek culture, he failed to make it obvious to posterity.

⁴ This use of *arche* is detailed nicely by Gerson in God and Greek Philosophy (1994), p. 5ff. We will return to his thesis (which is by no means original) that the pre-Socratic’s natural theology is based on an observation of nature, and a methodology of argument, much akin to emerging science.

Since the fragment leaves us hanging, Diels has proposed that what we have learned is: “τοὺς θεοὺς κακίστους εἶναι”.⁵ Leshner points out a broader moral may have been intended.⁶ Whether one assumes Diel’s narrow theological ending, or Leshner’s broad moral, or whether one accepts that the beginning refers to one’s education or societies foundation, this fragment points to Xenophanes’ consistent nemesis: the substance of Homer’s theology and its negative impact on his culture.

Fragment 11: Sextus Empiricus Against the Professors 9.193

πάντα θεοῖς ἀνέθηκαν’ Ομηρός θ’ Ἡσίοδος τε, ὅσσα παρ’ ἀνθρώποισιν ὀνείδεα καὶ ψόγος ἐστίν, κλέπτειν μοιχεύειν τε καὶ ἀλλήλους ἀπατεύειν.

Homer and Hesiod have attributed to all the gods, the sorts of things that are reproachful and blameful to humanity, for example stealing, adultery, and mutual deceit.

Fragment 12: Sextus Empiricus Against the Professors 1.289

ὥς⁸ πλείστ’ ἐφθέγγαντο θεῶν ἀθεμίστια ἔργα. κλέπτειν μοιχεύειν τε καὶ ἀλλήλους ἀπατεύειν.

... as they sang of numerous wicked works of the gods: stealing, adultery and mutual deceit.

⁵ The fragment would then read: “So from the beginning, all have learned from Homer that the gods are depraved.”

⁶ Ibid., p. 81.

⁷ Heitsch suggests (Xenophanes) that Xenophanes use of this word is sarcastic. People honor the gods by “offering” something to the gods, i.e. Hesiod Works 658: “a tripod I dedicated [ἀνεθήκα] to the Muses.”

⁸ Mss = ὅς Deils’ emendation.

That these are meant as criticism of Homer and Hesiod is never doubted. The description of what is attributed to the gods is clearly evil. These are activities of a wicked moral nature, something unthinkable in a god. But why did Xenophanes have these views, and upon what basis? That the gods participated in adultery and deceit was the common understanding of Greek theology. What is the grounding for Xenophanes' conviction that the gods (or the god, as the case may be) would be morally perfect or at least superior to humans? This, of course, is one of the questions we are attempting to answer. There would seem to be two primary possibilities. One is a prior doctrine(s) of theological attributes (e.g., of divine moral perfection) which is held by Xenophanes and which contradicts the accounts of Hesiod and Homer. The other is that Xenophanes has grouped these characteristics with other anthropomorphic ones, and rejects them on the same basis, i.e., that the gods are not like humans.

Leshner finds that the first is most plausible. While admitting that Xenophanes does not commit himself to such a doctrine in any of the remaining fragments, he notes that the idea is attributed to him by Simplicius, and that this idea was shared by various Greek philosophers. Contra Leshner, it seems to me that the preponderance of evidence favors rooting Xenophanes' conviction in his anti-anthropomorphism with its putative negative social influence, rather than in a conviction of some attribute of god. This question will be addressed in chapter 3, and will impact how one views the interface of his negative epistemological views, and his seemingly positive theology.

Fragment 14: Clement Miscellanies 5.109

ἀλλ' οἱ βροτοὶ δοκέουσι γεννᾶσθαι θεοὺς τὴν σφετέρην ἐσθῆτα <τ'> ἔξειν φωνὴν τε δέμας τε.

But mortals assume that gods are born, wear their own clothes, and have a voice and body.

For our purposes the significant translation issue here is what to do with *dokeousi*. KRS translate it “consider”, Leshner “suppose”, Barnes “think.” I have chosen “assume” as it connotes the adoption of an idea without a good reason. This seems to me to be Xenophanes’ primary point. However, the translation difficulty comes in the realization that *δοκέω* can mean “seem” or “appear”. Hence one possible rendering is: “Mortals seem to have begotten gods...”

Leshner’s inclination is that since mortal conceptions of the gods are implicitly under discussion in several other fragments, this rendering (of mortal opinions begetting gods) is to be preferred. Leshner goes on to suggest that the etymology of *δοκέω* suggests an element of choice or will, which again would support the above reading. That is to say, mortals chose to create gods in their own image, and do so stupidly.

If “mortals” make this assumption, or have this thought, then the question arises (again) why doesn’t Xenophanes? Where does he ground this criticism of what most in his society took for granted? Even reading Homer, the average Greek would have assumed that the god’s clothes and bodies were somehow different than mere

mortals, but they would never have questioned the existence of a voice, or the reality of a body. One possible source of his criticism is the “civic results” of the poet’s anthropomorphism. However, the fact that gods are born, or have clothes and voices like humans, surely has no obvious dilatory social effect. While it is clear enough, that placing murderous and adulterous gods at the center of worship, could be understood as dangerous for society, having gods with human-like clothes and bodies is not a clearly dangerous idea. In chapter 3 I will argue that Xenophanes’ theological reform is based *both* upon a desire to rid society of a theology he finds corrupting, and upon his conviction that the knowledge claims upholding this destructive theology rest upon unsupported assumptions.

Fragment 15: Clement Miscellanies 5.110

εἰ <δὲ> τοι <ἵπποι> ἔξον χέρας ἢ βόες ἢ λέοντες ἢ γράψαι χεῖρεςσι καὶ ἔργα τελεῖν ἄπερ ἄνδρες. ἵπποι μὲν θ’ ἵπποισι, βόες δὲ τε βουσὶν ὁμοίας καὶ <κε> θεῶν ἰδέας ἔγραφον καὶ σώματ’ ἐποιοῦν τοιαῦθ’ οἷόντερ καὶ αὐτοὶ δέμας εἶχον ἕκαστοι.

But if the horses, cattle, and lions had hands or could paint with their hands and do works like humans, horses would paint gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make the bodies of the sort which each of them had.

Fragment 16: Clement: Miscellanies 7:22

Αἰθίοπες τε <θεοὺς σφετέρους> σιμοῦς μέλανάς τε Θρηῆκές τε γλαυκοὺς καὶ πυρροὺς <φασὶ πελέσθαι>

Ethiopians say that their gods have snub-noses and are black; Thracians that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired.

With these fragments Xenophanes moves from negative criticism to a positive conviction. A number of commentators have divided Xenophanes' negative statements from his positive ones, a few arguing that Xenophanes was only a critic and a "deconstructionist" in the sense that he only argued against Homer, not for some clear positive conception of the gods. Others indicate that he is inconsistent, sometimes preaching grand theological statements, while other times making statements that make him sound like a sceptic. And still others, as was mentioned in the introduction, simply ignore the apparent contradiction. My argument, simply put, is that Xenophanes did not wish to establish a new conceptual theology, but rather simply purge the old one of its inconsistencies. That this is the best direction for understanding Xenophanes' natural theology will hopefully come to light. But what must be found and explored is the epistemic grounding for these negative statements, and the extent to which Xenophanes believed himself to have appropriately based his anti-traditional theological views.⁹

In fragments 15 and 16 the positive conviction is less problematic than in other cases, for it is based on empirical observation. A common human tendency is to create the gods in our own image. KRS classify fragment 15 a "reductio ad

adsurdum” from fragment 16.¹⁰ For example, if different races have gods with corresponding characteristics, then clearly the beasts would also. The essential point of these observations is both undisputed and not stated. The relativity of cultural assumptions about the gods put those very assumptions in a questionable light. Given what he has said in the earlier fragments, and that all of these characteristics are bodily, there can be no doubt that Xenophanes thought Ethiopian theology as misplaced as Homer’s.

Leshner mentions three ways to understand Xenophanes’ intention: 1) as an argument against such conceptions of the gods; 2) as examples of such views of the divine; 3) as an explanation of the origins of such views.¹¹ Leshner says the determination among the three provides us with a difficulty but argues for the third. He believes that to commit Xenophanes to (1) would be to commit him a sort of

⁹It has rightly been observed that to argue “not *p*” (a “negative” argument) is equal to arguing “not *p* is true” (a “positive” proposition). The grounds for “not *p*” are as tied to the justification of the premises for the argument “not *p*” as for any argument for “*p*.” Xenophanes clearly seems to be doing more than just arriving at ambivalent conclusions in his theological statements. Even the “negative” statements (e.g., the gods don’t have a mortal body, are not born) are not couched in terms like “we have no more reason to believe that the gods are born, than not.” Such a position would certainly interface more effortlessly with his epistemological statements (e.g. F 34 no one knows the truth...). See particularly Hugh Benson’s work on the elenchos, most recently in his *Socratic Wisdom* (Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 32ff.

¹⁰ KRS, p. 169.

¹¹ Leshner, p. 91.

fallacy of origins.¹² However, I find Lesher's argument unnecessarily convoluted with anachronistic expectations. Indeed it seems most likely that Xenophanes, in a minimalist sense, had all three purposes in mind. This is not to commit him to the conviction that his observations were a strong argument, rather that his explanation of the origin of these views was evidence which would support an argument against their authority. That is to say the inference from this anthropological observation is evidence for an argument against the view that these theological speculations had authority. It is not, as Lesher points out, a stand alone and logically flawless argument (unless one posits an unacceptable premise, i.e., all true beliefs must stand in an appropriate causal nexus with what they are about).

If Xenophanes had meant to observe that different races picture their gods distinctly - without implying the absurdity of these pictures - surely he wouldn't have specified the characteristics which match the race. Moreover, it is very difficult to read F 15 without a smile that implies the absurdity of the way human beings have imaged their gods. Hence, as these fragments stand, they are examples of such views and carry an implicit rebuke of those holding them. One might question that Xenophanes believes he has explained the origin of the differing portraits of the gods,

¹² "In order for Xenophanes to employ his genetic explanation of religious conceptions as an argument for their falsity he would need to assume that the disreputable or irrelevant origins of a belief assured its falsity or, conversely that all true beliefs had an appropriate causal nexus with the events or states of affairs they were about." (p. 94). This is based on Lesher's conviction that the best way to understand this fragment is that an individual's subjective circumstances causally determine these aspects of their religious beliefs. This is, it seems to me is a correct reading, but his argument that Xenophanes would not have taken such "subjective grounding" as evidence against the "objective reality" of the conviction seems to me to thrust a logical rigor on the philosopher which is not fitting here. Lesher's analysis of the supposedly implicit argument is undoubtedly correct, but there is no reason to think that Xenophanes was committed to doing anything more than making a sociological observation, which he

but there are good reasons to think he believes this empirical observation is itself evidence against the rationality of such views.

It would seem appropriate to read this fragment with F 14 (i.e., mortals assume...) and speculate that Xenophanes not only had a distaste for anthropomorphizing the gods, but also had a theory about the development of popular theology. This theory, in its most limited construction, would have included the observation that “mortals” make poor assumptions based on their limited experience. They “transfer” the elements of their limited experience upon a faulty image of the gods and wrongly assume they have these similar characteristics. This implies that a Xenophanean argument against anthropomorphism would include a premise on limited human experience, and proper empirical observation. It will be noted in a later argument that Xenophanes was seemingly proud of his extensive travels and would most likely have seen his cosmopolitan experiences as a source of wisdom.

Though he is stating a positive inference based on his observation of other cultures, in this fragment we still find the voice, not of a constructive theologian, but of a social critic. He is not here suggesting how we ought otherwise conceive of the god(s), or even if we should seek to picture them at all. Guthrie even remarks that Fragment 16 seems to mark the foundation of social anthropology. This combined with his remarks on fossils we find evidence for a true nature philosopher, drawing critical inferences from natural observation.¹³

took to be evidence against, not a knock down argument contra, the anthropomorphizing of the gods.

Fragment 17: Scholium on Aristophanes Knights 408

ἐστᾶσιν δ' ἐλάτης <Βάκχοι> πυκινὸν περὶ δῶμα.

... and bacchantes of pine stand around the well-fenced house.¹⁴

This fragment continues the tradition of ridiculing the popular conception of the gods as superior, but ultimately human-like creatures. There are two interpretations of this criticism mentioned in secondary literature. The first is epitomized by Guthrie: “Gods with human clothes and bodies, gods with snub noses or red hair, and now a god in vegetable form!”¹⁵ This view is not unlikely, given Xenophanes distaste for all forms of superstition. But it is also possible that the referent is not divine, but divine assistance. There was a common folk superstition in which green branches were cut and put around the house in order to derive godly protection.¹⁶ Leshner connects this with Xenophanes’ belief in divine immobility. “Xenophanes’ god is not only not a man, or an animal, or a pine branch, he is also not the sort of being that could flit about from place to place to intercede in the course of natural events for the sake of the safety of a particular house or its inhabitants.”¹⁷

Fragment 18: Stobaeus Physical Selections 1.8.2.

Οὗτοι ἀπ' ἀρχῆς πάντα θεοὶ θνητοῖς ὑπέδειξαν, ἀλλὰ χρόνῳ ζρόνῳ ζητοῦντες ἐφευρίσκουσιν ἄμεινον.

¹³ Guthrie, p. 373.

¹⁴ The preceding sentence in the Scholium reads: “...the branches which the initiates carry, Xenophanes mentions in the *Silloi*: and bacchantes of pine stand round the well-fenced house.”

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 372.

¹⁶ Leshner, p. 95.

¹⁷ Ibid., 96.

Indeed from the beginning the gods did not reveal all things to mortals, but as they search in time they discover better.

Within the text itself there are a number of ambiguities which make interpretation difficult. For example: “If indeed the gods did not reveal all things, are we to imagine that they might have revealed a few? If indeed the gods did not reveal all things at the outset, are we to understand that they might have revealed some things later on?”¹⁸ However, there are a couple of textual elements that aid in its interpretation. The first is the meaning of ὑπέδεικνυμι which is to reveal or show. Leshner translates it as “intimate”, but since the word is most often used with something that is shown in a partial, indirect or secretive manner, “reveal” seems to fit the sense better. This is particularly the case since the word or its cognate is used in early Greek as the “operative verb for divine communication.”¹⁹

The second textual element is the verb ζητέω which: “bears the rather prosaic meaning of ‘searching about for.’”²⁰ It is often used as looking for a lost item (*Iliad* 14.258; Hesiod *Works* 400) and typically combined with the words “throughout the land or the house”. Leshner speculates that Xenophanes’ audience would therefore have heard “by searching they find out better” and understood him to be recommending not simple inquiry, but travel. This is, of course, exactly what Xenophanes says he has done, and even if he hadn’t, we could have gotten the idea

¹⁸ Leshner p. 152.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Leshner, p. 154.

from the reference of many of the fragments that he certainly “searched about” the Mediterranean world.²¹

So the essential element of this fragment is straightforward. There is a contrast between divine revelation and humanity’s present hope at knowing or understanding better: seeking. This still does not tell us if divine communication is at all possible (maybe the gods will still tell us some things?) or of what this “searching about” consists. However, as for the latter, we can speculate (and will at greater lengths in the following chapters) that Xenophanes is contrasting limited experience with broad experience. That is, in light of F 16 (“Ethiopians say their gods are snub-nosed...”) that he would reject the kind of searching which is limited and provincially based, and would advocate a “searching about” that would include as much data as is humanly possible.

This fragment has often been read as one of the first, or the first, statements about the hope in social progress. Babut’s account is representative.²² He focuses on three ideas which appear to be present in the statement: 1) that progress depends on human activity; 2) that progress is continuous change; and 3) that progress is an unending process. He builds a great deal on the relativity of “better” and he ties this to Xenophanes’ belief in the relativity of human knowledge as expressed in F 38.

Leshner warns against an interpretation which focuses on social-intellectual

²¹ Fragment 8: “Now seven and sixty years have tossed my cares Throughout the length and breadth of Hellas’ land...” See Guthrie, pp. 362 - 364.

progress for three reasons.²³ First he notes that the other fragments “sit uncomfortably” with the idea that Xenophanes had a faith in such progress. Several other fragments seem to express negative notions about human prospects. For example fragments 1-3 Xenophanes complains about socially destructive practices, and in A1 he alludes to his own experience in the demise of a city. Second, the fragment speaks only of the success of individual seekers and not of humanity as a whole. Third, Xenophanes only spoke of “discovering better” not of the advance of social institutions or culture.

This first objection stands as a rather weak reproach to the “progress reading” given that: a) the number of fragments which do have this negative social critique is small, and; b) that his critical statements can, almost without exception, be read as expressions of suppressed hope (i.e., if humans just get their methodology right, then ...). The second seems a particularly fragile objection, as we have no reason to believe that Xenophanes would have understood the “society” of his day as anything more than a simple compilation of its parts. If the parts work correctly, the whole will move more appropriately. Lesher’s final objection is well stated. But one needn’t interpret this fragment as an expression of a conviction in a continual “utopian” progress, and yet see the implied hope for humanity.

²² D. Babut, “L’Idée de Progrès et la Relativité du Savoir Humain selon Xénophane.” It seems typical of those espousing this view to make much hay over Xenophanes being the first to promote the idea of progress. E.g., “Dans cette perspective, Xénophane devrait être regardé comme le premier témoin, dans l’histoire de la pensée grecque, de l’idée de progrès.”

²³ Lesher, pp. 152 - 153. See also his “Xenophanes” in *Ancient Philosophy* (11, 1991), pp. 229 - 248.

Leshar is correct to encourage hermeneutical humility in the face of so many unknowns, and his voice is very tentative at this point. However he argues for a “plausible” account, which limits the meaning of this text to scientific inquiry, rather than some faith in social progress.²⁴ His account is plausible, but in the end seems too narrowly defined. Since Xenophanes would not have limited the implications of his methodological shift (from seeking knowledge from divine revelation to seeking knowledge by searching) to what we know of as natural science, it is wrong to limit a present day interpretation by such language. Could one argue that Xenophanes would not have understood his “searching” to include theological (e.g., “she whom they call Iris, this too is by nature a cloud,” F 32) or epistemological (his tasting of honey and figs, for example) implications? Furthermore, while it is true that Xenophanes is never found to be a social optimist, there is good reason to think that he believed in the potential betterment of the society following his more rigorous and reason-centered method for deriving knowledge. For example in F 2 Xenophanes contrasts his expertise (*σώφρων*) with those who do sports (e.g., boxing). The latter are honored by the city more though they deserve it less.

...For our expertise is better than the strength of men and horses. But this practice makes no sense nor is it right to prefer strength to this good expertise. For neither if there were a good boxer among the people, nor if there were a pentathlete or wrestler nor again if there were someone swift afoot - which is most honored of all men's deeds of strength - would for this reason a city be better governed. Small joy would a city have from this - if someone were to

²⁴ “Fragment 18, therefore, may not have been the exercise in a priori sociology (of either the 5th-century BC or the 19th-century variety) it has often been taken for, but rather the rejection of an order, inadequate approach to the understanding of natural marvels through myth, legend, or simple superstition - and a call, in so many words, to natural science.” Leshar p. 155.

be victorious in competing for a prize on Pisa's banks - for these do not enrich a city's treasure room. (Fragment 2, Athenaeus 10.412f.)

The implication here is that his expertise in wise and rational government is undervalued. If we keep this in mind, with what is testified about Xenophanes' distrust for divination (see A 52 and the discussion in the following chapter), Fragment 18 would seem to run on a parallel track. That is, the way to gain understanding is not through the games of divination (or any other method for determining the knowledge of the gods), but rather through his expertise of intellectual inquiry. The people undervalue the latter at their own demise, and conversely, when they give attention to "searching about" one might rightly assume that Xenophanes would have believed that some progress would have resulted, not just for the individual, but for society as a whole. This account does not commit Xenophanes to a speculative idea of "perpetual human progress", but to a "consequentialist-view" of progress. If the people who make up society move from a corrupt and ineffective method of understanding to one based on critical observation then the result will rightly be societal progress.

Fragment 23: Clement Miscellanies 5.109

Εἷς θεὸς ἔν τε θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισι μέγιστος, οὐτι δέμας θνητοῖσιν ὁμοίτος οὔτε νόημα.

One god among gods and men is greatest, not like mortals in body or mind.

There are two fundamental questions arising from this fragment. One is textual and the other is epistemological. The textual question is: how many

predicates are intended? If there are three (one, greatest, and *not like*), then the most significant unanswered question about his passage is answered: Xenophanes is a monotheist. However, many scholars only see two (greatest among, and not like), which tends to place Xenophanes into a henotheistic position (i.e., there is one greatest god among gods). Indeed a conclusive determination is most likely beyond the scope of possibilities, but this does not imply that all accounts are of equal worth.

We will save discussion on this question until chapter IV where we discuss this central element of his theology. But here we should introduce the obvious epistemological question: how does he *know* this? This question is the substance of our thesis, for if Xenophanes is a monotheist then we will want to understand why he would seemingly contradict both the theological teachings of his culture AND his commitment to some form of limited scepticism. If we want to show that he is comfortable contradicting the former on the basis of the latter, then a real problem develops if he also is willing to transgress the principles of his epistemic humility for a theological conviction which seems to come from nowhere.

Here it will suffice to present the issues for that forthcoming (albeit tentative) resolution. First, there is the question of number. Is there one God, or just one great god? Second there is the question of monism. Does, as some of the doxographers have suggested, Xenophanes identify his god with the world? Third, there is the related question of body. If the god's body is not like mortals, what is it like? Is it possible that Xenophanes would have conceived of a god without a body? Fourth, if this god's mind is not like mortals, what is it like? Is it possible that Xenophanes'

god does not represent a self-conscious being, but rather a force which has an inherent intelligent design (a version of logos)? Or was Xenophanes deducing (from the premise that anthropomorphism is wrong) that the god's mind had to be altogether different, without the attempt to specify exactly how? Or possibly, given that his emphasis is upon the "greatness" of this god, he means to imply that this god has a superlative version of the human mind.

Fragment 24: Sextus Empiricus Against the Professors 9.144

οὐλος ὅρα, οὐλος δὲ νοεῖ, οὐλος δέ τ' ἀκούει.

whole he sees, whole he thinks, and whole he hears.

The primary difficulty in translating this text is whether to read the "whole" as subject or adverb. One alternative translation is: "All of him sees, all thinks, all hears."²⁵ Guthrie's is: "He sees as a whole, perceives as a whole, hears as a whole"²⁶ while Edmond's translates: "all eye, all mind, and all ears."²⁷ In this case the translation seems less important than the interpretation, or to put it another way, the interpretation of Xenophanes' intention heavily informs one's translation.

Guthrie notes that Diogenes, reporting this line in oratio obliqua adds "but does not breathe."²⁸ He thinks it likely that Diogenes understood that Xenophanes was a monist, and that here he is contrasting Xenophanes with the Pythagoreans' breathing

²⁵ KRS, p. 170.

²⁶ Guthrie, p. 374.

²⁷ Taken from Leshner, p. 103.

²⁸ Guthrie, p. 374. The Greek is "μη μεντοι αναπνειν" from IX, 19, DK, A1.

world. As Guthrie says, one cannot be certain whether the actual words were present in Xenophanes' poem, but both he and KRS conclude that it is likely. Since there is no compelling reason to believe otherwise and since it is probably not accidental that they end as a dactylic hexameter we can conclude these were the words of Xenophanes.²⁹

Why he uttered these words is another matter. Guthrie concludes that since there is nothing besides "the one" there is "nothing for the god to breathe." While one cannot argue with the logic, there is no compelling reason to make Xenophanes a monist.³⁰ Leshner concurs that the words were likely there, but gives another possible rendering besides the contrast to the Pythagoreans' breathing world. He thinks the phrase may be triggered by the use of "freni" in F 25 which are the organs in the chest linked to breath. In any case it is correct to associate this fragment with Xenophanes' most famous soap box: anthropomorphism, as will become clear in chapter 3.

Fragment 25: Simplicius Commentary on Aristotle's Physics 23.19

ἀλλ' ἀπάνευθε πόνοιο νόου φρενὶ πάντα κραδαίνει.

but without any effort he shakes everything by the thoughts of his mind.

Fragment 26: Simplicius Commentary on Aristotle's Physics 23.10

αἰεὶ δ' ἐν ταύτῳ μῖμνει κινούμενος οὐδέν, οὐδὲ μετέρχεσθαι μιν ἐπιπρέπει ἄλλοτε ἄλλη.

²⁹ Guthrie, p. 374, fn. 2.

³⁰ On this there is more to say later. The central point is that the doxographers were wrong to conflate Xenophanes with Parmenides.

He always remains in the same place, not moving at all; nor is it fitting for him to go to different places at different times,

KRS place fragment 26 as the first part of a sentence which is completed by fragment 25.³¹ Though we can't be certain of Simplicius' source, this is most likely the correct reading. In any case the two are clearly related and complimentary thoughts.

In fragment 25 we find the deity given what seems like a strange action for a rational god: shaking everything. Karl Popper argues that the real sense of the verb (though not found in any dictionary) is "reign".³² Leshner has a very helpful discussion of this verb, and notes that while there are some who argue for a different translation (e.g., Calogero who opts for emending the verb to *κραανει* i.e., to accomplish), there is a long tradition of this expression which connotes awesome power. "[*κραδανω*] is an apt expression for a deity in its meaning of 'shake' (cf. Poseidon's epithet 'earth-shaker' and Zeus' shaking of Olympus either by nodding his head (*Iliad* 1.530) or seating himself (*Iliad* 8.443), or Jehovah's promise (*Isaiah* 13:13; 2:19), 'I will shake the heavens.'"³³ Given the historical context of this image and its obvious indication of power, "shake" seems to me the proper translation. Popper says that to *rule* or *reign* connotes a commanding concern and presence that is

³¹ KRS, p. 170.

³² Popper, p. 53-55.

present in this verb. Given Xenophanes other statements, it is not unthinkable that he had this in mind, but for a translation it would seem irresponsible to take the verb to places it has never been because of a potential interpretation of the term.

In F 26 one is pleased to find Xenophanes giving a clear reason for his theological conviction, even if not pleased with the reason itself. Xenophanes' god does not move hither and thither. Why? It is not fitting. "Xenophanes thus appears to accept the well-established Greek criterion of *seemliness*."³⁴ Barnes maintains that "seemliness" is logical. He contends that analytically, the idea of non-human-like-movement is contained in "god." In chapter IV it will be argued that this is likely too strong, but one hopes that there is more substance to Xenophanes' reason than aesthetics.³⁵

Fragment 34: Sextus Empiricus Against the Professors 7.49.110

καὶ τὸ μὲν οὖν σαφὲς οὔτις ἀνὴρ ἶδεν 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.

And on the one hand, no man knows, or ever will have certain knowledge

³³ See Leshner, p. 107. Indeed as one who has experience an earthquake in Greece, it isn't hard for me to imagine that such an experience would be used as an expression of ultimate power, and that such an expression would be a poignant image of that power. Possibly because of this middle eastern reality there are numerous passages in the ancient Hebrew worship book, the Psalter, which speak of Yahweh "shaking" the heavens and earth.

³⁴ KRS, p. 170.

³⁵ "...the phrase 'it is not fitting' is Xenophanes' archaic and poetical version of 'it is not logically possible'." Barnes, p. 85. One can question whether Barnes is right to think that his interpretation does not "strain" the Greek, but he is correct to think that such a direction will turn out to be "consonant" with the tenor of Xenophanes' theological reasoning.

of what is the truth about the gods and about everything I speak;
for even if one chanced to say the complete truth,
still one knows it not, but on the other hand opinion is given to all.

Most translators of this passage, probably seeking to avoid the somewhat stilted reading (as above), seem to ignore the *μεν* - *δε* construction (particles of contrast). This is unfortunate, as this contrast carries a good deal of the interpretive weight. There is here a clear contrast between knowledge, and the *δοκος* which is given to everyone. That Xenophanes means to contrast two different “cognitive states” is clear. What those two states exactly represent, is unfortunately not as certain - although a mass of diverse opinions has indeed been given to many.

In a later section we will seek to develop a comprehensive and coherent interpretation of what this fragment says about Xenophanes’ epistemology. Indeed it is right to call it a “master fragment” and it is possible to build a great deal upon it (easy to build more than it will bear, also).³⁶ Here we will simply note other relevant translation issues.

First, and most importantly, is how to translate *τό σαφές*. The ways of translating this word are various, but broadly speaking those ways vary little beneath the surface. Barnes translates ‘the clear truth,’ Guthrie ‘the certain truth,’ KRS ‘the truth,’ and Fränkel ‘the exact truth’.³⁷ One exception, or addendum, to this understanding of the word is provided by Hugh Benson. He argues that Plato’s early

³⁶ Leshner following M. M. Mackenzie, see Leshner p. 160.

Socrates did not have a narrow understanding of “certainty” in discussions of knowledge (often using this Greek word), but his view of knowledge would have been closer to “understanding.” Benson says that it is not implausible that Socrates’ understanding of the “knowledge” of Xenophanes, Heraclitus, and Parmenides was related to this broader concept.

Could not the exclusivity these philosophers associate with knowledge be a result not of the certainty required for knowledge but of the understanding required? It may not be the gods’ ability to be certain that makes them especially suited for such knowledge but rather their ability to assimilate, systematize, keep consistent and so explain and comprehend a vast body of data that makes them suited to such knowledge.³⁸

There is, of course, good evidence that Benson’s view is correct. In the context of Socratic interpretation, this makes a great deal of difference. In the Xenophanean context it makes less. Whether Xenophanes had in mind a restricted certainty or a broad-based understanding connected to a view of the cosmos, is of less importance than the central idea that the gods had it, and humans do not. At this juncture it will suffice to note that for Xenophanes this word denoted a direct, clear, hence reliable, awareness of things. This may have been based on a concept closer to understanding than to knowledge, but what is certain is that the gods possessed it; humans rarely, if ever, do. Benson’s account will be of help, however, as we turn to examine how Xenophanes sought to make up for humanity’s lack of “certain knowledge.” He was not, it appears, interested in finding narrow truths of certainty (analytical or

³⁷ Leshner has a helpful discussion of this issue, and we need not reproduce it here., pp. 156 - 157.

³⁸ Benson, *Socratic Wisdom*, p. 217.

otherwise), but of searching broadly in order to understand better; seemingly (as we will argue) without much hope of ever reaching absolute certainty.

Second is what to make of Xenophanes' use of the perceptual verb ἰδεῖν "to see" in line 1. Fränkel argued that such a use required us to understand the εἰδὼς in line 2 literally, i.e., as "having seen" rather than "knowing". This fits into Fränkel's interpretive argument which seeks to give Xenophanes a "robust empiricism."³⁹

Leshner's first objection is not strong (i.e., Fränkel's thesis drastically reduces the impact of Xenophanes' argument), but his second one is sufficient to undermine Fränkel. This will be examined in some detail in the following chapter.⁴⁰

Thirdly, to understand this fragment it is essential to distinguish δόκος from knowledge. This word means conjecture, supposition, or opinion, and does not imply that those conjectures, suppositions, or opinions are false or even likely false.

Parmenides' and Plato's δόξα are of such "inferior status" that one might infer that Xenophanes means to imply human opinions are false, or are very likely to be so.⁴¹

There is much more to say on this with fragment 35 in the subsequent chapter.

So there is no standard interpretation of this fragment. Leshner notes that the best known and most frequently discussed view, Fränkel's "empiricist account" is "almost certainly not correct as it stands..." Below we will argue against Leshner's foe, but also seek to clarify Leshner's account as well. Leshner starts off on the right foot as he says:

³⁹ Fränkel, "Xenophanes' Empiricism" p. 123.

⁴⁰ See pp. 54 ff.

⁴¹ See Leshner on this, p. 159.

The most promising accounts, in my opinion, see fragment 34 in the light of a traditional ‘poetic pessimism’ voiced frequently in epic and archaic Greek poetry, place a significant weight on the sharply limited direct experience available to ‘mortal men’ over the course of their lifetimes (in contrast to the *noos* possessed by the divine), and connect these traditional ideas with the special sort of inquiry Xenophanes and his fellow Ionian philosophers practiced, perhaps even invented.⁴²

Fragment 35: Plutarch Table Talk 9.7.746b

ταῦτα δεδοξάσθω μὲν εἰκότα τοῖς ἐτύμοισι.

Let these be accepted, certainly, as like the realities (but...)

This was stated by a speaker in Plutarch to encourage a shy companion to state his opinions. This is, unfortunately, all we know of the history of this fragment. Nothing is known of the original context and so interpretations are built around “small and incidental features.”⁴³ For the purpose of this monograph, we need not rehearse the many plausible options which present themselves, as almost all substantial interpretations are based on an unacceptable amount of speculation. It will suffice to point out the obvious essential meaning and make a few observations.

Xenophanes is again contrasting two realities. In this case, unlike fragment 34, the realities are not just cognitive, but are metaphysical. Let us accept this as being “like” reality, or as a valid conjecture of it. This implies, as Popper points out, that there is a reality, a “truth” with which we are in touch, but we may not have the experience or opportunity to verify our “conjectures.”⁴⁴ This need not imply a

⁴² Ibid., 160.

⁴³ Leshner, p. 171.

⁴⁴ Popper, *Parmenides*, p. 46ff.

platonic (or Parmenidean) *metaphysical* distinction between the realm of ultimate reality and appearances. There is no other evidence that Xenophanes developed such a relatively sophisticated view. Most plausibly his metaphysic is that of the “rational-poet” who has understood that things are not always as they seem, and who seeks to use his experience to search out the best possible explanation of events or realities, but not that of the post-Parmenidean philosopher who has learned to distrust sense-experience altogether.

The most interesting account of F 35 is when it is read as an introduction to F 34. To paraphrase: “accept the things I say about the gods as being like reality, but no one will ever know, but opinion has been granted to all.” While this exercise is helpful in that it gives F 35 a context it didn’t have, such speculation is not necessary to gain an understanding of the one essential aspect of the fragment, i.e., Xenophanes understood the difficulty of claiming more than “a likeness” about many of the things he talked about - which from our fragments, looks primarily theological. Given F 34, and what we will see in F 38, this interpretation seems to interface nicely with Xenophanes limitations on knowledge.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Leshner says on F 35: “Since an author would not normally urge his audience to accept his account while simultaneously demeaning it by describing it as inadequate or inferior, it is difficult to take Xenophanes’ comment to mean ‘Let these be accepted, certainly, they are merely conjectures only resembling how things are’” (p. 174). I’m not at all sure how proper qualification is understood by Leshner as “demeaning it as inadequate”. Surely the most natural reading is that of a speaker who is seeking to be clearly understood, and who does not want to be seen as overstating his case, or as ignoring the difficulties of the issue at hand. Indeed an expression of “honest doubt and appropriate concessions” is often counseled by those teaching persuasive speaking.

Fragment 38: Herodian On Peculiar Speech 41.5

εἰ μὴ χλωὸν ἔφυσε θεὸς μέλι, πολλὸν ἔφασκον γλύσσονα σῦκα πέλεσθαι.

If god had not made honey, men would think that figs were much sweeter.

While a moral reading of this fragment is not out of the realm of possibilities (i.e., if men had never tasted the luxury of honey, they would be satisfied with figs, and should be anyway) it is not the most likely interpretation. Why would Xenophanes appeal to the god's originating honey, if he was only concerned with its misuse? The implications here are epistemic before they are moral. First note that it dovetails with ideas already expressed by Xenophanes: our judgments are based upon our (limited) experience. We have seen the implications of this same thought as it relates to theology in F 15 & 16. Second, and *a fortiori*, with the introduction of "the god" Xenophanes brings to mind the same duality we have run into before. There is the *noos* (mind) of the gods, and the finite experience of human beings. Here the implications of that "fact" are drawn out: different experiences mean distinct conclusions.

Does this lead us down the slope of cultural relativism to land in complete scepticism? The answer of course, is dependent upon the extent of relativity, and Xenophanes' definition of human knowledge and its limits. We will seek to set the former, and define the latter in light of the fragments, the testimonia we can trust, and the wider poetic and philosophical context below.

CHAPTER III

XENOPHANES' NATURALISTIC EPISTEMOLOGY

"I have learned the mind of many men..." Odysseus (I. 3)

Section 1 - Introduction

Timon of Philus, some two centuries after Xenophanes' death, brings back this pre-Socratic thinker in his fictional account of a visit to philosophical spirits of the past. Xenophanes acts as Timon's guide, and in fragment 60 (D.K.) Timon expresses qualified praise for his philosophical predecessor. His admiration is based on Xenophanes' personality being free of conceit,¹ avoiding dogmatism, vanity, and a thirst for pleasure and fame.² Given that Timon was a follower of the sceptic Pyrrho it seems likely that Timon's praise is based on Xenophanes' scepticism as expressed in F 34 where he rejects *to saphes* (certain knowledge or complete understanding).

However correctly Timon has portrayed Xenophanes' epistemology, he gives an account of Xenophanes' theological views which is logically inconsistent. In fragment 59, Timon writes as if Xenophanes is a monist, and in fragment 60 as if his god is separate from humanity. It is not clear how Timon would reconcile a monistic view of nature with a god who is transcendent. Moreover either picture is hard to square with the scepticism for which Xenophanes is praised. Given that Timon is

¹ From Diogenes Laertius - DK A1.

² Timon probably had in mind F3 where Xenophanes is critical of undue wealth and boasting, of F 34 & 38 where he is critical of undue knowledge claims, and of F 2 where he is critical of undue praise.

writing a satire and not a history of philosophy, we may not be surprised by this apparent philosophical ambivalence. But of other accounts we expect at least recognition of the tension involved in these concepts. However, the closest we come in the ancient testimonia to reconciling this inconsistent triad (without the mention of transcendence, however) is Pseudo-Galen's assertion (A 35): "Xenophanes having doubted all things, believed firmly only that all things were one and that this was god, limited, rational, and changeless."

Following the majority of present-day scholars, we will discard Xenophanean monism as an unfortunate ancient misinterpretation (the argument will be fleshed out in chapter 3). However, as we can see from the fragments, Xenophanes did have a conception of theism that, *prima facie*, sits poorly with his epistemic humility. Timon is one of the first among a multitude who do not try to reconcile Xenophanes' rigid epistemic notions with his speculative theological ones. And yet there are reasons to think that not only are the two strains of thought consistent, but to some extent mutually dependent. By way of demonstrating this, let us first clarify the limitations that Xenophanes seeks to place on human knowledge. This will take the form of attempting to find a clear model for understanding Xenophanes' epistemology.

Section 2 - The Appropriate Epistemological Model

J. H. Lesher provides a very helpful typology. He lists the varying ways that interpreters have sought to understand Xenophanes' epistemological views, and their

consequent classification. Below we will adumbrate this list noting arguments for and objections against each.³ A model will be presented, supporting evidence will be shown, and then the objections to this model will be listed. The first four will be shown wanting. Arguments will be garnered for the fifth model, seeking to demonstrate that Xenophanes held a robust scepticism that did not remain ambivalent to the prospect of knowledge. His epistemology would discourage a blind or even facile acceptance of experience or tradition, but encourage the pursuit of understanding with the hope of reaching verisimilitude between his beliefs and reality. Or so it will be argued. This is a portrait which must be supported in the face of many other models.

A. Xenophanes the Empiricist

Fränkel finds in Xenophanes an early empiricist.⁴ He develops a “semantic thesis” according to which the perceptual orientation of *idein* and *eidenai* of F 34 demonstrate that Xenophanes is holding forth for an epistemological empiricism where knowledge is only justified through the senses. Again my translation of F 34 reads: “And on the one hand, no man knows, or ever will have certain knowledge of what is the truth about the gods and about everything I speak; for even if one chanced to say the complete truth, he still would not know it, but on the other hand opinion is

³ While following Leshner’s typology, our conclusions will, however, differ from his. It seems his attempt to bring clear classification has encouraged a conclusion that expunges a significant detail of what Xenophanes believed about truth and knowledge.

⁴ The best defense of this thesis is in Mourelatos, “Xenophanes’ Empiricism and His Critique of Knowledge (B 34),” (1974), pp. 118 - 131.

given to all.”⁵ Fränkel grammatically connects the “certain knowledge” (*to saphes*) to “the truth” (*eidos*) and builds upon the empirical connotation of the latter. One could not have knowledge without truth, and the truth is (according to Fränkel’s Xenophanes) a perceptually based reality. His evidence is based upon his view of the word history of *eidos*. Fränkel seeks to show that the word cannot be separated from its roots in physical sight. He notes that in the *Iliad* (2.485 f.) knowledge acquired through a verbal communication is designated as “non-*eidenai*” and that only through *pareinai* (close physical presence) does one reach *eidenai*.⁶ The word *eidos*, “...presents itself [in F 34] as the perfect tense form corresponding to *iden*, “saw,” and accordingly designates only a knowing rooted in vision, or at least in experience...”⁷

He also connects certain knowledge to *oide* in line four. “One might say the truth, but he doesn’t “know” it...” This *know* is again connected to sense verification. He quotes a similar passage from Plato (*Meno* 80d): “... if you should chance to come up against it, how will you know it is this - the thing you didn’t know?” (*oida*). Fränkel notes both the similarity in form (believing that Plato is textually dependent

⁵ καὶ τὸ μὲν οὖν σαφὲς οὕτις ἀνὴρ ἶδεν οὐδὲ τις ἔσται εἰδὼς ἀμφὶ θεῶν τε καὶ ἄσασα λέγω περὶ πάντων εἰ γὰρ καὶ τὰ μάλιστα τύχοι τετελεσμένον εἰπών. αὐτὸς ὅμως οὐκ οἶδε δόκος δ’ ἐπὶ πᾶσι τέτυκται.

⁶ Fränkel, p. 124, n. 20.

⁷ Ibid., p. 123.

upon Xenophanes here), and in content (i.e., that Plato solves his *aporia* by assuming a “seeing” prior to the present life).⁸

This semantic study leads Fränkel to conclude that not only is certain knowledge connected to “sight” in Xenophanes’ mind, but that the *dokos* in the last line of F 34 is not the illusory opinion of Diel’s translation, but a “valid supposition” that can be made.⁹ He connects this fragment, correctly I believe, to F 35: “let these be accepted, certainly, as like the realities...” Hence for Fränkel, human opinion is not necessarily untrue, it simply never reaches the status of certain knowledge unless accompanied by perceptual experience. Direct experience would be necessary and even sufficient to obtain knowledge.

This semantic thesis argues that “sight” is contained in the meaning of knowledge. But Fränkel also argues that sense perception is *instrumental* for knowledge, not only a constituent of it.¹⁰ This thesis, as opposed to the “semantic” one, does not build sense perception into the meaning of knowledge, but rather makes it the only avenue open to human beings to have certain knowledge. His translation of F 34 reveals his emphasis: “A reliable knowledge with respect to all of the objects spoken of here, particularly concerning the gods, is not possible for men.”¹¹

He summarizes his view:

Xenophanes characterizes as certain and exhaustive only that knowledge that is empirically grounded. He holds only *opsis*, “vision” and *histroirie*, “direct acquaintance” (to use Herodutus’ expressions), as reliable. In contrast *gnome*,

⁸ Fränkel, p. 128, n. 22.

⁹ Ibid., p. 128.

¹⁰ Fränkel, (1974), p. 127.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 128.

“opinion” does not, in his view, lead to genuine certainty. ... All this can be understood as a preliminary stage of Parmenides’ doctrine, the doctrine of two worlds with two different principles of knowledge and of being.¹²

In criticism of Fränkel, Lesher maintains that if F 34 only asserts that direct, perceptual knowledge of the certain truth about non-evident matters then it is hardly worth stating. But surely this is an overstatement, and a very slight misrepresentation of Fränkel’s view. As for the former, he seems to have forgotten his own argument where he makes much of Xenophanes’ poetic context.¹³ Surely in this historical context the suggestion that it is impossible to have certain knowledge of the gods and “non-evident” matters was, if not unprecedented, at least extremely rare. As for the latter, Fränkel’s thesis appears to apply to more than just “non-evident” matters. The evidence from the Iliad which he uses to bolster his case is just one case in point. Word of mouth is not enough to count for certain knowledge. Only seeing is believing. This is indeed worth stating if it is true.

Lesher also stretches himself too far by suggesting that such a limited interpretation of F 34 would not have served as sufficient preparation for the conclusion regarding *dokos* (opinion) in the fourth line. He seems to believe that somehow the “shock effect” would not justify the statement, if Xenophanes were arguing for a simple empiricism. But again, this seems to be misreading the historical context. In a world not far removed from where philosophers are ridiculed, prosecuted, and executed for not believing in the gods of the state, to say that one

¹² Ibid., p. 130.

¹³ Lesher, “Xenophanes’ Scepticism” in Phronesis 23 (1978) pp. 1-21.

can't have certain knowledge of their existence would seem likely to make heads turn. In any case, the historical context would provide sufficient preparation for Xenophanes' conclusion regarding opinion.

However Fränkel's thesis is not entirely tenable. Indeed Lesher is right to note that the Greek verbs do not have the strict perceptual connotation that Fränkel's semantical argument requires. That they are historically rooted in "sight" is beyond question, but it is clear that even in the *Iliad* *eidos* does not always come by sight. The gods "know" a great many things that are not rooted in sight or experience. Of course, this is true because they are gods, but is this not enough to show that the semantical side of Fränkel's argument is not as strong as he would like it? At least in these cases early Greek knowledge does not have to include a "sight experience" to qualify for knowledge. Possibly this is only true for the gods, but it is doubtful that the same word would be so sophisticatedly distinguished. Surely it's more reasonable to assume that in common usage Greek words denoting knowledge (like many languages) were used in ways that did not necessarily denote an empirical experience. This would seem even more likely of a religiously rooted community, like Xenophanes'. Moreover, even as early as Homer *ἰδεῖν* can mean something other than "seeing with one's eyes." "Thus, even if *ἰδεῖν* meant 'saw' or 'has seen' and *εἰδώς* meant 'having seen,' there is no reason to suppose that such 'seeing' must have been a form of *sense* perception".¹⁴

¹⁴ Lesher, p. 158 (emphasis Lesher's).

Moreover the instrumental argument contrasts starkly with other fragments that manifest doubt about the veracity of sense experience. Indeed, Fränkel makes sense perception to be both necessary and sufficient for certain knowledge, and I concur with Lesher (among others) that the sufficiency portion of his argument is too strong.¹⁵ If nothing else F 38 causes us to question whether sense experience is sufficient for knowledge under Xenophanes' view. If men cannot be certain about relative sweetness of what they have tasted (honey verses figs), then it is obvious that sense experience alone will not lead to knowledge. And of course there are other fragments which also indicate that Xenophanes was aware of the fragility and uncertainty of sense experience. What most of his contemporaries *saw* was not Iris, but a cloud. It is not sense experience *simpliciter* which makes Xenophanes see a cloud and his friends see a god. These examples of a direct correspondence between what a human being sees, and what she falsely thinks, provide good reason to question that sense experience *alone* will convey knowledge.¹⁶ If Xenophanes believed, as seems likely, that sense experience is an essential component of human knowledge, he certainly didn't think it provided knowledge in a direct fashion. Sense experience might be necessary, but would not be sufficient for certain knowledge.

¹⁵ Lesher, p. 162.

B. Xenophanes the Rationalist

Recently Aryeh Finkelberg has argued that Xenophanes maintained rationalist sentiments (i.e., “attacking perceptions and impressions and trusting only in reason”).¹⁷ In this regard he follows Aristotle and Aetius who were the only ancients to interpret Xenophanes as this type of thinker.¹⁸ This approach reads F 34 as focused on *conventional* religious conceptions (reading line 2 as “their gods”), and physical phenomena. The pointed verdict of “opinion” is directed at only those two things. Finkelberg believes that the relatively early sources of Ps.-Galen and Timon, indicate that Xenophanes’ scepticism is “mixed” asserting that while sceptical elsewhere, in his monistic doctrines he was dogmatic.¹⁹ Hence, for Finkelberg, the best explanation for this ancient testimony is that Xenophanes’ scepticism was limited to natural explanations.

Finkelberg then rightly adds: “The conclusion that Xenophanes’ scepticism applies to natural explanation only, not extending to the “theology,” naturally raises the question why the doctrine of the One is immune to it.”²⁰ The answer *partially* lies, Finkelberg believes, in the unreliability of sense experience. But this is not, he admits, a full answer - at least in Xenophanes’ case - to the apparent inconsistency of being dogmatic about theology, and sceptical about natural explanations. There is,

¹⁶ F 16, for example: Αἰθίοπες τε <θεοὺς σφετέρους> σιμοὺς μέλανάς τε Θρηῆκές τε γλαυκοὺς καὶ πυρροὺς <φασὶ πελέσθαι> Ethiopians say that their gods have snub-noses and are black; Thracians that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired.

¹⁷ Finkelberg, “Studies in Xenophanes” (*Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* v. 93, 1990) p. 103ff.

¹⁸ Lesher also mentions two other modern scholars, who for our present purposes follow Finkelberg, O. Gigon and K. Deichgraber.

¹⁹ Finkelberg, p. 130.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

Finkelberg must admit, too much evidence for an empirical approach in Xenophanes for this to be so simply put.²¹ The answer, he locates in an epistemic distinction between natural and “theological” speculation. The former are non-apodeictic and the latter apodeictic. The former rests on the shaky foundation of sense experience; the latter upon deductive reasoning.

So Finkelberg attributes a distinction in Xenophanes’ mind between apodeictic and contingent truths. When he asks whether there is reason to impute such a sophisticated idea to Xenophanes, his answer is the philosopher’s historical context. This idea is found in Anaximander’s *Apeiron* and it is foreshadowed by Parmenides “Being”. Since it is historically plausible (and “geographically” possible) that Xenophanes was familiar with these ideas, he could have held them.

Finkelberg’s case is motivated by a desire to build a monistic interpretation of Xenophanes’ theology. Following Aristotle and the Eleatic connection, Finkelberg, sees the Xenophanean concept of God as:

“the single and unchangeable, intelligible essence unifying the manifold, and essence endowed with divine powers and causing and controlling all that goes on in the world, [this god] must be the development of one of the facets of the Anaximandrian notion of the *Apeiron*, the divine substance underlying the entire universe and governing it.”²²

And so understood, Xenophanes’ concept of theism is a forerunner of Parmenides’ idea of Being as the intelligible unity underlying the world. This is essentially tied to Finkelberg’s interpretation of Xenophanes’ rationalistic epistemic notions which

²¹ Finkelberg quotes a passage from DK A 33 that purport’s to describe Xenophanes’ teachings on fossils and accordingly reveals an empirical methodology, seemingly inconsistent with a simple rejection of all knowledge gained through the senses.

allow for the development of a proto-Parmenidean universe by casting doubt on the senses, and intuiting the existence of an underlying being. We will leave further discussion of the metaphysical side of this argument until the next chapter, but the epistemological interpretation of F 34 must be addressed here.

There are some sizable objections to this epistemic model of Xenophanes. First, it is impossible to find a clear deductivist approach within the statements of Xenophanes.²³ His theology is full of assertions and many of the arguments that do seem to exist are implied. Interestingly enough the place where Xenophanes displayed his capacity for logical exposition was in the realm of civic ethics (F 2). There he argues that the philosopher is superior to the victorious athlete using logical connectives (*γὰρ ... τούνεκεν*). These connectives are absent from the theological fragments. As Lesher says, there is very little deductive structure such that we could “comfortably ascribe to him a ... character of apodeictic truth.”²⁴ The logical structure present in Parmenides is absent in Xenophanes’ theology. He makes statements, to which we will later assume some epistemological reasoning, but clear and explicit premises are invisible.

Second, Xenophanes does not show sufficient contempt for sense perception. Lesher says the contempt is not “systematic” enough. What in this context constitutes a “systematic” approach may indeed be a subjective judgment call. It is certain that Xenophanes did indeed question the reliability of the senses, as Lesher admits. That

²² Finkelberg, p. 113, see particularly n. 35.

²³ Lesher, p. 163.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 164.

he did not *systematically* do so is a rather weak objection given so few disparate fragments. But it is the unfortunate reality of our inquiry that one or two words constitute a theme. And while it isn't a strong objection, it is still the case that Xenophanes does not have a sufficiently consistent, or certainly a metaphysical, criticism of empiricism. To be a rationalist of the Finkelberg sort, one would expect that Xenophanes would indeed be a bit more explicitly anti-empiricist and pro-deductivist. Instead what the fragments reveal is thinker who has reasons to question the senses (see the last section) but equally trusts in the breadth of experience to help human beings make appropriate judgments. The knowledge of the relative sweetness of honey and figs is presumably given through the senses, and via the medium of wide experience. This empirical truth of relative sweetness is obviously not grounded in deductive reasoning, but neither is it grounded in an uncomplicated version of empiricism.

The third objection relates to Finkelberg's historical contextualizing. While this seems both a reasonable and necessary course of action with any hermeneutical effort, typically one expects textual aids when making the kinds of connections that Finkelberg is attempting. There are no clear textual allusions to the kinds of metaphysical speculation that Parmenides practiced. Per objection one, there are not even any logical connectives in the theological fragments. There is never a mention of an *Apieron* by Xenophanes. While it makes sense to seek conceptual parallels among philosophers of close temporal and geographical proximity, there should be a greater reason to impute a metaphysical view than: "his neighbor thought so!" At

least Finkelberg is in good historical company, for some of the ancient interpreters also conflated opinions of neighboring thinkers.

The fourth objection will have to be filled out in the next chapter. As mentioned earlier, this view is connected to a metaphysical interpretation that will be found wanting. The motivation for a “rationalist model” is undermined if one does not assume that Xenophanes developed a proto-Parmenidean universe. The result is that when you eliminate Finkelberg’s motivation, and you account for the previous three objections, the “rationalist model” seems much less plausible.

We could speculate the existence of a relationship between Xenophanes and Parmenides which is very roughly analogous to the relationship between Socrates and Plato. The latter supplying the answers where the former supplied only questions ending in *aporia*. However this is a case I don’t want to make, for on the evidence we’ve seen so far, it seems unlikely that the relationship between Xenophanes and Parmenides resembles Finkelberg’s portrait. If indeed there was a pedagogical relationship, it is possible that Xenophanes would have been unhappy with his student’s conclusions.

C. Xenophanes the Critical Philosopher

Impressing upon their Xenophanean mold a Kantian imprint, three significant German philosophers have seen in F 34 an expression of the “critical problem.” This problem is that “the human mind must always be separated to some extent from

things as they are in themselves.”²⁵ A. Lumpe attributes to Xenophanes a view that humans may never know things in themselves, but simply “things as they appear” (from F 36) which may not appear as they really are (F 35).²⁶ That an analogous distinction is in Xenophanes’ mind, there can be no doubt. For example in F 32 (what appears to some to be Iris, is actually cloud), and F 35 (let these be accepted as like the realities) Xenophanes makes an appearance/reality contrast.

Untersteiner and Heitsch find the distinction expressed in Xenophanes’ language. Hesiod had made the distinction between truths and falsehoods, and a category of falsehoods that resembled the truth. These things were *ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα* or very much like the truth/reality. In their semantical approach they interpret Xenophanes’ comment “even if they had the truth, one would still not have certain knowledge” (F 35) as manifesting a belief that language could never be relied upon to attain knowledge. The crux of their argument is that Hesiod’s *ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα* (“like reality”) corresponds to Xenophanes’ *ἐοικότα τοῖς ἐτύμοισι* (“like the realities” in F 35).

In evaluation of this interpretation of Xenophanes which sees the thinker holding a metaphysical distinction of a Kantian sort, there should be recognition of the area of agreement. Xenophanes does indeed make a distinction between appearance and reality or at the minimum between common belief and reality. This is a significant insight that often divides philosophical thought from other forms of

²⁵ Leshner, p. 165.

²⁶ A. Lumpe. Die Philosophie des Xenophanes von Kolophon. (Munich, 1952), p. 27ff.

writing.²⁷ Almost all of Xenophanes' contributions can be traced to this one revolutionary thought: things aren't as they seem. Whether in the arena of the gods (it may seem as if Homer is the authority, because we've all learned that way from the beginning), or in science (Iris may look like a god, but alas is a cloud), or in anthropological insights (the Ethiopians have snub nosed gods) Xenophanes understands that things are not as they may seem to the common person. He has reason to know that things are different. The contrast for Xenophanes between what is commonly thought, and what he thinks is true, is often quite stark.

However, this contrast (between what is commonly thought and what he thought, or even the way things really are) is not the phenomena/noumena distinction. The former is present in almost every philosopher, and certainly the vast majority of pre-Socratics. This latter distinction would declare that no human being sees anything as it really is, and that all that we call truth is to a varying degree a human construct.²⁸ As we have adumbrated above there is Lumpe's metaphysical approach, and the latter semantical approach of Untersteiner and Heitsch. They both would hold that the "noumena" is, for Xenophanes, impossible to express in language.

Given that our account will arrive at a similar consequential conclusion (e.g., Xenophanes believes human constructs are almost always fallible) it is important to clarify the objections here. The issue is the process by which Xenophanes reached his

²⁷ It has been pointed out to me that even in the poets one can find evidence of this distinction; for example in *Odysseus* where the hero is consistently testing what he sees or is told.

²⁸ Nor, as implied above, can we see the Parmenidean or Platonic metaphysic in Xenophanes' contrast. For the latter philosophers the world known through sense experience as inherently inconsistent and

conclusion. Whereas this view purports to find a metaphysical distinction between human expression and reality, our view will only commit Xenophanes to a pragmatic conclusion based on common experience: i.e., typically our expressions of reality are wrong. This is so because sense experience is limited, not because of a metaphysical property of the universe. The “critical philosopher view” commits Xenophanes to an ontological distinction, the latter to a strictly epistemological one.

So Lumpe’s approach is almost certainly misguided for as Leshner writes:

A Kantian distinction between appearances and things in themselves would,... require us to assign a “subjectivist” meaning to *phainesthai* and a super-phenomenal meaning to *etumos* that are hard to imagine before the time of Descartes’ Meditations and Locke’s Essay. The “critical problem” of escaping from the world of the mind’s own contents to knowing what things are like independently of how they may appear to us is almost certainly not the crux of fragment 34.²⁹

Again we run into the difficulty of having little textual evidence to assign a rather heavy and anachronistic idea to Xenophanes. Finkelberg at least was able to cite contemporaries who held views he was seeking to impute into Xenophanes’ philosophy. Lumpe can quote only instances of similar sounding distinctions that are not metaphysical in the Kantian sense.

As for the semantical thesis, Guthrie rightly contends that there is a difference between Xenophanes’ words and Hesiod’s. Indeed Xenophanes’ words may be *aimed* at Hesiod’s “reality-like” statements. For the latter are falsehoods made to

contradictory. Xenophanes does not have in mind shadows on a wall here. These ontological concepts are not to be found in the fragments, except in some embryonic form.

²⁹ Leshner, p. 165 - 166.

look like truths.³⁰ Xenophanes, since he was urging the acceptance of the truths, must have meant things that are actually the case, or very close to resembling the case. I agree with Guthrie, that Untersteiner and Heitsch's case fails. Primarily we may hold up the fact that this crucial connection does not work, but it should also be remembered that the rather strong allegation that Xenophanes believed knowledge could *never* be expressed in words, i.e., the *noumena* could never be stated, is itself never expressed explicitly.

Finally, I follow Guthrie, Leshner, and Barnes, in wanting to avoid thrusting upon Xenophanes a sophisticated metaphysical system that we find no evidence he developed.³¹ *A fortiori* we should avoid giving him a metaphysical assumptions that were never explicitly stated until Descartes! However it is, as we have just seen, not without reason that interpreters are grappling to understand the scope of Xenophanes' scepticism and the extent of his epistemology. At this point, if our objections are shown to be as strong as they seem, then it is wrong to affirm the presence of a Kantian or Platonic metaphysic, the presence of radical empiricism, and the presence of a clear deductive-rationalistic epistemology. Is there evidence for the *presence* of more than just epistemological epitaphs?

³⁰ Guthrie., p. 396, n. 2. Guthrie will later credit Xenophanes with "the first explicit confrontation, as two separate things, of knowledge and seeming." See p. 399.

D. - Xenophanes the Sceptic

The tradition that Xenophanes was the first sceptic comes primarily from the ancients, many of whom were of that doubtful persuasion. This tradition has been largely considered unlikely by modern historians.³² Indeed it is not difficult to see in the historical context of arguments over scepticism, how F 32 and 38 (paraphrase: “Iris is actually a cloud” and “if god had not made honey, figs would be sweeter”) could be seen to support those who questioned the capacity of the human mind to convey knowledge. *A fortiori* F 34 (“happening to speak the truth... opinion is granted to all”) seems to consign our attempts at knowledge to the heap of guesses we make everyday, as well as to potentially express a theory of knowledge requiring a method of verification or justification not available to human beings. We have seen how reasonable people have understood Xenophanes as questioning whether language was capable of capturing reality, so that we could *ever* rightly say we had knowledge at all.

But here, as Xenophanes’ contemporary Parmenidies indicated, not all is as it might first appear. Sextus was not compelled by this interpretation, and Diogenes Laertius notes that Sotion is mistaken in his portrait of a sceptical Xenophanes (A1, 20). Leshner points out that later sceptics saw indifference and suspended judgment to be the best way toward human happiness, and Xenophanes is accused of many things,

³¹ While this is the case, it will be seen that Barnes seems less restrained when trying to entertain a groundwork for Xenophanes’ theological conceptions.

³² Leshner lists: Sotion in A1, Cicero in A25, Pseudo-Plutarch in A32, Hippolytus in A33, and Sextus Empiricus in Against the Professors 7.49. The aforementioned reported that Xenophanes embraced

but indifference is not one of them.³³ By his own words we know that he is concerned deeply about the misapprehension of theology, about the misplaced glory upon sport heroes, and about those who would misuse their wealth. Contra Sextus, who suggests that Xenophanes might be a “probabilistic sceptic” Lesher notes the incongruities. Neither the exact phrasing of F 34, nor the discussions of Xenophanes’ contemporaries were as universal as Sextus implies. The knowledge denied as “*to saphes*” concerned the “gods and what I say about all things.” Lesher contends that the conversation of the 6th century on human knowledge was not what men could know *simpliciter* but rather on what they could know “of the gods and the world at large beyond the narrow circle of their own adventitious experiences.”³⁴ That this is practically admitted by Sextus when he says that Xenophanes’ thesis may have been about “non-evident” matters, buttresses Lesher’s case.³⁵

So one crucial issue in this discussion of Xenophanes’ scepticism is the distinction between the “wide-scope sceptic” who did not believe certain knowledge was possible on *any* subject and the “narrow-scope sceptic” who thought opinions about non-evident *metaphysical matters* never reached the status of knowledge because even if truth were attained one would never know it. The former would make implicit contradictions of many of Xenophanes’ statements. The typical charge contra scepticism, i.e., that one surely cannot *know*, that he cannot *know* anything, could be

total scepticism, others (Pseudo-Galean and Timon) that he occasionally held such a view, and still others that he had a “modified but still universal” scepticism (Sextus at 7.110), p. 161.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Lesher, p. 161. This issue of the scope of “*to saphes*” is significant and is the substance of his argument against Fränkel in an earlier work (1978).

aimed at Xenophanes. Moreover it could be aimed at Xenophanes easier than some, as Xenophanes seems to know a great deal.

Given this we should opt for the latter, weaker form of scepticism, where certain knowledge of non-evident metaphysical matters is off limits for humans. This view is easier to reconcile with the explicit qualification in the text of F 34: “the things about which I speak.” But here we still have a difficulty given Xenophanes’ seemingly confident theological assertions.

A contemporary example of an answer to this difficulty is given expression by Abel Jeannière, who reads Xenophanes’ theology as simple critical and negative statements which make no claim of knowledge.³⁶ The only certainty is the existence of God, and he believes that Xenophanes makes no other knowledge claim. Jeannière even goes so far as to claim that Xenophanes’ opinions are not epistemological thinking, but represent his search for a “joie de vivre.” This joy of life combined with pragmatic wisdom is the hope of finding, not knowledge, but the “mieux-être” (best way of being). The difficulty of this approach is that Xenophanes makes more than just negative claims, and those are *prima facie* claims of truth, if not knowledge. As will be more explicitly dealt with below, the attempt to remove the tension between Xenophanes’ epistemology and theology by making him solely a critical reformer is possibly well-meant, but is misplaced.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 162.

³⁶ “La seule certitude est l’existence de Dieu. Xenophane a posé Dieu, mais nous n’en connaissons rien. Nos négations ne constituent pas un concept positif de Dieu.” Jeannière, *Les Présocratiques*. Paris: Seuil, 1996, p. 108.

Is there a model for understanding Xenophanes' epistemology that allows for both his restricted view of "certainty" and his rather optimistic idea that what he taught about divinity was more than just "opinion"? Indeed there is, but it isn't found in a scepticism that leads to *ambivalence*. Rather it is found in application of his expressed hope in of F 18 (the gods did not reveal all things ... in time they discover better) with the directed hint of F 35 (let these be accepted as like the realities). Contra Jeannière, this is not a hope of practical wisdom for a good life, but a hope in an epistemic state that has as its goal the expression of truth. The former rules out an apathetic ambivalence which comes with those who insist upon absolutist certainty, and the latter gives us direction as we seek understanding in interpreting Xenophanes' view of truth-claims. We may surmise that: 1) Xenophanes does not fit the model of the typical sceptic who aims towards conclusions of ambivalence; 2) Xenophanes does not conclude with cynicism, or with a rejection of the potentiality of human discovery.

The idea that Xenophanes represents the wide-scope sceptic who doubts that any human knowledge is possible should be rejected. His only explicit statements on the limits of knowledge demarcate the scope of that limitation. It seems safe to speculate that Xenophanes would have had a relatively uncomplicated view of sense experience (more on this below) and that *some* form of certain knowledge is not impossible in this realm. But without immediacy the picture is not so clear. No one, it seems, knows the truth about the gods, or about the "all things" of Xenophanes. This limitation of scope is not as narrowly defined as some indicate. These "things"

were not simply limited to theology, but also potentially included assertions about culture and nature. His instruction ranged from how to have a dinner party, to the make up of heavenly bodies. So the realm of things about which certain knowledge is impossible, is not universal, but it is extensive.

So I submit that the best articulation of Xenophanes' view on human knowledge would include the idea that it is granted in an empirically grounded dialectical process of searching. He has doubts that this process will lead to certain knowledge, but he believed it would lead to an expression of reality much closer than the one granted by cultural tradition or facile assumptions. Xenophanes understood better than most of his contemporaries the limits of sense experience, and the influence of culture on reason. This, among other reasons, is why his expressed hope that humans could "know better" was such a defined and limited expectation.

E. Xenophanes the Fallibilist & Natural Epistemologist

In Lesher's extraordinary study of Xenophanes he rejects a fallibilist approach to understanding Xenophanes, and opts for a portrait that shows the philosopher as a natural epistemologist.³⁷ His reasons for rejecting the former are as unfortunate as his reasons for accepting the latter are welcome. Properly understood, these "two" interpretations are not only compatible, but coexist in a mutually supportive manner.

Under the fallibilist view Xenophanes saw his own search for truth gain modest ground, saw that his results were not the whole truth, and came to the

³⁷ Lesher, pp. 164 - 166.

conclusion (which was not revolutionary given the poetic tradition of divine verses human knowledge) that humans could never reach an infallible understanding of truth; particularly in the arena of non-evident metaphysical matters. Fallibilism holds that human knowledge is perpetually open to revision and correction, and no statement represents certain knowledge. I argue that Xenophanes held this view as applied to the “non-evident scope” of knowledge, and that in other more “evident” matters, he was a natural epistemologist who believed some knowledge (if not certainty) was possible.

As has been noted in the previous chapter KRS and Guthrie both see a strong sense of poetic continuity in Xenophanes’ philosophy. They agree that Xenophanes does not hold to a metaphysical distinction which is present in the universe (appearance/actual or shadow/reality), but that he is philosophically aware of the human/god distinction which was present in all Greek poetry.³⁸ As Guthrie remarks, a commonplace of poetry was that humanity had no sure knowledge. This is expressed in invocations to the Muses, and elsewhere.³⁹ He quotes Heraclitus: “Human nature has no insight, but divine nature has (F 78).”⁴⁰

There are then credible “external” reasons to think Xenophanes might have held this divine knowledge/human knowledge distinction. Is there “internal”

³⁸ “Taking all the evidence together, but relying particularly on the actual fragments, we cannot affirm that Xenophanes posited two realms of existence, of one of which men could have certain knowledge, and the other only opinion. He said that men could have no certain knowledge at all: that was reserved for God.” Guthrie, p. 398.

³⁹ Guthrie., p. 398.

⁴⁰ Ibid. Guthrie also quotes Democritus (5th century), “we know nothing truly” and Ecphantus the Pythagorean, “it is not possible to obtain true knowledge of existing things, but only them as we believe them to be” (fr. 117, and DK, 51,1 respectively).

evidence for this in the fragments? I would suggest that we see this distinction clearly present in F 34 (no man has seen the truth... - i.e., surely the gods have), possibly present in F 23 (god is not like mortals in thought - i.e., infallible verses fallible) and latent in F 38 (if god had not made yellow honey - i.e., the god, as maker, would know the absolute sweetest, not just the taste relative to ones experience). There is also in F 18 a clear distinction between the gods who have “not revealed all” to humanity, and the latter who must find out, through searching, and in time.

Setting aside significant differences for a moment, the one element that most epistemological interpretations of Xenophanes have in common is a conviction that he expresses doubt about the clarity and capacity of human understanding. This is obviously the case with those who would call him a sceptic, and equally clear in those who see the metaphysical contrast between reality and appearance. The “rationalists” read him as denigrating sense experience and its power to convey knowledge to humans. And Fränkel, the empiricist, reads Xenophanes as one who builds sense experience into knowledge, because human reason will not bring it alone. In every case human knowledge is not a facile thing, but requires some sense of verification or justification. In short, all views have to get around F 34 and its clearly negative evaluation of the extent of human certainty. Since Xenophanes’ god “sees all,” it is reasonable to assume that such a limitation would not be placed on the divine.

Of course it is one thing to say that this understanding exists in Xenophanes’ epistemology, and another thing to say *exactly how* it impacts his demarcation of human knowledge. That human knowledge is qualitatively different than divine

knowledge is one thing; but that it is permanently fallible and has “perpetual possibility of error” is another.⁴¹ Lesher finds that fallibility goes beyond what is in the text of F 34. “If Xenophanes’ conclusion really had resulted from a deep conviction of human fallibility (or corrigibility), one would expect to see *some* suggestion of this sentiment here in the heart of his argument.”⁴² But surely this is exactly what we do find! Is this not a plausible reading of: “no one has seen the certain or reliable truth”? Why could this not be understood as an expression of the fallibility of human understanding? Must Xenophanes add “perpetual” when he has stated that “no one” has *ever*? It is possible that he is speaking historically, and that there is hope that through his scientific methodology (searching) that someone might. But this reading weakens the first phrase so that the third line (...even if one speaks the truth... he wouldn’t know it) no longer carries the punch obviously intended. It also misses the future tense of the following phrase: “or ever will have.” Furthermore, I would suggest that the $\mu\epsilon\nu$ - $\delta\epsilon$ construction emphasizes this contrast more than has been sometimes noticed.⁴³ On the one hand you have the fact that no one has, or ever *will have* certain knowledge, but on the other hand a contingent fact of human nature is that we are all given opinion.

Karl Popper, in one of his last philosophical works, develops this very plausible conception of Xenophean epistemology. Popper believes that not only does

⁴¹ The phrase is borrowed from Lesher, p. 164.

⁴² Lesher, p. 165.

⁴³ See Chapter one and commentary on F 34.

F 34 contain a theory of truth, but that it contains a “theory of objective knowledge.”⁴⁴

The fragment teaches that one might say what is true, but neither he, nor anyone else would know that it was the case. “This means, however, that truth is objective: truth is the correspondence with the facts of what I say, whether I know or do not know that the correspondence holds.”⁴⁵ Correlative to this, Popper believes that F 34 contains a “clue” to the distinction between objective truth and subjective certainty. Even if one utters the truth - a statement that corresponds to the facts - one cannot be absolutely certain of having obtained knowledge. “We can never, or *hardly ever*, be really sure that we are not mistaken: our reasons are never fully sufficient” (emphasis mine).

Were Popper to end here, we would need to reject his view as too utterly pessimistic, and seemingly inconsistent with the man who made all sorts of claims. These are claims that appear to approach boasts of knowledge. But Popper says that Xenophanes is not a pessimist, rather he was a “searcher.” His case is built primarily on F 18, but he conjectures beyond the text of course. Popper understands Xenophanes’ searching as an attempt to reach an “approximation to objective truth: closeness to truth, affinity with truth.”⁴⁶ His interpretation of Xenophanean epistemology is summed up in eight points:

- 1) Our knowledge consists of statements.
- 2) Statements are either true or false.
- 3) Truth is objective. It is the correspondence of the content of a statement with the facts.

⁴⁴ Karl R. Popper, The World of Parmenides (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 47.

⁴⁵ Popper, p. 47.

⁴⁶ Popper, p. 48.

- 4) Even when we express the most perfect truth, we cannot know this - that is, we cannot know it with certainty. We can never have sufficient reasons.
- 5) Since "knowledge" in the usual sense of the word is "certain knowledge" there can be no knowledge. There can only be *conjectural knowledge*: "for all is but a woven web of guesses."
- 6) But in our conjectural knowledge there can be progress to something better.
- 7) Better knowledge is a better approximation to the truth.
- 8) But it always remains conjectural knowledge - a web of guesses.⁴⁷

What then, is the difference between this explication, and the one proposed by Leshner? There is no contradiction between the two accounts. The most significant distinction is the added premise (in Popper's account) that human beings can *never know* (with certainty) if they have reached truth. The crux of the matter would seem to rest on the exact meaning of certain knowledge and exact limits of the "all things about which I speak." Popper does not say that Xenophanes is committed to a metaphysical assumption that humans *never* know the truth, but rather the weaker proposition that they never know it with *certainty*.⁴⁸ Popper's primary division between conjectural knowledge and certain knowledge would seem to mirror the divine/human distinction. It is a difference of disposition and aptitude. There is awareness that statements should forever be open to refinement and that a Socratic expression of epistemic humility does not negate the possibility to learn, or even to know better. If Popper is accurate, as there is reason to believe, then Xenophanes has embraced an epistemology of openness where knowledge claims find justification in

⁴⁷ Ibid. pp. 48 - 49.

⁴⁸ Popper, p. 43 ff.

their correspondence to reality, but the nature of human limitations make testing that correspondence very difficult.⁴⁹

Under the “naturalist” account advocated by Lesher it is the sizable “distance between the conditions in nature which causally determine human beliefs and the natural states of affairs which render those beliefs either true or false.”⁵⁰ It is this “sizable difference” that is at the heart of Popper’s interpretation as well, for the “conditions in nature” which make knowledge extremely difficult for Lesher’s Xenophanes, makes certain knowledge impossible for Popper’s.

Heitsch, following a naturalist account, primarily relates the conditions in nature that make knowledge difficult, to the limitations of human experience. Humans only see/touch/feel a small portion of the world, and have no way to verify if knowledge claims beyond direct experience are true. This resonates very nicely with several of the fragments, where Xenophanes seems concerned with experience both in the negative and positive sense. He rejects some theological formations because wider experience has taught him the inconsistency of how people view their gods (F 15 and 16), and his cosmopolitan life is important to him (F 45). The breath of experience seems to be significant for human beings to make judgments as he points out in F 38. Because men have tasted both honey and figs, they believe that honey is sweet. If however the gods had not made honey, their experience would have led them to believe that figs were the sweetest food.

⁴⁹ One way this is done, however, is by induction, i.e., collecting experiences so that the breath and number of them validate a proposition and make it a strong conjecture.

⁵⁰ Lesher, p. 166.

It is this naturalist account, with its emphasis on experience that leads us back to Popper's more elaborate theory. At first glance a fallibilist approach leans toward scepticism. Knowledge, at least certain knowledge, is impossible. But Xenophanes seems to indicate that this is not the end of the story. There is not ambivalence here. There is a method by which we may make better "conjectures" (Popper's term) than others. We might read a closer approximation to the truth than we would if we didn't have this method. What is this method? Is it a proto-scientific method? In short, yes. It is a method that would emphasize the breath of experience combined in a dialectical form with the mind's reasoning capacities to reach tentative conclusions. Conclusions that will never have the status of *divine* knowledge, or *certain* knowledge, but which will be better than an unconnected guess, or an opinion with no "nexus." In Popper's words, those conclusions will be *conjectural* knowledge. In chapter five I will adumbrate with greater detail how this process works.

Would Xenophanes have recognized himself in Popper's mirror? I believe the answer to be yes, with one significant qualification. It seems less than certain that Xenophanes would have made claim four in Popper's form ("Even when we express the most perfect truth, we cannot know this - that is, we cannot know it with certainty. We can *never* have sufficient reasons." (emphasis mine)). He likely would have opted for something a bit weaker: e.g., only in exceptional cases - i.e., direct perception combined with good reasons - can we be sure of having true knowledge. Since he demarcated the scope of what one could know, it seems reasonable, as implied above, to assume he did not mean "everything." It is difficult, if not

impossible, to think that Xenophanes would have found contemporary epistemological examples of inner states, such as “I’m feeling pain,” as instances of conjectural knowledge.⁵¹ We have rejected simple empiricism as a sufficient component of knowledge, but my account of fallibilism would not require Xenophanes to hold the radical view that we can *never* trust our direct experience to convey certain knowledge. Under this view, passive convictions like “I’m being appeared to” would count as certain knowledge. Concurrently, this account would not hoist upon Xenophanes the conviction that simple mathematical truths were not certain knowledge. Rather this view recognizes the conditional and contingent reality of human knowledge, and stops short of committing Xenophanes to a metaphysical conviction that human beings are incapable of being certain of anything. Popper makes a similar equivocation in his essay. There are cases where human beings do have certain knowledge, but they are extremely rare. One may call this a weak fallibilist approach, but it fits both the text, and our reticence to give Xenophanes a view we don’t have good reasons to believe he had.

Before turning to provide an illustration of this view at work, it might help to clarify the view at issue. I will follow Popper’s list so that my dependence upon him, and differences with him, will be evident:

- 1) Human knowledge is expressed in statements.
- 2) Statements are either true or false.
- 3) Truth is determined by the correspondence of the statement with reality.

⁵¹ I am not implying that Xenophanes’ had such anachronistic reflections, but rather trying to communicate by contemporary examples that it is doubtful that he would have been a “wide-scope” sceptic, who believed all certain knowledge impossible.

- 4) Even when we express the truth, we rarely know this. We rarely have sufficient reasons to know anything with certainty.
- 5) While certain knowledge is rarely possible, conjectural knowledge is within humanities reach, and is a worthy epistemological goal.
- 6) In our searching for, or striving after, this goal we progress to a better understanding.
- 7) This understanding is a better approximation of reality (e.g., verisimilitude).

I believe we can find an illustration of how Xenophanes' fallibilism works in his views on divination. Divination was a widely practiced method for obtaining knowledge from the gods, undoubtedly cast as "certain knowledge" by most practitioners. Xenophanes' account of this human phenomenon, is not only consistent with fallibilism, but is most likely grounded in it. Thus the following account will both bolster a fallibilist reading, and demonstrate fallibilism at work.

Section 3 - Xenophanes' Fallibilism Applied to Divination

There are numerous ways that early Greek poetic literature taught a human/divine gap in mental aptitude, capacity, and experience. Human beings were inferior beings, and were dependent upon the gods for a great many things, knowledge often being one of those things. However, there was rarely a question, until Xenophanes, that the gods could chose to reveal truth to humans through divination. Xenophanes apparently allowed no such transference of divine knowledge, and proposed that certain knowledge about heavenly matters was no earthly right.⁵² Cicero's account is typical of both early and later accounts of this part of his

⁵² Roy Hack (God in Greek Philosophy to the Time of Socrates, Princeton: University Press, 1931) said: "Xenophanes denied the possibility of divination. Very few later philosophers agreed with him; and henceforth some theory of divination became a part of nearly all philosophical systems" p. 68.

philosophy: “Certain carefully worked out arguments of the philosophers for the reality of divination have been collected; among these, to speak of the earliest, Xenophanes of Colophon, one who said that the gods existed, repudiated divination in its entirety.”⁵³

It is hard to imagine how a (seemingly) pious man living in the sixth century BCE could have expressed doubts about such a commonly accepted form of divine-human interaction. However difficult it is to imagine - given the context - Xenophanes is consistently interpreted as having “cut divination at the base.”⁵⁴ Why did Xenophanes have such doubt about something that Socrates himself seems to accept without much difficulty; even (by most accounts) to the point of making it the basis of his philosophical career? Bouché-Leclercq believed he struck at the root of this popular belief by casting doubts on the god’s concern for human life.

Xenophanes’ god did not move, wear human clothes, or have a human body, so he consequently did not have human preoccupations. If indeed Xenophanes thought the god(s) had no concern for human life, then this belief would certainly strike at the heart of any divine communication. Divination would be shown to be a clear and certain hoax because if the gods are not concerned about human beings they are not going to bother with their pesky questions relating to love and war. However, Xenophanes never stated such a limited view of divine concern. He, so far as the

⁵³ DK, A 52. While we will find reason to doubt some of the testimonia about Xenophanes in the next chapter, there is consistency in the ascription of an anti-divination view in all accounts.

⁵⁴ A translation of Bouché-Leclercq’s famous commentary in Histoire de la Divination dans l’Antiquité (Paris 1879), p. 33. “... nous dit-on que Xénophane <<supprimait la divination par la base>> en supprimant la sollicitude de la Providence pour les intérêts humains.”

fragments record, never indicated that the gods are so aloof from humanity that some form of revelation is conceptually unthinkable. In fact his god “shakes all,” which is a clear indication that the god is not aloof and removed, but intricately involved, at least on some level, in the affairs of the world, and so one assumes, humanity.

In the next chapter I will adumbrate the most plausible view of Xenophanes’ greatest god. This god is very different than Homer’s gods who watched humans carry on their soap opera with great interest, nor does this god have a preoccupation with the lives of mere mortals, in the way that Zeus watched his children. However there is nothing conceptually impossible about Xenophanes’ rather distinct god communicating to humanity. Moreover, in F 1 Xenophanes encourages prayer, specifically the prayer for the power to do what is right.⁵⁵ Would Xenophanes suggest prayer if he believed no one was listening? Would he have suggested praying for something that would never be given? Possibly he had developed the view that prayer was a psychological force, employed by, and only concerned with, the *pray-er*. He would most likely be the first to have such a view, but he certainly would not be the last. However, before we impute this rather sophisticated theory of prayer upon Xenophanes, it is better to seek another basis for his anti-divination convictions. Naturally there must be a connection between his conception of god/gods and their potential interaction with humans, but in Xenophanes case, there is a more plausible basis for his criticism of divination than in the *divine* makeup.

⁵⁵ “And having poured a libation and prayed to be able to do what is right - for these are obvious...” F 1, line 15.

This basis is not hard to find. One need only relate his stance toward divination to Xenophanes' common focus: traditional expressions of theological knowledge claims. Xenophanes' concern is on the human side of the equation. It is not that the gods don't *care* (though Xenophanes' god is certainly not rushing about as a divine butler), but that humans don't *know*. Xenophanes has struck at the root of divination, but the root is not divine concern, but human capacity. Even if the gods did reveal the truth, a human being would never be certain of it, he says. His view is not that the god(s) will not countenance a mortal concern, but that the mortal simply does not have the wisdom or capacity to determine when an intuition or intimation from the god might be true. For Xenophanes the god did not reveal "all things" to humans (F 18), but this is not because god can not, or will not, but that human beings simply do not have a criterion for determining when god has spoken, and so whatever divination is, it isn't a channel for knowledge.⁵⁶

Evidence for this view is found in whom Xenophanes makes the subject of every restriction, and of every admonition, in the fragments. The primary subjects are his compatriots. In every case the person who holds the wrong conviction, who has come to the wrong assumption, or who is limited to "opinion" is a human being. It should be noted that in fragments 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18, and 34, Xenophanes

⁵⁶ Socrates, as noted above, has a more generous view of divination. But even Socrates needed to test the oracle, and determine *how* it was true. It is doubtful that Socrates would have considered his oracle as a case of "to saphes" since he felt compelled to find out in what way it was true. This was accomplished by examination and the process of reason. "Socrates does not endorse a form of the intellectualist rejection of divination's efficacy, but also does not merely take the operations of traditional divinatory practices at face value" Mark McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates* (Penn. State Press, 1996), p. 177. I think there are significant differences in the way that Socrates treats his Delphic

directs his criticism at human beings and their penchant for placing authority and trust where it does not belong. Whether in their poets (Homer), or in their limited experience (Ethiopians with snub-nosed gods), or in their facile and false assumptions of divinity (gods have human bodies), human beings often get it wrong. This is an anthropological reality, not a theological one. Whether by limited experience, or by bad education, or because of an unfortunate taste for luxury, his compatriots are wrong. Xenophanes' pessimism reaches across towards humanity, not up towards the divine. No where does he limit divine capacity, except in areas of wickedness and immorality.

Therefore, Xenophanes' understanding of divination is perfectly consistent with, and supportive of, a fallibilist version of his epistemology. The god(s) might reveal something, but this could in no way be assigned to knowledge, because the limited experience of human beings makes verification impossible. One couldn't know whether it was from the divine, or from the sheep's cheese eaten for dinner. One might accept the revelation, but it would never be granted knowledge, for it amounts to one experience impossible (or nearly so) to verify. Until you've tasted the honey, you assume figs to be the sweetest. Possibly Xenophanes would, like Socrates, allow for the experience to be something worthy of verification, but it would not in and of itself be considered true, until tested. Xenophanes, like Socrates after

oracle, and the way Xenophanes would likely do so. The latter seems, on the whole, less open and more likely to doubt. But this is a topic for another paper.

him, undoubtedly believed that to “know thyself” was to know how “ignorant and far from the divine one is.”⁵⁷

If a fallibilist interpretation is plausible, then Xenophanes would have included “theology” under this rubric. One cannot have but a tightly woven web of conjectures, about the gods. How then are we to go about weaving a better web, particularly where direct empirical evidence is so scant? More significantly how did Xenophanes ground his theology in a web of conjectures, particularly since he rarely seems to be making conjectural type statements? There are unfortunately few clear directions in the text where Xenophanes might point us. But we are not left without any signs. Both during and after an exploration of his theology we will seek to determine how Xenophanes’ fallibilist and natural epistemology led to his natural theology and how his theological convictions support his fallibilist epistemology. The way towards understanding will be paved with stones we have picked up on the way: a moralistic concern for his society, and a sceptical attitude towards knowledge claims rooted in traditional means of gaining understanding of the world. These two elements, bolstered with a respect for those things that can be more easily affirmed via his naturalistic epistemology, will motivate and ground his theology.

⁵⁷ McPherran, p. 292.

CHAPTER IV

XENOPHANES' NATURAL THEOLOGY

Section 1 - Introduction

“Natural theology” has for more than two millennium been distinct from other forms of the *logos* of the *theos*. For example, Augustine informs us that pagan philosophers divided theology into three parts: (1) civic theology which included the cultic practices of both ethnic and political groups; (2) mythical theology represented by Hesiod, Homer, and other poets; and (3) natural theology which included the arguments for the nature and existence of god created by the philosophers.¹

Unsurprisingly the great church theologian says that natural theology was of primary concern among the pagan philosophers, and that it could never have such primacy for Christians, or for that matter anyone who recognized the authority of revealed religion. This highlights the deep fracture between the different forms of theology, where argument in natural theology is contrasted between the authoritative assertions

¹ This is found in the De Civitate Dei (6.5.1 and 3) where Augustine ascribes this typology to Varro and to the first century Pontifex Scaevola. The theologian is seeking to contrast Christian theology which, for him, does not fit neatly into any of the three *pagan* categories. It is, of course, not lost on Augustine that a revelation based theology, loses its appeal to reason *simpliciter*, but original sin makes the latter a questionable basis for truth, and the special revelation of the incarnation supersedes reason. Aquinas will, a few centuries later, allow reason and revelation to work together to form the foundation of Christian theology - with the recognition that human reason begins (e.g., belief in God), what only revelation can complete (e.g., Jesus is God's son).

of (1) and (2). Augustine, in this instance, is drawing on a distinction that appears traceable to the time of Xenophanes.

Diogenes Laertius (DK 11A1), for instance, mentions a letter of Thales to Pherecydes in which Thales says that Pherecydes intends to be the first Ionian to express *logoi* about *theion chrematon*.² Scholars have found this same distinction “implicitly present” in Xenophanes’ attack on the disreputable claims of the poets.³ There would seem to be no plausible reason to reject the notion that Xenophanes has a distinction in mind, and that he believes his views represent the superior type. Even in light of Xenophanes’ expressions of doubt about knowledge, there can be no question that he claims to have a better understanding (although not certain knowledge) of the gods than do those instructed by Homer. However, we have not yet firmly established that *his* distinction (between his views and the popular theology) is Augustine’s distinction (between theology based on mystical experience and that based on argument). This chapter will show not only that this is the case, but also elaborate on *how* this is true.

So painting roughly, we may draw two options. One is that Xenophanes is something on the order of Gomperz’s poet by day and cynic by night, who makes nothing but anti-traditional assertions based on his own internal intuitions about heavenly matters. In this case he could be acting out of poetic jealousy of Homer, a simple desire for notoriety, or some other internal inspiration. The other option,

² Even if this letter is a Hellenic forgery, Aristotle (*Meta.* 14.4.1091b8-10) lends credence to a distinction between Pherecydes’ *logos* and those other types of speech about the gods. See L. P. Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy* (London, 1994), p. 239, n. 2.

albeit not necessarily inconsistent with the first but distinct from it, is the idea that Xenophanes has some (even if implicit) reasons for his views and that plausible arguments are evident, either on or underneath the surface. In this case his theological assertions have some legitimate claim to objective and universal criteria, whereas in the former case his convictions are rooted in a claim of personal inspiration or revelation. I will show that even with a less than charitable reading of the fragments presented in chapter one, we have the evidence necessary to build a case for option two.

As was intimated in chapter two, there are varying ways interpreters have sought to build this case. Using very distinct methods scholars have sought to show that Xenophanes had *some* type of philosophical basis for his assertions. The differences seem quite stark. Barnes writes about a theological consistency which permeates the “summa” of Xenophanes. Leshner believes that Xenophanes has certain theoretical demands which arise out of a basic theological postulate. Jaeger roots both Xenophanes’ motivation and assertions to a reverential awe of the divine. KRS, and to some extent Guthrie, seek to show how Xenophanes’ reflections were just that: reflections of the poetic views with the contradictions and inconsistencies removed.⁴ Following this “continuity” account, KRS emphasize that the concept of a god without human-like organs was simply the extension of a Homeric god. The idea “that thought or intelligence can affect things outside the thinker, without the agency

³ Gerson, p. 239.

of limbs, is a development - but a very bold one - of the Homeric idea that a god can accomplish his end merely by implanting, for example, infatuation in a mortal.”

These are obviously very distinct ways of understanding the source of Xenophanes’ ideas.

The following account will build on those, like KRS and Guthrie, who emphasize the poetic continuity in Xenophanes’ thinking. This chapter, specifically, will seek to elaborate on the likely *external* motivation of Xenophanes’ reform. A fuller discussion of the *internal* philosophical basis, of Xenophanes’ assertions will wait for a later chapter. As for the former, the most plausible explanation for the philosopher’s adamant conviction that a Homeric education was dangerous (and of his consequent effort to undermine it), is found in his conviction that such views are moralistically damaging - for individuals and for society. As for the latter, the reform is philosophically based on both the observation of the poetic inconsistencies *and* the observation of anthropological realities, particularly epistemically rooted ones. This chapter will start the discussion (on these inconsistencies and anthropological factors that ground Xenophanes’ core theological ideas) that will be completed in chapter five.

So, with this explanatory goal in mind, it will be argued that a “continuity” account fits the picture of Xenophanes that emerged from our examination of the fragments. Let us begin by dealing with a couple of difficulties. First, if

⁴ I hope to show that this approach dovetails nicely with another tenant of Xenophanes’ thinking which we have seen implicitly present in the fragments, i.e., Xenophanes is concerned not simply to destroy or debunk the popular religion of the day, but to reform its less fitting aspects.

Xenophanes' god is simply a reformed Homeric one, then how, and upon what basis, did Xenophanes base his reforms? Finding the inconsistencies between *p1* (e.g., the gods are born) and *p2* (e.g., the gods are forever) is a helpful enterprise, but with it one can only reach the epistemically negative conclusion that *p1* and *p2* cannot both be true. But Xenophanes has done more than demonstrate that one, but not both, can be true.⁵ He has either argued, or asserted, that a particular vision of theology is wrong, and (if our epistemological understanding is correct) has conjectured a portrait of the gods quite distinct from, and yet rooted in, the theology of his day.

Secondarily, if we find this basis in the cultural and religious tradition, how do we avoid the charge that Xenophanes is being arbitrary, simply picking out characteristics at will and advancing these by mental fiat? And if we cannot avoid this charge, how would we distinguish Xenophanes from Homer, i.e., creating a cleaner version of old mythologies, not by argument, but by imagination?⁶ One hopes to find some basis, other than the inconsistent tradition, for any substantial theological reform. Here is a brief summary of how these questions will be answered, in part by the "external motivation" side of this chapter. First, this account will argue that Xenophanes' primary concern is human, not divine. He begins with a rudimentary belief that society is affected by the tenants of its popular theology. But his focus is not on theology *per se*, but on the human result of corrupt ideas.

⁵ It is of course plausible that both *p1* and *p2* are false, for example that the gods don't exist at all, so they are neither born, nor are they eternal.

⁶ In retrospect Xenophanes' might not mind the comparison to Homer as a *poet*. The comparison here is on the level of theologian and philosopher. There, I believe, Xenophanes would contend he had a superior methodology.

Xenophanes appears to have the commonly held conviction that religion is essentially connected to public morality. This may be based upon his own extensive observation. This conjecture would be based on an inductive inference from his, albeit informal but extensive, study of cultures.

Second, I will maintain that Xenophanes' motive is religious reformation, not theological construction. He does not mean to renounce or even utterly transform Greek worship, but remove its "less fitting" aspects. This too, is rooted in civic concern. For example, consider his view of divination. As was stated, Xenophanes was the first major Greek thinker to oppose this common Greek practice; a practice upon which Socrates seemed to base his philosophical vocation. It was found in the previous chapter that the likely philosophical ground for this Xenophanean opposition was in his epistemic scepticism. There might, however, also be external motivations which played a role in Xenophanes' adamant position. For to claim direct knowledge of the mind of God is to make a power claim; it is, in effect, to claim some form of "certain knowledge" which was given directly. It would grant the holder power over those without the same claim to knowledge. The misuse of such notions is as old as human beings, but the philosophical attack on the basis of such claims might well begin with Xenophanes.⁷

⁷ Recent American religious leaders have claimed that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were the result of God "removing his protection" from an increasingly immoral land. This brought wide spread condemnation - not least of which came from other religious leaders. Much of the criticism was based, and an apology was eventually given, on the idea that claiming to know the mind of God in a specific historical event is an unacceptable power play in the arena of ideas. Xenophanes would likely have agreed, and for the same reasons.

Hence, I do not argue that Xenophanes was attempting to rid traditional religion of *all* its myths, or even all of its apparent difficulties. Rather the observation of nature and society led Xenophanes to “deconstruct” the unworthy elements of Homeric concepts and popular practices, which appeared to him to be dangerous for civil society, and to construct (plausibly by inference) an entity who governs and knows the world. This contrasted starkly with the popular and traditional image of the gods, but had the virtue of allowing for the positive utility of religion (e.g., a reverential fear encouraging morality), while discarding its baser aspects (e.g., an unqualified claim to metaphysical certainty). Xenophanes was a critical reformer, not a theological apologist. He stated, seemingly with dogmatic authority, that the popular conception of theology was absurd. He then provided a limited vision of what should take its place. However, of all the things said of Xenophanes, never is it assumed that he wanted to start a new religion. Rather he sought to help his Greek compatriots to understand how they could think of god(s) in light of an understanding of the natural world emerging out of the superstitious and mystical *kosmos* described by the poets. As critical as Xenophanes was to Homer, he was still a man of the 6th century BCE. As an Ionian Greek he possessed many anti-cultural and anti-traditional sentiments, but he stopped well short of atheism. In an emerging world of proto-scientific understanding, and cosmopolitan influences, a well traveled Greek might ask how he could be both sensible and pious. Xenophanes attempts to show the way by stripping the gods of what they weren’t and by demonstrating what they had to be.

In the following sections we will more clearly see *what and why* Xenophanes constructed his religious reform, and in the next chapter precisely *how* he could have constructed this in light of his negative claims about the possibility and extent of human knowledge.

Section 2 - The Content of Xenophanes' Theology

Barnes, who readily admits that Xenophanes was no Aquinas, nevertheless gives us his picture of Xenophanes' "Summa Theologiae."⁸ It is a good place to start, but as will be demonstrated, it is a poor place to finish. It will be seen below that Xenophanes' theology is less systematic and less substantial than Barnes' reconstruction. However his seven "bones" on which Xenophanes' theology supposedly hangs, provide a nice outline for exploring the ancient thinker's religious reformation:

- 1) God is motionless
- 2) God is ungenerated.
- 3) "There is one god, greatest among gods and men."
- 4) God is not anthropomorphic.
- 5) God thinks and perceives 'as a whole'.
- 6) God moves things by the power of his mind.
- 7) God is morally perfect.⁹

Barnes asks the same question we are posing ("is this a natural or revealed theology?"), but whereas he finds his answer in a theoretical account of the logical derivatives of implied concepts, we will find an answer in concepts which arise out of

⁸ Barnes, p. 84 - 94.

⁹ Ibid., p. 85. This is not meant to imply that what follows will match this list in order, or number, simply that every element of Barnes' list will be explored.

Xenophanes' attempt to reform Greek religion. What follows will demonstrate the weakness of Barnes' account, but more significantly, it will show that a version of the "continuity case" explains the fragments more fully, consistently, and comprehensively.

A. On Monotheism

We will begin with the most famous, and some would say most significant, issue in theology (Barnes no. 3). Is god one or many? Is there "at most" one God, or are there several gods with distinctive tasks and responsibilities? F 23 does not settle the issue, but raises it: "There is one god, greatest among gods and men." If there is ONE god, then how can it be among gods? On the other hand, how can several gods "think" as a whole, move things with their mind, or together be motionless (as fragments 24, 25, 26 indicate)?

The doxographical tradition's tendency is to view Xenophanes as a monotheist. This is clearly the case with the MXG, but also true for Hippolytus (A 33), Cicero (A 34), and Simplicius (A 31). However, as was stated in section 2 of the introduction, there are good reasons for questioning these interpretations in light of their clear eleatic corruption.¹⁰ Furthermore there are contradictory statements in the tradition. Pseudo-Plutarch (A 32), for example, implies that Xenophanes was a

¹⁰ For more on the corrupt reception of Xenophanes see the writings of Jaap Mansfeld. For example his "Compatible Alternatives: Middle Platonist Theology and the Xenophanes' reception" in which he argues that Simplicius' interpretation of Xenophanes (at In Phys. 29.12ff.) is identical with Eudorus' interpretation of Pythagoreanism as quoted verbatim by Simplicius (at 181.10ff).

polytheist.¹¹ Barnes says that most modern scholars follow the majority of doxographers, but there have been some very strong objections to this recently and from my survey the weight of opinion seems to be shifting.¹² These objections to the monotheistic tradition, both old and new, are well based. These objections will be presented below.

First is the objection based on the intended clarity in F 23. "One may reasonably follow J. Freudenthal in doubting 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."¹³ This objection seems stronger, when one seeks to not think anachronistically about monotheism. Had Xenophanes intended "there is at most one god..." then it is very difficult to believe that in the 6th century B.C.E. he would not have been clearer.¹⁴

¹¹ Herein Pseudo-Plutarch reports an argument that there is no leadership among the gods, for it is not right that one god should be the ruler of another. The passage continues with the assertion that none of the gods are in need of anything. This is closely paralleled by Euripides (*Heracles* 1341ff) where Heracles refuses to believe the gods are adulterous, or kidnappers, and he refuses to admit that one god could rule over another because a god who needs something is no true god. The resemblance to Xenophanes is striking, and even confirmed (as Stokes, following Reinhardt, points out) by the final remark that "these are the unhappy tales of poets" (see F 11). Stokes, p. 80.

¹² A good example of the former is found in Fränkel's grand work, *Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy*. "His search for moral purity and intellectual precision led him to purge religion also of preconception and prejudice, and was led by way of unsparing criticism to become an *apostle of monotheism*" (emphasis mine) p. 330. Fränkel admits that from Homer until the "end of paganism" monotheism and polytheism were not mutually exclusive and yet calls Xenophanes a "militant monotheist." A view that not only contrasts starkly with the one being developed here, but a view which seems hard to reconcile with the acknowledged fact that Xenophanes polemic "produced virtually no effect." See p. 332.

¹³ Stokes, p. 76.

¹⁴ "... it must be understood that the question of monotheism or polytheism, which is of vital religious importance to the Christian, Jew, or Moslem, never had the same prominence in the Greek mind." Guthrie, p. 375. This is undoubtedly true, although for Aristotle and followers it became more significant than it would have been to someone of Xenophanes' generation. However it is reasonable to assume that anyone who took up a strong monotheism would be countered vigorously by the

Secondly, if in this polytheistic society, Xenophanes had intended to establish monotheism, it is odd at best that Homer and Hesiod are not criticized for saying that there are many gods. His only recorded criticism has to do with their description of the god's characteristics not their number. Naturally this is not a strong objection, given that our fragments are so few, and such a criticism is not unthinkable. But coupled with the first one, it gains strength. Surely such a radical position, had Xenophanes really stated it, would have not escaped the record easily.

Thirdly, Xenophanes does often refer to the gods (plural) in the other fragments.¹⁵ The gods looked like their worshipers (F 15 & 16), the gods are supposed to be born (F 14), the truth of the gods is not known (F 34), and the gods did not reveal all things to humanity (F 18). This (careless?) use of the plural form would not be incompatible with a monotheist of later generation who simply chose to use the plural for poetic or aesthetic reasons. In point of fact, Guthrie makes light of these uses of the plural and notes that the critical fragments are all negative (i.e., the gods were wrongly depicted) and so (according to Guthrie and others who hold this view), his use is either a concession to popular expression or an argument with tradition. But at the minimum the use of the plural is indicative that Xenophanes' primary goal was not to battle polytheism. This is admitted by Guthrie ("doubtless Xenophanes did not condemn the worship of gods outright, provided men's notion of them was

traditionalist, possibly even labeled an atheist in the spirit of Socrates' accusers. If this was Xenophanes' concern surely it would be found elsewhere in a less ambiguous expression.

¹⁵ As to his reference in this very fragment to gods (plural), it is noted by scholars that in polar expressions (such as, one god vs. gods and men) the existence of the items of both poles is not implied. This point is made by Burnet, KRS, and followed by Leshner.

stripped of anthropomorphic crudities and immorality”), but his reasoning sounds like liberal 19th century Christian theology: “...he probably thought that the spirit of this universal being manifested itself to the imperfect perception of man (F 34) in many forms.”¹⁶ At the very least we can say that the fragments present us with a religious thinker who is seeking to communicate a reformed theology against a corrupt tradition, and that monotheism is not one of his primary concerns.

Fourthly there is the objection based on the translation of $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ (one) as an idiomatic way to reinforce a superlative (in this case “the greatest”). Stokes notes that the idiom was probably known already to Homer and that there are a number of examples in both Attic and non-Attic writers.¹⁷ With this understanding the translation of F 23 would read: “the one greatest god...” This is undoubtedly a plausible rendering of this fragment, although Stokes may be overstating when he demands that the onus is on those who would separate “one” and “greatest” and that they “should first be required to show good cause, and this no one appears to have done.”¹⁸ At most, in my view, what this objection details is a very likely reading of a difficult fragment. This reading cannot be embraced without any reservations, but when compiled with the other objections helps to build the case that Xenophanes’ was not a committed monotheist.

However before we can put the issue to rest, we should address the supposedly implied monotheism of F 24. This god “sees, thinks, and hears” as a whole.

¹⁶ Guthrie, p. 376.

¹⁷ Stokes, p. 77.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Admittedly this statement, along with F25, seems to dovetail better with a monotheistic theology. But there is nothing here incompatible with the “one greatest” god whose activity is so described. It is not incompatible with either Homer, or with later accounts to describe great (even superlative) attributes to the god, (Zeus) and to continue other references to the gods. It is not, of course, unproblematic to construct a theology with a god full of superlatives and leave room for other gods, but there is nothing *prima facie* incoherent in the attempt. The three major monotheistic religions (Judism, Christianity and Islam) have for centuries had systematic beliefs which include angels and other such superhuman beings that exist in conceptual harmony with the one God. There is no textual reason to think that Xenophanes would have found the idea of one god, with other gods being logically inconsistent.¹⁹ Moreover, if it is true that Xenophanes was more concerned about the aspects of popular religion which were incompatible than becoming a theologian with a new and distinctive religion, then this objection carries weight. He is simply continuing in the tradition of the day which also referred to god (singular) and at times gave him superlative characteristics.

¹⁹ The exception to this is the MXG where Xenophanes supposedly makes the argument: “if the god is the most powerful thing of all... then he must be one. For if there were two or more, then he would no longer be the most powerful and best of all. For each god of the many would be the same kind for the same reasons. For this is divine and the quality of a god, to rule and not be ruled and to be the strongest of all things... So if there were a god, and moreover a god of this kind, the god must be one alone” (3.3). No one believes these to be the words of Xenophanes, but it cannot be conclusively proven that these don’t have some roots in his thinking. But as Stokes (and most other contemporary historians note) there is a clear “Eleaticization” in the MXG and this could easily be the case here. This does, however, raise a difficulty. How did Xenophanes understand the relationship between the greatest god, and other gods? Did he make the connection between need and inferiority? I follow Stokes in thinking that it is unlikely that the “keen-witted” Xenophanes would not have noticed this concern, and find it more likely that he was not particularly concerned about the relations between the

Lastly Leshner is correct that it is not simply a trivial fact that Plato, “who fully imbibed Xenophanes’ view of divine perfection with its consequent strictures on poetic representations of the divine and developed them at length in Republic 2, should have remained so thoroughly indifferent to god’s number.”²⁰ Plato was not, of course, attempting anything like a philosophical theology, but nevertheless we can again wonder why a radical conceptualization of the gods (as strict monotheism would have been seen to be), if it had been pushed by Xenophanes, was never dealt with by Plato. Leshner sums it up very nicely: “The fragments warrant attributing to Xenophanes the novel idea of a single god of unusual power, consciousness, and cosmic influence, but not the stronger view that beyond this one god there could be nothing else worthy of the name.”²¹

Before turning from monotheism, we must deal with a potential objection to our account coming from the ancient tradition. This tradition, rejected by most present day scholars, states that Xenophanes was a monist and that as such he founded the Eleatic school. As was noted before, this tradition started with Plato, continued with Aristotle and Theophrastus, but most today reject the notion as bad historical scholarship.

gods except to be critical of poetical misconceptions (e.g., that they don’t commit adultery). For more on “Eleaticization,” see below.

²⁰ Leshner, p. 99. It should be noted that Leshner’s view of Xenophanes’ conviction of divine perfection is ultimately found to be unacceptable, but his point here (in reference to Plato) is well taken.

²¹ Ibid. W. A. Heidel (A. J. of Philology 64, 1943) made a comparison with the Hebrew idea of monotheism and Xenophanes’ version, noting that in the former you also had a stage where Yahweh was the greatest of the gods before being the only God, p. 275ff (which is indeed the view of most non-dogmatic scholars). Stokes takes issue with any implication that Xenophanes was the first step to a classical Greek monotheism (which never existed in anything like the Hebrew form), but certainly we are not amiss to place Xenophanes in the logical progression to Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover.

There are a number of reasons that Plato could have easily confused Xenophanes, with Parmenides.²² We know that Plato has been guilty of historical exaggeration before, so there is no *a priori* reason to rule out the possibility.²³ Furthermore, what Plato actually says is that the Eleatic tribe “begins from Xenophanes and even earlier” and that they base their stories on the “assumption that what are called ‘all things’ are really one” (*Sophist* 242d). Could it be, as Leshner speculates, that some embryonic concept (e.g., there is one greatest god) could have earned him this title? Indeed if Plato called Homer the “captain of the Heracliteans” merely because Homer said that the river Oceanus was the source of all the gods, then surely Xenophanes could undergo Platonic *eleaticization* (Stokes term) on the basis that he believed in one great god.²⁴

Aristotle follows Plato, but interestingly enough shows some ambivalence about this connection. At *Metaphysics* A 5.986b2 he calls Xenophanes the first of the monists but cautiously adds that Parmenides is *said* to have been Xenophanes pupil. He then expresses his frustration that Xenophanes makes so little clear, and goes on to say (“with obviously studied caution”²⁵) that Xenophanes “looked up to” heaven and said the one was god.²⁶ This statement *alone* does not equate god with the world, or

²² Stokes mention several: Parmenides taught that what is, is one; Xenophanes (possibly) that god is one (F 23). Xenophanes deity is connected to noos as is Parmenides’ subject. Xenophanes god perceives as a whole, and Parmenides subject is also a uniform whole. Stokes, pp. 82 - 83.

²³ For example his singling out Heraclitus’ theory of flux and giving it more importance than it originally had. Stokes, p. 83.

²⁴ From *Theaetetus* 153a. I’m indebted to Leshner for this connection, p. 190.

²⁵ Stokes, p. 83.

²⁶ There has been significant debate about the meaning of ἀποβέψας (to look up). Burnet claims that the word is usually translated “with reference to” and so is rather colorless, but KRS translate the term “with an eye toward” (Burnett, p. 127, n. 4 and KRS, p. 172). In either case this is speculation on

heaven, but does make a very inaccurate historical statement. Stokes stresses the point that: "Xenophanes may have said that god was one but scarcely likely to have made "the one" the subject of any sentence whatever; the definite article would have been meaningless."²⁷ While this may be overstating, there are good reasons to doubt that Aristotle's statement renders Xenophanes' philosophical orientation correctly. For example, if Aristotle had access to Xenophanes' other statements, why did he not attempt to reconcile them with this early version of monism? How could a god "shake" itself (F 25) and yet remain in the same place without moving (F 26)? What would it mean for a god to be "not at all like" (F 23) mortals and yet for the latter to be a component part of the former? We may share some affinity for Aristotle's complaint that Xenophanes made nothing clear, (were these contractions part of the reason?) but not with his conviction that Xenophanes was an early Eleatic.

Popper also considers the monistic interpretation a "Platonic-Aristotelian exaggeration."²⁸ He rightly believes that Xenophanes may have learned, and consequently taught, that the earth was a sphere. This may have been conflated with his theological views and led some of Xenophanes' followers (e.g., Plato and Aristotle) to attach his name to the untenable view that the shape of God is spherical and all encompassing.

Aristotle's part. KRS call this a cryptic statement, but then go on to say: "This clearly implies that god is identical with the world, which is what Theophrastus seems to have assumed. But Aristotle must be wrong here: how could the god be motionless if it is identical with a world which is itself implied to move?"

²⁷ Stokes, p. 84.

²⁸ Popper, p. 45.

Moreover Fränkel calls attention to a remark by Theophrastus (A31, 2-3)

which he paraphrases:

Theophrastus says that Xenophanes, the teacher of Parmenides, put forward the (Parmenidean) thesis of the unity and completeness of that-which-is (i.e., cosmos); but he adds that the thesis of Xenophanes does not belong in this context, since Xenophanes was speaking not of the cosmos, but of the unity and completeness of God.²⁹

This remark is in sync with the contention that the Eleatic connection is at best exaggerated.

Finkelberg has a table which helps picture in detail the reception of theological ideas into the Xenophean tradition:³⁰ What it demonstrates is a linear progression of corrupted ideas.

Theophrastus	Simplicius	“Parmenidized” version	“Melissized” version
1) ungenerated and eternal	ungenerated	ungenerated and eternal	
2) one	one	one	
3) it is not said whether finite or infinite	neither finite nor infinite	finite and spherical	
4) it is not said whether moved or unmoved	neither moved nor unmoved		
5) yet actually unmoved		unmoved	unmoved
6) thoroughly perceiving		thoroughly perceiving	
7) governing all things by his mind	governing all things by his mind		

²⁹ Fränkel, (Early) p. 259, n. 17 and p. 335.

This table represents the temporal progression, and consequential corruption of some of Xenophanes' ideas in the doxology. The point here is not to trace any specific convictions, but rather to demonstrate how easily a phrase is detached from its original meaning. It is clear that often interpreters read Xenophanes' through their polemical lenses.

In light of the evidence it would seem imperative to avoid two hermeneutical errors. One would be to place too much weight on the few fragments which seem to point to a monotheistic conception. Clearly the path towards that interpretation is filled with enough obstacles to make any observant traveler hesitant. However we must also avoid ruling out the option that this one god developed such significance for Xenophanes that the other "lesser divine forces" paled into significance. If, as the evidence seems to show, Xenophanes retained his conviction in "the gods" existence then:

...it would be wrong to conclude that these must be the anthropomorphic gods of the epic, which would rank side by side with the one highest God and would enable Xenophanes to compromise with the popular religion. It is more plausible to think of the dictum of Thales that all things are full of gods, or of Anaximander's doctrine of the one divine primal ground and the innumerable gods... even if we have no right to ascribe to Xenophanes any specific dogma of this sort.³¹

It would indeed be imputation at its best if we ascribed such views to Xenophanes, but from his very words we can be assured that his form of polytheism embraced one supreme god of gods, who was unlike human beings in thought, form, actions, or

³⁰ Finkelberg, will argue that some of the corruption is not as great as most modern scholars believe, but he nevertheless shows in detail of how some of the corruption likely took place. p. 126 ff.

³¹ Jaeger, *Theology* p. 44.

power. That this god would have ruled other gods, hence making them inferior, needy, and of questionable “god-like” status either didn’t bother Xenophanes or never occurred to him. It would be fitting of the critical reformer we have seen in the fragments, that such a thought *would* have occurred, but since his motivation was not the development of a new religion, but the renovation of the old one, he saw no need for further theological speculation - particularly on something that had a benign cultural influence. This is itself speculation of course, but it splices nicely with the Xenophanes who was seeking to chip away the rough edges of convictions which were so palpably false in light of both the internal inconsistencies of Homer, and the external realities of cultural relativism and the emerging natural science.

B. On Motionlessness

If Xenophanes is not committed to monotheism, he is still convinced that the one great god is very unlike the portrait of the gods in Homer and Hesiod. This god is *not* a number of things which the poets say god is. Xenophanes theology represents the first “via negativa” but in this case the negations are directed at the established and popular conceptions of the poets, not ontological concepts. For example, Xenophanes says that god does not move, in fact he remains in the same place for it would not be fitting for him to move about in space or time (F 26).

The question for interpretation is not whether Xenophanes believed his god to be motionless, but why? Lesher locates the origination in a process of reflection on his own understanding of the implications of the other aspects of his new view of the

exalted divine nature.³² Reinhardt, who sees the presence of early Parmenidean thinking, explained that god's movement was precluded by omnipresence, and he was followed by von Fritz.³³ Guthrie explained the genesis as coming from the antithesis of Homer's gods, as did KRS.³⁴ Jaeger, remaining consistent to his nineteenth century Christian liberalism, traces Xenophanes' theological reform not to a "logical proof" nor a philosophical development, but an "immediate sense of awe at the sublimity of the Divine... His religious motif - the demand for utter sublimity in the Godhead - is expressed with particular clarity in the assertion that it is not seemly for God to move hither and thither."³⁵

It is highly dubious that Xenophanes would have understood the Greek equivalent to "sublimity of the Godhead," but Jaeger does point us in the right direction. For if we are to make any progress at a plausible selection from these options which moves beyond mere speculation, it will be based upon the most reasonable interpretation of what Xenophanes meant by "fitting" or "seemly" (*ἐπιπρέπω*)³⁶ As was noted in the commentary on F 26, Barnes sees here a logical connection, i.e., it is not logically possible that the god would move because it does not "fit" the nature of the god. To suppose that god moves is then self-contradictory. Indeed we would like to think that Xenophanes is basing his theological reasoning

³² Leshner, p. 113.

³³ From Leshner, p. 112.

³⁴ Guthrie, p. 374 and KRS p. 170.

³⁵ Jaeger, p. 49.

³⁶ Leshner relates that *ἐπιπρέπω* has three different but related meanings: "what something seems to or appears to be (or be like), and what something characteristically is (or is like), and what it is fitting or seemly for something to be; that is from what is empirically evident, to what is objectively the case, to what is normatively correct." p. 111.

upon something more than personal aesthetic taste (e.g., “locomotive gods are not pretty”³⁷). But if Xenophanes had meant to communicate that the divine nature makes it logically impossible to move, he could have selected a number of ways to express this, without using a term that having such aesthetic connotations.

The most promising and plausible account comes from D. Babut, who provides a nuanced version of KRS and provides Xenophanes with philosophical insight (more than, but not necessarily incompatible with, Jaeger’s religious sensibility). It also does not impute an anachronistic positive concept (as the doxographers are often guilty of doing). Babut argues convincingly that this text represents the inverse of Xenophanes’ negative criticism of Homer.³⁸ It is not, he says, F 26 which explains F 11-17, but rather it is the latter which allows us to understand the former. The anti-anthropomorphism does not arise out of a clearly developed monotheism, but the reverse is true. F 26 arises from the realization that the god(s) are not like humans, in fact cannot be in any way like humans to have the power ascribed to them by religion. In effect, god may not resemble humans, and since humans move about, it is not “fitting” for god to move. This is not the result of an objective or normative understandings which are absolute in Xenophanes’ thinking, but rather the correlative concepts which arise critically and logically from his criticism of Homer.

³⁷ Barnes, p. 85. “It is incredible that any thinker should have advanced such a fatuous piece of reasoning.” Barnes is either giving way to hyperbole here, or demonstrating his ignorance of a great deal of theological writing. Michael Eisenstadt (*Hermes* 1974) also accepts this logical description of fitting, p. 148.

³⁸ Babut, p. 433ff.

Whereas Barnes relates his logical connection to a conception of god under which it would be self-contradictory to posit movement; Babut sees the connection solely related to his critical response to the poets. Barnes sees a logical relationship to an imagined posited concept; Babut to an obvious textual concern of Xenophanes: how do we purge the poets of morally degenerative ideas, and theologically debasing concepts. Barnes account has the disadvantage of being difficult to reconcile with Xenophanes' apparent disavowal of real knowledge of the gods. Babut's account has less difficulty. With his reading one need not view Xenophanes as a deductive theologian, but rather someone more in line with the Socrates we find in Plato's early dialogues: a religious practitioner who claims to know with certitude very little about anything (including the gods), but who is unhappy about apparent contradictions in the poetic accounts of the gods, and just as dissatisfied with his contemporaries who embrace those contradictions (e.g., the Euthyphro). So we may reject Barnes account as being potentially too strong, and certainly unnecessary.

Jaeger's account is also an unlikely reading of "fitting." First, this is based partly on Babut's contention that the word does not have a common religious connotation.³⁹ That there is rarely, if ever, a religious "coloring" of this Greek word, is important evidence against Jaeger. But this view is bolstered by a second factor. While Xenophanes may have truly revered his god, his view of the god's sublimity would not have motivated F 26.

³⁹ "Bref, le concept énoncé par *ἐπιπρέπειν* n'a aucune coloration religieuse particulière, et le critère de la convenance - qui n'est pas inconnu de la littérature épique - se réfère à une norme sociale plutôt que morale." D. Babut (1974), p. 432 - 433.

Leshner's interpretation does have the advantage of giving Xenophanes the benefit of philosophical reasoning, but again it is unnecessary given Babut's account. Guthrie and KRS seem to explain the connection with the "negative fragments" in a way that is consistent with Babut's explication. The attempt by some (e.g., von Fritz and Reinhardt) to explain this in light of the ubiquity of god is most likely misplaced. Why would a god who was everywhere need to move in the first place?

C. On Divine Birth

The poets spoke of the god's birth, both in individual and group terms. This is another case where Xenophanes believes the tradition is inconsistent. And he is not alone. Some 200 years later Aristotle will quote a "saying of Xenophanes" that expands upon the laconic comment of F 14.⁴⁰ He says: "that to assert that the gods had birth is as impious as to say that they die; the consequence of both is that there is a time when the gods do not exist."⁴¹ It is widely speculated that Aristotle drew directly from Xenophanes, but whether this is the case or not, there is every reason to believe the statement is consistent with Xenophanes' thinking.

Given that there is a tradition of believing in the gods as "those who are forever" (e.g., Homer *Iliad* 1.290, and Hesiod *Theogony* 21, 33, 105), we again find reason to think that Xenophanes is drawing out a latent contradiction "which had either gone unnoticed or, if noticed, had received insufficient consideration at the

⁴⁰ "Mortals assume that gods are born, wear clothes, and have a voice and body."

⁴¹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1399b 6-9.

hands of the poets.”⁴² This dovetails nicely with what we have discovered so far. Xenophanes is not as dependent upon a positive doctrine of what the gods must be like, as upon a conviction that what the poets have represented is inconsistent, and so must be false, or at least incomplete. Exactly what positive theological content Xenophanes holds, we will more fully uncover in the following fragments and in the subsequent chapter, but at this point one thing is certain: Xenophanes found the poetic theological imagination woefully inadequate for it reduced the seemingly invariant gods to beings with transitory qualities of human beings.

Here we must advance this interpretation particularly in light of those who see the inconsistent poetic tradition as being insufficient grounds for this theological advance; contra Barnes, for example, who seeks to demonstrate the “logical aspect” of Xenophanes’ theology by reconstructing his arguments for divine ungenerability.⁴³ Barnes finds that the argument from Aristotle’s quote (that if the gods are born then it entails a denial of divine eternal life) is pointed but not profound. Perhaps there is an asymmetry between birth and death. Perhaps the reason they cannot die is because their power precludes it, but divine power does not similarly preclude divine birth. Given the supposed inadequacy of this argument, Barnes then turns to two texts to attempt a reconstruction of the implicit arguments in them.

⁴² Leshner (following Heitsch’s interpretation), p. 87.

⁴³ Barnes, p. 86ff.

One is from the Sicilian playwright Epicharmus. This poet knew Xenophanes and parodied his poems more than once.⁴⁴ “Fate has preserved a fragment in dialogue form on the birth of the gods...”

- But the gods were always about and never off the scene; and they are always about in the same way and always with the same habits.
- But Chaos is said to have been first born of the gods.
- How so? if he didn't have anything from which to which he could be the first to come?
- Then nothing came first?
- No - and nothing second either of the things we're now talking about; but they always existed (66: 23 B 1).⁴⁵

From this fragment where Epicharmus is “tilting” at Hesiod, Barnes mines an argument for divine ungenerability. The linchpin is the premise that a generated god must have something to “come from.” Let's term this the “generation source” premise. “If *a* comes into being, then there is some *x* such that *a* comes into being from *x*.” Since everything we know came *from* something else, then the gods would have to have been born *of* something. Since there is nothing that produces a god, except other gods, it cannot be said that they are born unless one admits to an infinite regression of god-begetting. Hence, Barnes' (re)constructed argument only works well when he assumes a prior commitment to monotheism, i.e., there is no reason that gods could not beget gods for eternity. It is not until you assume a God, who could not have been begotten by anything except himself that the argument has poignancy.

Barnes admits that his exegesis is “undeniably contorted” yet he can see no other way to extract an argument from Epicharmus. Naturally given what has been

⁴⁴ See Barnes, p. 321, n. 12.

⁴⁵ Quoted from *ibid.*, p. 87.

argued above about Xenophanes' lack of commitment to monotheism I find "contortion" to be a generous term for Barnes' extraction. In addition to the fact that when you remove the monotheism premise the argument becomes weak, it is also true that we have no other textual evidence that Xenophanes would have applied the above "generation source" premise to his belief that the gods were not born.

Barnes recognizes he needs more ammunition to fight for a deductive argument from Xenophanes. Barnes finds this ammunition in an alleged Xenophanean argument in the MXG.⁴⁶ He admits that the report is contaminated by later Eleatic logic, but its "Xenophanean core" is evident (for Barnes) in: a) certain turns of phrase (without specifying what these are), and b) by its similarity to the above fragment of Epicharmus. He quotes:

And he says that it is impossible, if anything exists, for it to have come into being - starting this in the case of god. For it is necessary that what has come into being should have come into being either from like or from unlike. But neither is possible, for it is not suitable that like should be sired by like rather than sire it (for things that are equal have all their properties the same and in similar fashion as one another); nor that what is unlike should come into being from unlike (for if the stronger came into being from the weaker, or the greater from the less, or the better from the worse - or the reverse; the worse from the better - what is would come into being from what is not, which is impossible) (65: 977a14-22)

From this text he draws a "Xenophanean kernel" while admitting that his account has a "somewhat arbitrary air."⁴⁷ He grants to Xenophanes the premise (let us call it Cartesian causation): "If *a* comes into being from *b*, then *b* is at least as great as *a*."

⁴⁶ It has been mentioned that the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise Melisso, Xenophane, Gorgia is usually dismissed. But Barnes follows Reinhardt in believing that the MXG relies heavily on Theophrastus and hence has some historical value.

⁴⁷ Barnes, p. 88.

What, Barnes rightly asks, might commend this premise to Xenophanes? The answer immediately strikes the reader as rather anachronistic, for he asserts the existence of a “general theory of causation” which states that “there is as much reality in the cause as in the effect.”

It is true that this theory of causation is older than Descartes and that versions of it are found in Aristotle and in Plato.⁴⁸ It may even be the case, as Barnes speculates, that the principle has a Pre-Socratic origin, and if Xenophanes held the “Cartesian causation” premise, it might even rest on this “general theory.” But do we have reason to give Xenophanes the former premise? One hates to give way to Barnes’ “gratuitous scepticism” by denying this premise to Xenophanes, but again it seems wise to risk erring on the side of hesitation.

There are a number of reasons for this hesitation. First, the MXG is too corrupt to use successfully except when there is clear evidence from other sources that the words are indeed Xenophanean. Correlatively, I can find no “phrase turns” (Barnes’ term) which clearly indicate that the description above is indeed Xenophanean. It is true that in such cases beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but in this case the beholder (Barnes) has not aided us in seeing what he sees. Next, given that the “Cartesian causation” premise is false it would be charitable to restrain from imputing it unless there is overwhelming reason to do so. Why should we want to donate a “misleading notion of the causal process” upon a thinker who, even in a corrupt and anachronistic document, is not manifestly guilty of possessing it?

Lastly, as Barnes admits, we have an *a priori* argument from Aristotle, which while possibly weak, does have three advantages. First, it points out the internal inconsistency in the poetic account itself. Since we are absolutely certain that one of Xenophanes' primary concerns was Homer and Hesiod, would not it be likely that his argument would make a direct reference to an inconsistency in their theology? It is of course true that the other two arguments Barnes creates can be equally read as an indictment against Homer, but the strength of them rests on premises (monotheism and the theory of general causality) which we have found to be anachronistic to Xenophanes. They don't make the *direct* and undeniable reference to the poets that Aristotle's account makes: i.e., to say the gods are born is to say there was a time they didn't exist, the poets have said this, and so are guilty (in this case) of being impious.

The second advantage of Aristotle's argument is that it manifests a concern which we can more easily find in Xenophanes than monotheism or Cartesian causation: piety. We have argued against Jaeger's thesis that Xenophanes' reverence is a source of his theological reformation, but while doing so, admitted that it is highly likely that he had emotional investment in the divine. To speculate about Xenophanes' internal emotive state while thinking about his god(s), as Jaeger seems to do, is to go a bit farther than the fragments allow. But there is no reason to doubt that he was pious. Even if you take the stance of Eisenstadt that Xenophanes' piety was simply a concern for the destructive effects of certain religious practices, one

⁴⁸ See Barnes, p. 119, for a discussion of what he calls the "synonymy principle" of Aristotle, Plato, and Descartes (Meditation III).

must admit that piety is a concern for Xenophanes, and would easily have fit into his argument against the birth of the gods.⁴⁹

The third advantage of the Aristotelian argument is that it sits more comfortably with Xenophanes' negative critique and it is consistent with the grounding of some of his other "positive" theological concepts in this critique. We mentioned Babut's argument earlier. Here it will suffice to say that Babut uses fragment 14 (often termed a "negative" fragment) in contrast with fragment 23 ("one god among gods and men is greatest, not like mortals in body or mind") as evidence for his thesis that the negative-positive typology is misplaced. Babut believes all the fragments are negatively and critically based, and even Xenophanes' "positive" statements are the simple critiques of traditional beliefs. His doctrines are not a new invention, but a logical extension of beliefs which are latent in that tradition.

Il n'y a donc pas lieu de distinguer ici entre une 'théologie positive' et la simple critique des croyances traditionnelles, la théologie qui s'exprime ici n'est pas plus positive que celle que l'on peut trouver en B 14, elle ne se définit pas comme une doctrine entièrement nouvelle qui viendrait se substituer aux croyances traditionnelles, mais plutôt comme le prolongement logique ou la radicalisation des conceptions sur lesquelles reposaient ces croyances.⁵⁰

D. On Anthropomorphism and Divine Morality

I argued (comments on F 11 and 12) that the basis for Xenophanes' rejection of anthropomorphism is partially found in his moral concerns.⁵¹ I also argued that fragments 15 and 16 (on the tendency to imagine gods who resemble ourselves) were

⁴⁹ I'm referring to Eisenstadt (1974), p. 149ff.

⁵⁰ Babut, (1974) p. 409.

not meant to be the sole basis for an argument against anthropomorphism, simply evidence against the practice. Since Xenophanes seems to hold something like the positive conviction: “the gods are not like humans, and so it is wrong to image them that way” we need to discern the grounding for such a claim.

Barnes sees this belief as a derivative of other positive convictions about the god, particularly his probable omniscience (F 24) and his assertion of god’s mastery (F 25).⁵² It is, of course, not difficult to derive anti-anthropomorphism from the idea that god’s sensory organs are not localized (and so not like mortals in form); nor from the conviction that he can move all things by his mind (and so is not like mortals in thought).

However it seems to me that Barnes has put the cart before the horse. There is more evidence that Xenophanes roots his denial of anthropomorphism in his critical epistemology and its correlative negative social criticism, than in theological speculation. Indeed, Fränkel sees this line of progression in Xenophanes’ thought: his criticism of anthropomorphism led him to monotheism and thence to an idea of a god transcending all human conception.⁵³ While firm and absolute convictions are impossible to establish here, there are substantial reasons for thinking that Fränkel’s direction, while taking him too far (monotheism) is more sensible than Barnes’ derivation which takes him the wrong way.

⁵¹ See pp. 23ff.

⁵² Barnes, p. 93.

⁵³ Fränkel, (Early Greek) p. 332.

In all likelihood anti-anthropomorphism is for Xenophanes a self-evident reality, which needs little or no argument for support. It would have been for him an analytical truth. In the very definition of “god” one finds “non-human.” The fact that anti-anthropomorphism was supported by traditional Greek religion would not have been the decisive issue *per se*, but the tradition would have given him material to describe *how* the gods were different. In other words, that the gods were not human every Greek would have accepted, but Xenophanes wished to show in more detail why they are not. For this he draws upon the tradition that surrounds him. Via his epistemological knife Xenophanes carves an image that is true to his understanding of the natural world, and corrects the poets of their flagrant contradictions. Babut is probably right in his contention that anthropomorphism was the first thing that Xenophanes noticed about the poetic account. It provided the Greeks a theological understanding that could not be reconciled with itself. For within the poetic writings the gods were represented as having superior (sometimes superlative) mental and physical capacities. These capacities could in no way be consistent with having a human body, a human mind, or indeed a human life.

What of god’s moral perfection that we find putatively expressed in F 11?⁵⁴ I have said that where there is no clear evidence or need of a positive theological doctrine, it would seem best to refrain from imputing one, particularly in a thinker

⁵⁴ Jonathan Barnes finds that F 11 implies the god’s moral perfection, but offers no argument for his position. “That Xenophanes upheld [this position] is an inference from B 11.” His evidence is the testimony of Simplicius and the MXG. The former is rejected by my most modern scholars as significantly corrupted and the latter, a spurious work in the Aristotle corpus, as not representative of Xenophanes at all. See pp. 101 ff. for more on the corruption of the MXG.

like Xenophanes. Fränkel, Heitsch, and Jaeger all relate F 11 to Xenophanes' rejection of anthropomorphism. It is possible that Xenophanes is only committed to the negative proposition (the gods are not like humans - hence are not morally reprehensible) and not to the positive counterpart (the gods are morally perfect - hence have a "human-like" will). Even if Xenophanes held the latter conviction, it is most likely that his rejection of moral corruption on Mt. Olympus was based in his distaste for transferring human realities to divine conceptualizations.⁵⁵

It has been noted by theologians that a belief in the moral excellence of the gods "sits rather uncomfortably" with a conviction of their dissimilarity.⁵⁶ We may find evidence that Xenophanes would have been concerned about this "discomfort" in his conviction that the gods are not like mortals in "mind." But we must be very tentative at this point. Xenophanes does *not* say whether he believes it is right to attribute positive moral attributes to the gods. Consequently it is not clear that he would have gone on to say, contra Homer, the gods respect property rights, don't break their marriage vows, and practice honesty. It is possible that he would have agreed with Aristotle who said that to ascribe just, brave, generous actions to the gods "appears trivial and unworthy of the gods" (NE 1178b16). And of course it is equally possible that Aristotle was dependent upon Xenophanes for this conviction. At the end of the day, to impute moral characteristics to the gods is another form of anthropomorphism, albeit considerably more subtle than the one Xenophanes is

⁵⁵ "Of all the Pre-Socratics it is Xenophanes who might be credited with moralizing divinity." Vlastos, Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher (Ithica: 1991), p. 164, n. 32.

⁵⁶ Leshner, p. 83.

countering in fragment 14 and 23 (i.e., “mortals assume that gods are born, wear their own clothes, and have a voice and body” and “one god... not like mortals in body or mind”). The scope of Xenophanes’ conviction that the gods don’t resemble humans in body is clear, but what he intended by “in mind” is not. Gilbert Murray observed that Xenophanes’ conviction that god did not resemble humanity in mind (or some translations “thought”) reminded one of the medieval Arab mystic who said that to call God ‘just’ was as foolishly anthropomorphic as to say he had a beard.⁵⁷

Leshner claims that the most plausible diagnosis for the grounds of both fragments 11 and 12 is in a doctrine of divine perfection. But it is Leshner who points out, what seems to be a more appropriate place to ground these statements. He draws attention to the fact that Xenophanes only explicitly mentions those illicit deeds which are: “crimes against organized society... By appearing to sanction acts of theft, infidelity, and dishonesty, the poets undermine the mutual trust and honesty essential to a healthy society.” Seen in this light, fragments 11 and 12 display the concern with “civic utility” that surfaces in Xenophanes’ criticism of the poets’ fictions of old in fragment 1.”⁵⁸ Eisenstadt has argued that this fragment shows that Xenophanes’ judgment about the appropriate use of a myth has less to do with its truthfulness, and more to do with its civic usefulness.⁵⁹ This fragment, along with F 21-23, proposed a

⁵⁷ Leshner, p. 83.

⁵⁸F 1 (line 19ff.) “Praise the man who when he has taken drink brings noble deeds to light, as memory and a striving for virtue bring to him. He deals neither with the battles of Titans nor Giants nor Centaurs, fictions of old, nor furious conflicts - for there is no use in these. But it is good always to hold the gods in high regard.” See also F 2 where sports enthusiasm is contrasted with the philosopher’s wisdom. The former does nothing to help the city be better governed. The Leshner citation from, p. 84-85

⁵⁹ M. Eisenstadt, (1974), p. 147ff.

ensorship of those myths (even true stories of civil strife) whose violent theme “exasperated violent tendencies in an inebriated audience.”⁶⁰ This concern of Xenophanes, manifested in several fragments and combined with his sensitivity to anthropomorphism, is the motivational root of his criticism of Homer and Hesiod. It may very well be the case that Xenophanes believed his god(s) to be completely good and it is likely that Euripides was following him in thinking that “if gods do anything evil, they are not gods” (fragment 292.7). But civic concern, in this case manifested by the belief that popular religions undermined public morality, combined with his conviction that the gods are not like humans, is sufficient to derive fragments 11 and 12. One need not posit a conviction of divine perfection upon Xenophanes without more evidence these fragments provide.

Below I will build this case by elaborating on two essential elements of the argument that Xenophanes’ criticism is motivated by, and to some extent based upon, his views of civic morality. First I will give evidence for the “reformation” side of this argument and then for the contention that he had reason to be concerned about the connection between theology and morality.

1) Divine Morality and Religious Reform

Leshner says that “we should not imagine that ‘clarification and revision of prevailing religious sentiment’ would have been one of Xenophanes’ avowed

⁶⁰ Eisenstadt, p. 147. However, F1 also gives evidence that Xenophanes warmly approved some practices of traditional Greek religion, as Eisenstadt rightly points out.

purposes.”⁶¹ On the contrary, there are several reasons why, in the light of the concerns of the other fragments, the easiest explanation of his positive theological fragments is a desire for religious reformation of popular sentiment.

First, from several of his non-theological fragments Xenophanes manifests concern for public life. For good or ill, he should be compared with a William Buckley, rather than a Gregory Vlastos.⁶² He is indignant at incapacitating inebriation at civic events (F1), by undue civic concern with sports over proper political philosophy (F2), and with the boastful display of wealth in his city (F3). There is nothing in the tone of his remarks which could lead us to believe that Xenophanes was ever indifferent to corrupt societal actions.

Second, while critical of the traditional poets, we have good reason to think that Xenophanes wholeheartedly accepted the Greek maxim that to be “god-fearing” is to be moral. He advocates the prayer to “be able to do right” (F 1). The idea of the fear of the gods being intimately tied to morality lies deep within the classical Greek soul.⁶³ This idea is expressed well in the *Odyssey* where, “Polyphemos, though a son of Poseidon, has no care for the gods, and hence he is a man-eater.”⁶⁴ We need not be critical of Xenophanes unqualified acceptance of this connection of religion and

⁶¹ Leshner, pp. 105-106.

⁶² In a very poignant essay Vlastos defended his “academic silence” that led him to devote more energy to the study of Plato, than the condemnation of the Vietnam conflict (for example). One has a feeling the argument would have been lost on Xenophanes.

⁶³ This is not unique to the Greeks, of course. It is a common religious theme (e.g., Proverbs 1:7 “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” or the fact that Greeks who converted to Judaism in the first century were called “God-fearers.”)

⁶⁴ And also in the positive form when Odysseus asks as he lands on an unknown shore: “are the inhabitants ‘wanton, wild, and not just’ or ‘hospitable and of a god-fearing mind.’” Quoted by Walter Burkert in *Greek Religion* (London: Blackwell Press, 1985), p 247.

morality, as it has been embraced in some form by the vast majority of human cultures. Xenophanes' originality was in the assumption that he could refine the old unacceptable myths, and consequently purify the piety of Greek religion, and consequently improve social morals.

Third, his philosophical statements are combined with clear expressions for the need of piety. "Pious men should sing to the god with decent stories and pure words" (F 1). His concern over the corruption of theology by Homer and Hesiod, is not the detached frustration of a logician, but an emotionally engaged critic, who expresses his disgust at the denigration of something about which he cares. As was noted above Jaeger traces Xenophanes' theology to his "reverence." While the notion was found incomplete as a grounding of his theology, nevertheless, there may be good reasons to believe that Xenophanes really did have a reverential awe of the divine. We should be surprised of course if this was not the case, and indeed the onus is on those who would like to prove otherwise.⁶⁵ Scholars who have embraced a portrait of Xenophanes as simply a critical nature philosopher whose theological concerns were

⁶⁵ This is not meant to imply that generations later atheism was not becoming more tenable among the philosophers, and might more appropriately be assumed. Indeed it was the work of the Ionian philosophers of Xenophanes' era which made the later atheism expressed in Athens possible. Critias' famous statement that suggests that the gods were a deliberate human invention introduced to provide a sanction to ensure good behavior and that the inventor of the gods placed them in the upper circuit from which lightening and thunder come to frighten humanity, is less surprising in his day precisely because he follows Xenophanes, who has already suggested that humans form their own images of the gods. When Aristophanes' Socrates says "there is no Zeus" and Strepsiades question (who rains?) is answered by "it never rains without clouds" one is reminded of Xenophanes' statement about Iris (that which they think is Iris is a cloud F 32). From the fragments it is clear that Xenophanes didn't want to express doubt about the god's existence, only doubt about their activity as popularly expressed. One might say, following Nietzsche's typology, that Xenophanes was seeking to strip the gods of their Dionysian qualities (irrationality, immorality, divination, estaticism) and instill their Apollonian qualities ("fitting" form, rationality, and moral uprightness) (F. Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy).

solely cynical punches at popular heroes like Homer, have had a difficult time explaining this pious expressions in fragment 1.⁶⁶ These are the words of one who has a prescriptive and normative view of religious life and who is willing to thrust that view at (or upon?) others. In our secular age, we should resist anachronistic temptations to imagine a philosopher of religion who has no emotional investment in the philosophy he is positing. Xenophanes may not be a Martin Luther, but he is clearly not a contemporary academic publishing ideas he suspects few will read. Furthermore while Xenophanes may have never nailed his ideas to the doors of a Greek temple, we do know that he made quite an impression on the Greek mind.

If these comments represent an accurate understanding of this natural theologian then two things seem sure: 1) he never lost sight of his religious context when forming his theological views, 2) he had a desire to reform and augment, rather than destroy and undermine, the religion of his day.⁶⁷

Finally it should also be noted that if Xenophanes was attempting to establish an entirely new religion he utterly failed. There is no clear evidence that he had any followers. "Xenophanes found listeners but no adherents or disciples."⁶⁸ But his listeners were not insignificant. As Walter Burkert says: "The break with tradition is

⁶⁶ He describes a banquet and says: "but first glad-hearted men must hymn the god with reverent words and pure speech. And having poured a libation and prayed to be able to do what is right - for these are obvious - it is not wrong to drink as much as allows any but an aged man to reach his home without a servant's aid." Fragment 1.

⁶⁷ See also Michael Eisenstadt "Xenophanes' Proposed Reform of Greek Religion" in Hermes (Wiesbaden, 1974, v. 102) pp. 142 - 150.

⁶⁸ Burkert, p. 309.

accomplished. Xenophanes' criticism of Homeric religion could not be outdone, and it was never refuted. *Even Christians had nothing to add.*"⁶⁹

2) Morality and *Memisis*

So this picture of Xenophanes' is based upon his explicit ethical emphasis. As was just indicated, he is disgusted with a good deal of human behavior, and particularly that which contrasted with the social norms of the day, and which was attributed to the gods. Xenophanes was not averse to making moralizing statements in the direction of his society, nor if he was the strong sceptic that some claim, did he correspondingly limit his own knowledge claims about what was good for his fellow citizens. Whether arguing against the obsession with sports, or exhorting others on how to conduct a drinking party, he seemed to have a clear conviction about what was good for society.

Is it beneficial for society if the people who make it up, believe their gods are morally superior to humans? Xenophanes most likely believed so. Why, and on what basis? Though developed by Plato, it would not be anachronistic to impute in his predecessor an early form of the ethics of *memisis*. According to this view we learn by imitation of our superiors.⁷⁰ We adopt the manners, lifestyle, and actions of those we see in positions of prominence. This is true both in language and in ethics.

⁶⁹ Ibid., emphasis mine.

⁷⁰ Incidentally this is picked up by early Christians, particularly Paul, who when writing followers in Greece, encouraged them to imitate him, as he imitated Christ.

Cultural differences, between two human beings who are otherwise physically alike, are explained by this process which begins at birth.

Plato, for example, clearly thought that the poetic conception of the gods was a problem for Greek society. Euthyphro is indignant that the same people who believe that Zeus is “the most excellent and just among the gods” and also that he “shackled his own father, for swallowing his sons unjustly, and that Cronus in turn had gelded his father for like reasons” are enraged that he is proceeding against his own father.⁷¹ Euthyphro’s justification for taking his father to court is based in the stories of the gods, which Socrates finds incredible. The point is made here, which will be further explored in the Republic (374a), that the poets are dangerous for public morality. Using a Euthyphronic method of justification there are a great many ways that a Greek could be pious, ways that would undermine public life.⁷² We can speculate that immoral behavior was at times personally justified on the basis of some sophisticated version of “if they can do it, why can’t I?”

One reason for thinking that Xenophanes would have held such a view are his thoughts on culture. He notes that the Ethiopians have a very different sort of theological conception than do the Thracians. The easiest explanation for this, and the one implied by Xenophanes, is not that there are distinct gods for different people groups, but that physical differences influence our idea of what the gods must look

⁷¹ Plato, Euthyphro, 6a.

⁷² This, of course, is not to say that Plato did not have a doctrine of divine perfection. It is to say that the basis for his criticism of the poets is grounded in his sociological concerns, more than his theological ones. His expression of distaste for the poets is couched in terms of bad influence, not reverential concern for the god’s dignity. In this regard he resembles his philosophical predecessor

like (F 16). We form theological opinions on the basis of the physical realities we see around us. This is one of the earliest implied arguments based on cultural relativity, and is evidence that Xenophanes understood the impact of a regional culture upon ideas. It is a commonplace that individuals who travel extensively and encounter cultures, are less likely to be “provincial.” Even the term we use to describe cultural prejudice, indicates a core conviction that encountering other places and cultures gives a degree of perspective about the role of culture in human life. Xenophanes admits to traveling much, and he is reported to have been a keen observer wherever he went.

Do we have indications that he continued to reason that this process works in the civic moral realm? Do we have evidence that he thought the idea of “moral imagery” of the gods influenced a society’s conception of proper behavior? Fragment 10 does give some indication that the answer is yes. “Since from the beginning all have learned according to Homer...” This implies more than that Xenophanes was very sensitive to cultural and popular morality, which was widely influenced by Homer. It implies he found this influence to be negative, and worthy of censure.⁷³

The “blameful” things which Homer attributes to the gods were forbidden by Greek city-states. Murder, adultery, and deceit, however often practiced, were not

who undoubtedly found that the health of his society was undermined by the very behavior attributed to the gods by Homer.

⁷³ Iris Murdoch, in connection with art and ethics, has said that humans are the only animals who draw pictures of themselves and come to resemble the pictures. It doesn’t seem out of the bounds of the textual evidence to speculate that Xenophanes, in connection with theology and ethics, would have had

smiled upon. Part of the reason that F 11 and 12 have such a sting is because all of his readers would have understood the behavior to be indeed shameful. Killing, the taking of women in war, and malicious acts of deceit may have been common practice during war, but these were in a different moral category from murder, adultery, and deceit during peace.

One objection to Xenophanes' views might be that Homer's stories do not excuse or "forgive" this behavior in the gods. In some cases the gods suffer because of their illicit conduct. Could it not be argued that many of Homer's stories are moralistic in their outcome? Possibly, but this does not seem to be the position of Plato, or in this case his predecessor Xenophanes. The latter plausibly holds the conviction that to portray the gods in this behavior is in itself to induce, or at least to incite, similar forms of action among those who would see the gods as their superiors. If Zeus cannot resist beautiful Ganymedes, then how could a mere mortal resist the lure of available flesh (willing or not)? If anger can lead a god to kill, doesn't a human being have a better excuse? These are crude questions, but they easily could have been the very ones that concerned Xenophanes.

If this line of thinking is correct, then the motivation for Xenophanes' anti-anthropomorphism is not top-down (moral perfection, and other divine attributes, make the god very distinct from human beings and so it is wrong to picture the god with human traits), but bottom-up (civic and ethical concerns require that god(s) be morally superior, hence Homer must be purged and his negative influence expunged).

a similar view; i.e., the gods represent the extenuation of the best human characteristic imaginable, and

Admittedly the evidence for the latter is based upon scant textual references, and some amount of speculation. However the former is, in my opinion, in more obvious contradiction with the explicitly epistemological fragments and with the critical, proto-scientific, rational disposition of Xenophanes. According to Xenophanes' own testimony he could not know about theological matters without some degree of doubt, and a great deal of searching (F 18 and 34). He could not have possibly known about divine perfection from personal experience and he is obviously not appealing to revelation. He is either positing a claim for which he has no real evidence and at another place and time has said he cannot know, or he is making a claim that is strictly critical and utilitarian. He might say religion is a civic reality, which must respond to the needs of its society. The religion with dilatory narratives at its base is in need of reform and purification, not theological propositions.

At the minimum, then, the evidence shows that Xenophanes did not *begin* with an assumption of his god's moral perfection, but began with a social-critic's concern for the debilitating effect of Homer's stories on his compatriots.⁷⁴ But to speak in such temporal terms may belie the complexity of the origination of Xenophanes' utterly unique (in historical context, at least) natural theology. To say that Xenophanes' fragments do not need to be grounded in a posited doctrine of

when they don't we risk undermining public morality by providing a poor picture to emulate.

⁷⁴ While not wanting to draw anachronistic connections that stretch credulity to the limits, I would like to note that if this aspect of our interpretation is correct, then Xenophanes saw a connection that has been sometimes ignored in social ethics, i.e., the central role of religion in motivating and sometimes justifying behavior - good and bad. Recent attention in academic circles has sought to address this oversight. A wonderful example is Charles Marsh's God's Long Summer (Princeton: University Press, 1997) where he eloquently weaves the intersection of faith and practice in the civil rights struggle in Mississippi in 1964.

divine moral perfection, is not to say that Xenophanes could not have had notions that his god was indeed morally superior to humans - even to a superlative degree. It is rather to lessen his commitment to a prior theoretical demand.

This interpretation of Xenophanes allows for the most comprehensive reading of all of the philosopher's fragments, by recognizing that the basis of his speculative theological statements is found in a logical process that begins with rudimentary ethical and sociological arguments, and not in prior theological convictions. We may find the reasoning faulty and the "science" primitive, but that is a different matter than imputing ideas into Xenophanes' philosophy which contradict his fallibilist epistemology. It remains now to show how this "logical process" could have derived that god thinks as a whole, and moves things by the power of his mind.

E. On Divine Thought, Perception and Power

If Xenophanes' god sits as an unborn entity, which refuses to move about, what causes the shaking? The answer according to Xenophanes is the *phren* of the *nous*. S.M. Darcus follows B. Snell in calling these two elements "psychic organs".⁷⁵ She argues that the *nous* has a distinctive role when used to describe the god's psychic activity. It is to bring all things to their *telos*. The *phren* is a locus of emotion "which can contain other psychic organs."⁷⁶ Darcus, however, gets into difficulty when her argument leads to the conclusion that "Xenophanes believed that [the god's *phren*]

⁷⁵ Shirley M. Darcus, "The Phren of the Nous in Xenophanes' God" in *Symbolae Osloenses* (1978) pp. 25 - 39.

⁷⁶ Darcus, p. 26.

was similar to a human one.”⁷⁷ Surely this is to disregard both the letter and the spirit of several of Xenophanes anti-anthropomorphic statements. The difficulties deepen when she accepts the view of the doxography that Xenophanes’ god has a round body, which she associates with the *phren*, noting that this human organ is usually located by the poets around the heart. Darcus’ account is helpful, although not alone, in pointing out the tradition of these two “psychic organs” but in the effort to make the connection this account “creates at least as many problems as it solves.”⁷⁸

The best reading seems to be, as translated in chapter 1, with the genitive sense in full force: i.e., the *thoughts of* his mind. Interpreting a spiritual entity as a physical reality breaks with the direction and intent of Xenophanes’ thinking as otherwise expressed in the fragments. Xenophanes may have imaged a physically located god, but nothing he says forces this opinion upon us. Many contemporary interpretations would lead us to a non-physical account, where the greatest god was exhibited in order and intelligence rather than in any physical property. In this case the god would be closer to a governing logos, than to a sitting Zeus. Fränkel’s contention that the double expression (*nous, phren*) was chosen *in order* to exclude any taint of materiality, may be a bit strong.⁷⁹ It certainly didn’t work if that was Xenophanes intention. However Fränkel’s basic non-physical interpretation seems correct.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p30.

⁷⁸ See Lesher’s criticism on p. 108.

⁷⁹ Fränkel, (*Early Greek*), p. 331, n. 11.

Heitsch, for example, provides an account that sits comfortably with this same sentiment, and for that matter everything we have discovered about Xenophanes.⁸⁰ Given what Xenophanes says about the god not having a physical body like humans, it is certain the god needs no ears, eyes, lungs, or even brain. He is all perception, without the human need for a physical body.⁸¹ He argues that fragment 24 is an example of Xenophanes working through latent inconsistencies in the poet's theological accounts. A god of broad perceptive powers (e.g., the kind imagined by Homer of Zeus) would not have achieved that state with the normal human organs. This approach views Xenophanes as a revisionist who is stripping away the "unattractive, demeaning, or otherwise limiting attributes" of the gods, and beginning with the "essential traits of the gods of popular religion."⁸²

Heitsch's account is consistent with Burkert's, who not only appreciates the continuity of traditional religion as expressed in Homer, but his reception of the ideas of contemporary thinkers.

Aristotle asserts that Xenophanes had "looked up to the sky and thus called the one (the universe) god". But Xenophanes only draws together what Anaximandros and Anaximenes had taught. The divine beginning which embraces everything and guides everything, from which everything proceeds, including gods and things divine, is in fact the One, the greatest of all. The original contribution lies in the concept of thinking comprehension, *Nous*: the question of how the divine can guide everything is thereby answered.⁸³

⁸⁰ Heitsch, *ibid.*, p. 153.

⁸¹ For other versions of this interpretation, see W.A. Heidel "The Pythagorean and Greek Mathematics", *AJP*, 1940, 1-33 and E. Heitsch "Xenophanes: Die Fragmente" (1983), pp. 153ff.

⁸² See Leshner, p. 105.

⁸³ Burkert, *Greek Religion* (London: Blackwell Press, 1985) p. 308.

Leshner believes that Heitsh's account is possibly true, but not sufficient to explain (or at least ground) fragments 23-26 (to paraphrase: "there is one great god, who perceives as a whole, who shakes everything by his thoughts, and who never moves").⁸⁴ Leshner insists that there must be an unstated theoretical demand "imposed by the nature of the divine."⁸⁵ For example, with this fragment the idea of a body possessing full awareness might have stood upon any of the following:

1) only such a body would be compatible with an attribution of omniscience to the divine; or 2) only such a body could achieve the 'shaking of all things' ascribed to the deity in fragment 25; or 3) only such a body would be fully 'befitting' to the divine, just as only spatial immobility could befit such a being according to fragment 26.⁸⁶

While it is true that Xenophanes' divine description might have stood on any or all of those three, we need not commit Xenophanes to a "unstated" metaphysical conception, but rather to an acceptance of the best possible formulation of traditional religion. As mentioned earlier, for Xenophanes to have reached more than a "negative ambivalence" he has to have some positive justification for his theological reformation. This positive justification can be placed in both a moral concern (the "emotional or external motivation"), and a theoretical clarification (the "logical or internal motivation"). The former is alluded to throughout this chapter, and latter will be spelled out in greater detail in the next chapter, but for now it should be clear that the theoretical aspect of this includes the desire to do two things: 1) to bring out

⁸⁴ "So while the notion of a god who thinks 'as a whole' may actually resolve certain inconsistencies in older views, the fact could not of itself serve to explain Xenophanes' support for the idea." Leshner, p. 106. This is stated but never argued.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

latent theological concepts of the inconsistent and corrupt poetic account, and 2) to create a version of natural theology which would be consistent across cultures and even religions.

At this point two clarifications may be in order. First, this argument is not meant to rule out the possibility of some theoretical considerations entering into Xenophanes' thinking as he forms his theology. This argument is simply meant to undermine Leshner's overstatement, that one of his prime theological motivations is *not* found in revising the incoherent (and in Xenophanes and Plato's view) dangerous teachings of the poets, and so reform religion. In the next chapter we will build the case that the prior theoretical elements were minimal, and that the logical ground of Xenophanes' theological reform is found in an embryonic science. This is to say that Xenophanes did indeed embrace aspects of his religious tradition, but did so not because of a metaphysical vision, but out of inductive inferences. He provides a theology by evidential induction that is far from perfect, but that squares well with his epistemological concerns.

Secondly this argument does wish to defend Xenophanes' from the charge that he has so reformed religion so as to make his god almost unrecognizable to the Greek practitioner. Traditional Greek piety would seem to have serious conflicts with natural theology, in general and with Xenophanes' version particularly. The typical Greek piety, for example, is manifested by prayers for war victory, hope of divine communication, and promises of faithful obedience. This would be very distinct from

⁸⁶ Ibid.

the kind of piety that, at least *prima facie*, Xenophanes' theology would call for. How could Xenophanes be pious, or even recommend piety, if everything he taught undermined the basis of Greek practice of piety?⁸⁷ This may be one of the first instances of the long noted difference between the god(s) of religion and the god (typically singular) of the philosophers. The former typically illicit emotional states like reverence, and lifestyles described by piety and commitment; at times even leading adherents to martyrdom. The latter is often represented in terms of intellectual consistency. But as John Henry Newman said: "no one ever delivered himself up to martyrdom for the sake of a conclusion."⁸⁸ Piety, reverence, and ultimate commitment, don't seem to sit as well with a religion that is based in human argument as against a religion founded by divine authority. Moreover Xenophanes' one greatest god is not named. The god might be revered in some Kantian sense (as his reverence for the law) but not feared as one might fear or even love powerful Apollo. One can easily imagine Homer's Zeus moved to aid a faithful's good cause, but this is more difficult of Xenophanes' unborn, unmoving, unnamed entity.

The most plausible interpretation of Xenophanes' theology, I have argued here, is not a monotheistic replacement of, but a supplement to, Greek theology. Xenophanes did not mean to strike at the root of traditional Greek religion but according to this view Xenophanes intended to retain the positive elements of pious commitment. In so arguing we are walking a tightrope, one I assume Xenophanes

⁸⁷ A cursory read of Thucydides will show, for example, the commonplace practice of divination before battle. To remove this cornerstone of Greek piety would have been to transform it almost beyond recognition.

attempted to walk. If god is abstract and all-powerful, can he be personally and intimately concerned with my life? A god who sees all, would by definition see me, but does that imply his sight would bring intervention into my affairs? Moreover, setting aside individual concerns, would the god of Xenophanes be concerned with corporate issues like Athens winning a battle against Sparta? Even today the vast majority of religions contain some element of the god's reciprocity for good deeds. It should be recalled that Xenophanes seems to cast doubt not only on direct divination, but also on the god's direct protection (F 17). If this account is correct the question would arise in the mind of the average ancient Greek: why does one, worship?

Whatever else could be said of worship and piety in a Xenophanean theology, it includes the concept of selflessness. There would be no prayer for certain knowledge (although it is less certain that one might pray for some vague wisdom), no petition for divine protection, and no assurance that god would help in time of war. God would be worshipped for god; awe expressed at the mysterious nature of Nature, or simple joy expressed in the face of mystery. Given that higher forms of moral philosophy call for some version of "unselfing" is it impossible to think that

⁸⁸ Gerson, p. 13

Xenophanes had a moral vision in sight as he propagated the more abstract forms of his understanding of divinity? His preoccupation with public morality has been cited enough to give a firm yes.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ It is of course impossible in this context to not think of Socrates conversation with Euthyphro; particularly where the latter rejects (with Socrates approval) the idea that the gods stand in need of anything, and can be improved by the work of humans. McPherran argues that in this dialogue Socrates holds something like this definition: "Piety is that part of justice that is a service of humans to gods, assisting the gods in their work, a work that produces good results." McPherran's arguments for this constructivist approach are convincing, and it would seem to me that elements of Socrates' convictions on piety resonate well with Xenophanes' teachings; not only the idea that the holy is a reality loved by the gods because of its inherent properties, but also the view that the gods are not possibly improved by human actions. What McPherran says about Socrates, could stand for Xenophanes: the fact that these convictions undercut Greek religious practice is precisely the point - certain aspect of Greek piety were meant to be undermined. See McPherran, pp. 29ff. There will be more to say about this connection with Socrates in the final section of this monograph.

CHAPTER V
ON EPISTEMIC FOUNDATIONS AND THE FORMULATION OF
XENOPHANES' THEOLOGY

Walter Burkert, in his classic Greek Religion, sums up the pre-Socratic philosophical “principles” as applied to religion:

First, the poets are to be criticized, for their myths are, if understood literally, untrue and impious. Second, there are outlines of *theologia* to which one must subscribe, concerning divine power, perfection, and spirituality. And third, the practice of piety is not to be touched, since it is regarded as compatible with purer piety, indeed as a duty. A dash of Protagorean scepticism is combined with the old inherited caution in religious affairs. The intellectual revolution ends in a conservative attitude.¹

Expressed this way, Xenophanes stands as an archetype. He not only fits the mold, he created it. And from what we've seen, Burkert has listed the two main ingredients in Xenophanes' mix. A dash of “Protagorean scepticism” mixed with his particular blend of “inherited theological caution” is what we have found in the fragments. My focus has been to try to determine exactly what this “dash” of scepticism was made of (Chapter 3), and how it combined with Xenophanes' fairly traditional piety to form his theological views (Chapter 4).

It was noted at the outset that Xenophanes' scepticism seemed out of keeping with his theological assertions. However, this attempt at interpreting the fragments has resulted in the lessening of the tension between these two elements. That tension

has slackened after a better understanding of Xenophanes' epistemological fallibilism and his version of natural theology. Hence I maintain that the task of reconciling the two primary streams of Xenophanes' thought is much easier given what we now know of his philosophical persuasion. Epistemologically and theologically Xenophanes was a critical minimalist. He resisted speculation that is too far removed from human experience.² His understanding of human knowledge was grounded in the attempt to broaden experience, and in the effort to engage critical faculties to look out for things like consistency and cultural anomalies. His theology was shaped by these same factors. Xenophanes did not believe that certain knowledge of non-evident matters was possible, but did think that some form of conjectural knowledge was; particularly when experience and reason work to trim away outdated concepts and poetic fancies. The tool he uses to deconstruct Homeric theology is the same tool he uses to construct a new vision of the natural cosmos.

In the previous chapter we found evidence for an "external" motivation to Xenophanes' theological reformation. I argued that his moral and existential concerns, which Xenophanes likely grounded in some rudimentary social theory about religion and ethics, drove his adamant religious reform. But this, in and of itself, does not fully explain how the make-up of his epistemic convictions helped form the recipe of his theology. It helps to understand the motivational factors that led Xenophanes to "publish" statements which would be discussed for thousands of years, but it does not

¹ Walter Burkert, Greek Religion (London: Blackwell Pub., 1985) p. 321.

logically ground these revolutionary statements. There is more that must be said if we are to adequately account for his theology. I now turn to this explicitly epistemological grounding that appears very much like foundational science. It is this embryonic version of the scientific method, conceived in a fallibilist epistemology, which births a critical theological reform.

Section 1 - A New Understanding of the Basis of Knowledge

While we have seen that interpretive differences on Xenophanes specifically, and the pre-Socratics generally are wide-spread there is significant agreement that with the advent of Thales we have a new beginning in human history. This beginning is traced primarily to a new method of explanation. While snickering at Thales' ubiquitous gods, and making light of Anaximander's *apeiron*, we still marvel at the originality of their accomplishment: initiating the turn away from superstition to science. Since Burnet published his Early Greek Philosophy in 1930 there have been intervening decades of contention about whether the pre-Socratics were really involved in science. Many scholars today accept Burnet's identification of the pre-Socratics' inquiry with science, *with reservations*. However, there is good reason to concur with those contemporary scholars who warn against anachronistic expectations of early science, centuries before more refined methodologies were developed, and

² For similar view see Paul Steinmetz, "Xenophanesstudien" (in Rheinisches Museum fur Philologie 109, 1966), pp. 13 – 73. Steinmetz argues that the reforming and demythologizing spirit of Xenophanes' philosophy lends to his thought a strong sense of purpose and unity.

with those who would guard against making a categorical distinction between pre-Socratic philosophy and science.

Bringing evidence to and argument for this view, Jerry Stannard (in an article on the “Presocratic Origin of Explanatory Method”) shows that Burnet’s thesis can be defended with two conditions: “The first is the condition that by ‘science’ we understand the formulation of an explanatory method.” The second condition is that the sharp distinction between science and philosophy does injustice to pre-Socratic inquiry by insisting on a distinction which is anachronistic.³ Stannard’s concern is that in the intervening 2,500 years we have developed scientific methods which obviously make those of the pre-Socratics look quite distinct, but that in actuality arise from the same motivation: the explanation of phenomena through natural means.

Based on these observations, it seems reasonable to attempt to find further evidence that Xenophanes himself was involved in an *early* form of science. Today we would call his inquiry “natural science”, but he (in all likelihood) would not have so easily distinguished this from other areas of inquiry. We have not studied his scientific and naturalistic statements, so a few examples may be in order:

F 27: ... for all things are from the earth and to the earth all things come in the end.

F 29: All things which come into being and grow are earth and water.

F 30: The sea is the source of water and of wind, for without the great sea there would be no wind nor streams of rivers nor rainwater from on high; but the great sea is the begetter of clouds, winds, and rivers.

F 33: For we all come into being from earth and water.⁴

³ Jerry Stannard, “The Philosophical Quarterly” (Vol. 15, July, 1965) p. 194.

⁴ Leshner’s translation.

In their context these are remarkable statements.⁵ The question at hand, is how did Xenophanes come by these exceptional words, and could this be methodologically related to his theology?

I believe, hardly alone, that the pre-Socratics generally and Xenophanes specifically, sought an explanation to phenomena. A desire to understand joined with awareness that natural causes were not always driven arbitrarily by personal entities, caused Xenophanes to look about him in studied curiosity. He sought to explain what he saw, by appealing to other natural phenomena as opposed to imagined mystical constructs.⁶ That in itself is a major step, but when added to a rudimentary methodology one has the makings of an intellectual revolutionary of the first rank. Xenophanes not only had a concern for civic culture and religion, but also a scientist's desire to explain phenomena through a method that would appeal primarily to observable natural phenomena, rather than mythology. It is with Xenophanes that the divine-human knowledge gap takes on a different slant. We may not have certain

⁵ Mourelatos has recently argued that in spite of the generally negative assessment of Xenophanes' scientific views among ancient and modern commentators, they offer some important scientific breakthroughs. The historical scientific worth of Xenophanes' statements is not our direct concern, but how he came about these arguments and how this may be connected to his theology obviously is. See A. P. D. Mourelatos, "X is really Y: Ionian Origins of a Thought Pattern," (in Ionian Philosophy, Athens, 1989), pp. 280 – 290.

⁶ Pascal Boyer has recently argued that "religion is about the existence and causal powers of non-observable entities and agencies." One of Boyer's examples is the belief of people of Cameroon in the possession by some - those particularly successful in oratory, business, horticulture or witchcraft - of an internal organ called *evur* with which the possessors are born but which can't be detected directly. This common human phenomenon (an attempt to explain the unseen by spiritual or supernatural entities) was intimated (and opposed) in Xenophanes' statement about Iris, as will be argued below. Boyer's conviction that those who were of a religious bent were better off in the span of evolution, certainly post-dates anything Xenophanes would have believed, but the conviction that scientific explanation is at least in tension with a religiously rooted explanation, can clearly be traced to Xenophanes. See, Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors (London: Heinemann, 2001).

knowledge, but we do have hope of knowing better and we have no need for divine revelation to help us in this regard. Reason and observation will take the place of oracles and divination.

There seems to be widespread agreement today that the essential ingredients of the explanatory method are: 1) the explicit formulation of specified techniques; 2) the following of a stipulated sequence; 3) the solution of a circumscribed problem.⁷

Stannard argues that the pre-Socratics were engaged in these three elements.

Moreover I will argue that we find evidence that in Xenophanes' idea of searching he has applied a methodology that resonates with Stannard's interpretation of the pre-Socratic approach. I wish to adumbrate this evidence with a view of supporting the thesis that Xenophanes' theology is an outgrowth of his naturalistic epistemology as defined in Chapter 3: a fallibilist view of knowledge, coupled with an optimistic hope that humans can find something closer to truth as we "search". I argue below that this "search" is an early version of the scientific method.

Section 2 - The Explanatory Method and Natural Phenomena

Stannard, in delineating the components of the explanatory method as outlined above, provides examples of the pre-Socratics using inference, evidence, classification, hypothesis, generalization, and guarantee. Xenophanes explicitly and implicitly makes use of several of these in his attempt to explain natural phenomena.

⁷ Stannard, p 104.

I will adumbrate a few examples in this attempt to show Xenophanes' use of a more traditional, even if early, version of the scientific method.

While the separation of inference and speculation is a vexed issue with the pre-Socratics, there is good reason to believe that Xenophanes practiced a relatively sophisticated form of inferential reasoning.⁸ Indeed, it appears that Xenophanes often steered away from the commonly used and weaker form of inference: analogy. He resisted the attempt to draw out the similarities in wildly different things (e.g., Anaximander's likening the earth to a stone pillar), and in keeping with his minimalism focused on inferences closest to human experience. For example, in F 31 Xenophanes is reported (by Heraclitus) as saying: "[The sun must be thought of as Hyperion, 'the one who always goes over the earth,' as I think Xenophanes the Colophonian says:] ...the sun both passing over the earth and spreading warmth over its surface." This observation seems strikingly obvious, but when considered next to other accounts of Xenophanes' solar views the inference is a bit more significant. Aëtius reports, for example, that Xenophanes believes the sun consists of burning clouds (A 40). Hippolytus conveys that Xenophanes says that the sun comes into

⁸ It should be noted that in chapter 3 I argued against a rationalist interpretation of Xenophanes, based on the fact that the *theological* fragments do not possess inferential connectives. Here I'm arguing that Xenophanes does use inferential reasoning. The difference lies in the subject matter, and in Xenophanes' epistemic convictions. He seems to resist metaphysical speculation, based in some prior theoretical concept, but is willing to infer from experienced phenomena the explanation for that or other phenomena. For example, I and others believe that the fact that the Sun is both warm and rises daily, leads Xenophanes to infer that it is analogous to a fire lit every day, and extinguished every evening. See the discussion following.

being each day from the gathering of small fires, and is extinguished every night (A 33). This view would have contrasted quite sharply with the older idea of a sun god.⁹

This rejection of sun worship and the attempt at a natural explanation shows an instance where the inferences Xenophanes draws are closer to a sophisticated derivation, than a simple analogy. The former are based on experience (warmth and light), the latter upon comparisons which are often as baseless as mythology (the earth rests on a pillar). Thales' famous statement that "all is water," seems quite mythological next to this more sophisticated form of reasoning. Pre-Socratic ideas are at times (e.g., "the gods are in everything,") much closer to simple analogies than is this statement of Xenophanes, which seems to be an example of an inference based on experience and observation.

Of course the exact extent to which Xenophanes traces this particular set of solar inferences to observation cannot be shown conclusively.¹⁰ However, what seems beyond doubt is that the difference between his inference (however weakly based on evidence and experience), and the older assumption that what could not be easily understood must be a divine force, is great. Given the observable connections between the sun and fire, and given the contextual belief in a "sun-god" who might

⁹ Deils (1897b 533) as cited by Leshner, p. 139.

¹⁰ Mourelatos (1989) argues that Xenophanes' astronomical explanations are representative of a kind of scientific linguistic pattern widely found in modern scientific language. I do not wish to argue for or against this interesting notion. I simply want to suggest that Xenophanes had the clear motive, and the early and incomplete methodology of a scientist.

threaten to take his warmth and light elsewhere (Odyssey 1.24), Xenophanes' inference seems both an early scientific account, and a radical one.¹¹

In addition to an obvious use of inference, Xenophanes appeals to evidence. Or to put it more precisely, Xenophanes bases his inferences on evidence. A common division of evidence is between that which is deductive and that which is based on sensory reports. We find indications of the use of evidence in the pre-Socratic inquiry generally, and Xenophanes specifically. This seems likely in the case above (inferences on the Sun's makeup), but is more certain in his statements about fossils. Hippolytus reports that Xenophanes found fossils, and inferred from their presence on land, that there was a time when everything was covered in mud (A 33). That these "imprints of fish and seals" were found by Xenophanes in Syracuse, Paros, and on Malta is significant in that it shows that in his natural studies Xenophanes took seriously the epistemic principle alluded to earlier: broad experience, or its correlative: extensive evidence. The point here is not simply that Xenophanes developed an inference, but that he based his ideas upon an extensive collection of data.¹² This fact should be connected to F 18 (Indeed from the beginning the gods did

¹¹ In striving to place these ideas in context, we should not forget that more than a century later Plato would propose severe punishments for practitioners of Ionian science (Laws 10.886ff.). Those espousing the "dreadful theory" that the heavenly bodies were not gods would be five years in solitary confinement or death with the second offense (909a).

¹² A 33 "... Xenophanes thinks that a mixture of the land with the sea comes about, but that in time (the land) becomes freed from the moisture, and he asserts that there are proofs for these ideas: that shells are found inland and in mountains, and he says that in quarries in Syracuse imprints of fish and seals were found; and in Paros the imprint of coral in the deep of the marble and on Malta slabs of rock containing all sorts of sea creatures." From Hippolytus Refutation of All Heresies 1.14 (DK, 565, Leshner, p. 214).

not reveal all things to mortals, but as they search in time they discover better¹³). As stated earlier, the operative verb in this passage (ζητέω) connotes “searching about for.”¹⁴ I concur with Leshar that to Xenophanes’ audience this action would not have communicated armchair reflection, but inquiry involving travel and discovery through encounter of new persons, things, and places.¹⁵ And for our purposes in this section, it would have explicitly included the idea of accumulating evidence.

On the notion of Xenophanes use of evidence Stannard draws an interesting comparison of the pre-Socratics and contemporary scientists. Wisely rejecting the notion that the pre-Socratics were early Darwinists, Stannard nevertheless notes that the differences between the ancient’s use of evidence and the Darwinian method should not obscure their point of resemblance. This resemblance concerns primarily their use of evidence and the consequences they drew from that evidence.¹⁶ In Xenophanes case, this means the use of fossils and evidence gleaned from the observance of common natural processes, to infer an explanation of natural phenomena.

Of course in science evidence is always sifted and selected out of a greater body of potential data. The pre-Socratics appeared to make the first steps towards classifying data. If the collection of data, does not lead to the classification of that

¹³ Οὗτοι ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς πάντα θεοὶ θνητοῖς ὑπέδειξαν, ἀλλὰ χρόνῳ ζῶντες ζητοῦντες ἐφευρίσκουσιν ἄμεινον.
From Stobaeus 1.8.2.

¹⁴ See the commentary on F 18 in chapter one, particularly p. 36 ff.

¹⁵ Also see Leshar, p. 154.

¹⁶ Stannard, p. 199.

data, then the mass of evidence cannot lead to any rational explanation.¹⁷ The significance of Hyppolytus' report that Xenophanes found fossils and inferred that the sea once covered the earth is not found in the accuracy of the inference, but in its origin in classification and evidence. Apparently Xenophanes not only collected the fossilized shells from a wide variety of places, but he makes a point to distinguish their animal origins. Some were fish, some seals, some coral, and some sea creatures. All of these belong in the sea, but were found in a place where the sea no longer extended.

Of course this interpretation is not without difficulties, for the connection of inference and evidence is not always as well established as with the example above. The line between assertion and explanation is blurred for the pre-Socratics. This is even sometimes true today, but it is certainly true for Xenophanes. Typically the fragments we have do not explicitly list evidence for the assertion. However evidence is not always hard to find. For example, KRS note that Xenophanes' assertions as in F 33 ("For we all come into being from earth and water.") form a rudimentary physical theory, and probably represent an attempt to explain the fact that growth is always accompanied by moisture and nourishment.¹⁸ This is a very reasonable interpretation, and one that dovetails nicely with my argument, but one can see that it is hardly conclusive. Stannard is right to affirm that "the very fact the truth-claim of an assertion, offered as an explanation, depends on evidence, is a noteworthy step

¹⁷ "What, for example, was Xenophanes to do with the mass of fossilized remains he observed on Paros and elsewhere? (A 33) Classification first arose in the attempt to catalogue such accumulated evidence." Stannard, p. 200.

forward.”¹⁹ However, the nature of that dependence is not always as clear as we might like it to be.

We should not, nevertheless, be discouraged by this lack of clarity, but must discipline ourselves to remember the context. This is where Stannard’s interpretation finds its power: in the amazing turn from mythological explanations, even from simple analogies, to an attempt to explain by relatively sophisticated natural means. The quasi-animistic propensity of the ancients is widely documented. Natural properties were assigned a supernatural cause by default.²⁰ That Xenophanes questioned this default position is obvious, that he based his questioning upon solid scientific reasoning is not as obvious, but seems likely given our argument.²¹

Before moving to demonstrate other connections between Xenophanes’ methodological searching and his theology, I will add another two elements to Xenophanes’ approach to explanation: hypothesis and generalization. Take for example, Xenophanes’ statements (which we will examine in greater detail below) about the ethnological and cultural roots of our theological formations. His assertion

¹⁸ KRS, p. 177.

¹⁹ Stannard, p. 200.

²⁰ See n. 6 above, for a contemporary study of this common religious phenomenon.

²¹ The recorded “natural” interests of Xenophanes have given rise to criticism that the thinker simply practiced Ionian science in order to counter the existing and predominantly religious view of the natural world. Heidel proposes that Xenophanes uses explanation merely as a weapon against popular religion (“Hecataeus and Xenophanes” in *American Journal of Philology* 64 (1943) p. 269 ff.). However this view does not take into account the instances of natural explanation that do not seem to have such direct theological implications (e.g., fossils, the connection of moisture with life) or F 19 where Diogenes Laertius testifies that Xenophanes admires Thales for predicting (supposedly) an eclipse. I concur with those that believe Xenophanes’ thought represents a consistency and coherence that would be hard to explain if he pursued Ionian science merely to fight against the fabrications of poets and seers (Barnes, Leshner). However, even if Heidel is correct, which seems unlikely, our thesis (that scientific reasoning is at the root of Xenophanes’ theological reform) would still hold.

that if the horses had gods, they would look like horses, is a generalization from a hypothesis: humans have a habit of creating a theological image, based on their self image. His evidence is seen in the Ethiopians and the Thracians, and their gods. The implication of this hypothesis and following generalization is quite clear. We need a better basis for theology than anthropology. The divine is wholly unlike humanity. As was indicated in a previous chapter, if Xenophanes thinks he has a knock down argument against anthropomorphism, then he is guilty of the fallacy of origins. It is more likely that Xenophanes sees the human habit of self-imagery in the gods, as evidence of, not a complete explanation of or knock-down argument against, anthropomorphism. What seems most likely in this context is that Xenophanes represents the new kind of thinker who comes at the cosmos with the tools (albeit not as sharply defined as we might desire) of inference, evidence, classification, hypothesis, and generalization. This demonstrates that at least as far as the explanation of natural phenomena, Xenophanes has rationally based his theories in something other than speculation, and certainly something more than superstition. Hence, this is what “searching” consists of for Xenophanes: a methodological approach that is not able to reach certain knowledge about very many things, but which allows for an understanding of reality closer than the one facilely adopted from tradition.²² We must now further develop a plausible account of how, in parallel with

²² Heitsch has mounted an argument that is perfectly consistent with the one I am positing here. He argues that Xenophanes natural explanations exhibit two distinct principles that resonate with scientific reasoning: 1) his accounts are based in natural observable causes; 2) he adopts as a governing principle that similar effects must be assigned to similar causes (e.g., the similar accounts given to various lights and fires: A 38 – 41, A 43 – 45). See Heitsch, (1983) pp. 170ff.

his social and moral concerns and his embryonic scientific methodology, he developed his “positive” theological content.

Section 3 - The Explanatory Method and the Theological Reformation

Karl Popper wrote that Xenophanes’ new theory of the divine was the solution of a difficult problem for the philosopher. Indeed not just a difficult problem, but *the* difficult problem: the universe.²³ Popper does not mean to imply that Xenophanes was a monist, and so conflated the universe with God (he rejects a monistic interpretation, as we did in the previous chapter), but he means that for Xenophanes God acts as the final explanatory factor for the large unexplained question of the existence of the universe.²⁴ God is a hypothetical entity that rules the world via order. Popper roots this discovery to his rejection of anthropomorphism, which led to monotheism, and then to the insight that God cannot be like human beings in body or mind.

Popper also believes that Xenophanes would have understood the conjectural nature of this picture of God. While this theory would have “appeared like a revelation” to Xenophanes and would have been very difficult to view as a conjecture, nevertheless in spite of its interior power of persuasion, it was a human construct, and as such open for revising. Popper’s account is an interesting attempt to reconcile Xenophanes’ narrow epistemic restraints with his “conjectural God.” But how does

²³ Popper, pp. 44-45.

one deal with the fact that Xenophanes does not seem to talk about his theology in “conjectural tones?” This concern may be partly answered by the philosophy of science in recent years, which has demonstrated that many scientists do not use tentative tones in reference to their theories.²⁵ Xenophanes’ resolute attitude must be viewed in the context of the poetic account he was both using and countering. It must of course also be understood in light of an emerging and early science that knew very little about the difficulty of language bumping up against the limits of metaphysical explanations.

So if Popper’s account is consistent with what we have found, it is not as full an account as can be drawn. In Xenophanes’ early adaptation of the scientific method we can see he uses several tools which allow him to construct his theology. This theology, as has been shown, draws and departs from the religious tradition of his day. Just as the new explanatory method was manifesting a world, not of personal and inconsistent forces, but a place of ordered laws and impersonal forces, so Xenophanes seeks to show that this methodology, when aimed at the gods, portrays a picture quite different from the popular one. The cosmos follows a pattern of

²⁴ A similar account, at least at this level, is given by Gérard Legrand who traces Xenophanes’ rejection of anthropomorphism (and adoption of some form of monotheism) to the pluralism he sees in religious views and in its inability to explain the reality of the cosmos. See *Les Présocratiques*, p. 74 ff.

²⁵ I’m thinking mostly of Thomas S. Kuhn’s: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University Press, 1962). This work demonstrates that science often involves a commitment to a theory (“paradigm”), which is often not held in a “conjectural manner.” Indeed at times, Kuhn documents, a paradigm is held in the face of amassing contradicting evidence. Kuhn shows how at times progress in science is made through a *revolution* of a paradigm. The specific connection here is that Xenophanes’ adamant conviction that there was one greatest god, who was not at all like human beings, can be understood as a hypothetical inference which he saw as a theory. No one has certain knowledge that it is true, but the inference is evidentially solid enough to speak of in convinced tones. What is certain is

consistent behavior discovered through process. Xenophanes seemed to have believed that just as one discovers that mud once covered the dry land by the presence of fossils, so one might approach understanding the divine by using elementary scientific and epistemic tools to unearth from piles of tradition a more profound and trans-cultural verisimilitude.

One tool is that of “non-contradiction.” We have seen how often the positive concepts that Xenophanes theological assertions contain, are alluded to in popular theology. But these concepts, or myths, are often contradicted by other concepts or myths. For example, if the gods are “forever” then they can never be born, as the traditional poets seem to think they are. Xenophanes sought consistency in such views, seemingly believing that both “P” and “not-P” cannot both be true.

This is not as facile an idea as it may seem. When applied to theological matters this rule gets quickly bogged down in the mire of tradition and revelation. There are always those who would, with a sort of Xenophanean resonance, announce that human ignorance reigns supreme in these matters, and that one must accept what the ancients have written. This was undoubtedly the view of many of Xenophanes’ contemporaries, who themselves could not have been blind to the contradictions in the poetic accounts. Xenophanes’ tool of non-contradiction was applied rigorously in spite of this common sentiment, and applied in the face of a vast majority who would have thought such ideas to be impious.

that the traditional paradigm of theology could not be left standing in light of piling evidence, and that by scientific “searching” Xenophanes believed he could come closer to the truth.

The inconsistency tool works well when working with contradictions. The gods either exist or do not. This is a clear case of either P or not-P being true. However with many theological ideas there is a third alternative. For example, the idea that the god(s) cannot both be born, and be forever or that they cannot both be “like humans” and run the universe, does not itself adequately ground Xenophanes’ positive theology. It is possible that both “P” and “not-P” are not true. There are many cases where a third alternative (excluded middle) is conceptually possible. For example in the question of whether the gods are born or not born, it is of course possible that the gods do not exist at all.

So if Xenophanes was solely dependent upon the law of non-contradiction, then he would merely have constructed one possibility among many others; a cleaner version of popular theology, but one possible view among several other options. Xenophanes seems to have believed that he has done more than this. He is willing to admit fallibility, but is also convinced of progress, via his searching. In this case the searching includes clearing some ground via removing that which is obviously contradictory, and then picking up the tool of inductive inference.

Why would Xenophanes the scientist have assumed that the gods existed at all? If Homer, other cultures, and his own society consistently maintain ridiculous theological ideas, why not assume they are *all* false? This would seem in keeping with his willingness to counter popular ideas (one can’t imagine that arguing that political leaders should be more popular than sports heroes, would be any more accepted then than now!). However, rather than opting for atheism, he develops a

sophisticated reformed theology. There may be good reason to accept Popper's contention that Xenophanes' greatest god is an inductive inference.

The first evidential element of this induction was, as has been alluded to all along, his cultural assumptions. Even a revolutionary thinker like Xenophanes cannot be removed from his context. In an earlier chapter we discussed Xenophanes' convictions on the common cultural formation of religious ideas. This formation was found wanting partially because of Xenophanes' desire for consistency. Surely the Ethiopian view and the Thracian view cannot *both* be right. The other thing that this observation reveals is the level of observation itself. Xenophanes is traveling widely, observing closely, and drawing what he would then call a fallible hypothesis based on these observations and travels. The point here is that Xenophanes only found cultures which were religiously rooted. This in itself is evidence for an inference that the gods exist. Something that most cultures conceive of, however wrongly, might to Xenophanes to seem most likely to exist in *some* form.²⁶

Correlative to this cultural assumption would have been the need for an ultimate explanation for natural phenomena. Heraclitus seemed to find this explanation in his *logos*. The fragments on the greatest god's involvement with the world are vaguely reminiscent of this impersonal approach. While god sees and hears

²⁶ The argument that the pervasive and cross cultural reality of religion is evidence of God's existence is not an uncommon argument for the existence of God - at least not historically speaking. Indeed the famous British writer C. S. Lewis says in his Mere Christianity: "If you are a Christian, you are free to think that all ...religions, even the queerest ones, contain at least some hint of the truth. When I was an atheist I had to try to persuade myself that most of the human race have always been wrong about the question that mattered to them most; when I became a Christian I was able to take the more liberal view." I do not wish to defend this argument; only point out that Xenophanes could have classified this cultural phenomenon in such a manner as to see it supporting such an inference.

all, he governs with the thoughts of his mind. This concept, combined with the lack of body, clothes, and human like properties, makes it likely that Xenophanes saw this god in a non-material form. This view is bolstered by remembering that humans are incapable of retrieving direct information from this god. This is not to say that Xenophanes might not have had reverential, or devotional sentiments, directed at this god, but rather that the god was a principle part of Xenophanes' *rational*, as well as religious, world.²⁷

²⁷ We could speculate that Xenophanes might have fallen prey to the fallacy of the "god of the gaps" where what can't be explained otherwise must, by definition, be explained as the work, or arena, of God. He would hardly be alone in this. Western philosophical theology is quite full of this fallacy. However, we have no evidence that he did succumb to such an easy scientific out. In fact the vast majority of Xenophanes' statements are in the other direction, i.e., arguing that what some see as a god, is really a natural effect. There seems to be a consistent materialistic explanation for specific natural phenomena, and the god's involvement is that of distant watchmaker.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: XENOPHANES' INFLUENCE ON SOCRATES

In the introduction I mentioned that the symbiotic relationship between Xenophanes' theology and epistemology gave birth to a method of understanding reality that today we think of as Socratic. In addition I have alluded several times to Xenophanes' influence on later thinkers, but have not made subsequent influence a major part of this analysis. Such a study would be a worthy treatise in and of itself. However, by way of conclusion it would not be out of place to sketch a brief picture of Xenophanes' influence on Socrates' religious thinking. The evidence that shows direct influence is evidence that reveals Xenophean thought was taken seriously by founding western philosophers, and that it is philosophically, or at the minimum historically, worthy of our attention.

Not everyone writing on Socratic thought seems to appreciate the possibility of Xenophanes' influence. Indeed Brickhouse and Smith, including a sizable chapter on "Socrates and Religion" in their Philosophy of Socrates, fail to mention Xenophanes at all.¹ Not one reference to this pre-Socratic can be found in their index.

Gregory Vlastos, who was quoted earlier as crediting Xenophanes for "moralizing divinity," demurs at giving Xenophanes credit for the moral theology

¹ N. Brickhouse and N. Smith, The Philosophy of Socrates (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000).

found in Plato's *Republic* (e.g., 379a – 383c). He rightly traces Xenophanes' protest against the immorality of the traditional gods to his deeply rooted anti-anthropomorphism.² Hence Vlastos is resistant, as I was above, to ascribe to Xenophanes a view of divine moral perfection. Since this is found in Plato, Vlastos believes that it cannot be rightly said that Plato's theological ideas have been "taken over" from Xenophanes. On a different but related theological issue, Vlastos goes on to assert: "there is an appreciable difference between the denial of motion to god in Xenophanes (F 26) and the denial of 'departing from his own form' in Plato: Xenophanes builds on a cosmological premise, Plato on a metaphysical one."³

While I think that Vlastos is correct in his analysis of the differences between Plato and his predecessor Xenophanes, I find his insistence in Plato's originality to be misguided. I also find it amazing, given the historical context that one could write a significant chapter on Socrates' religious thinking, and fail to mention his clear commonality with Xenophanes (e.g., Brickhouse and Smith). It is true that Plato has shows significant metaphysical development over Xenophanes, but this is also true of Socrates, as Vlastos' own "dialogue development" theory demonstrates. Vlastos would concede that Plato took over a great deal of thinking from his teacher.

Of course I do not mean to argue that Xenophanes had a significant and major role in a substantial portion of Plato's philosophy. Rather I think there are a number of reasons to appreciate the foundational "moralizing" effect that Xenophanes'

² Gregory Vlastos, "Socratic Piety." In Reason and Religion in Socratic Philosophy. (Eds. Nicholas Smith and Paul B. Woodruff. Oxford: University Press, 2000, pp. 55 – 73). See particularly p. 68, n. 30.

³ Ibid.

teaching had on theology, and that that aspect plays a major role in Socratic and Platonic religious thought. As has been argued all along, Xenophanes does not approach this theological reformation with a great deal of metaphysical sophistication, but with a desire to develop a religious reformation based on newly found epistemic priorities. Plato added a great deal to the part of Xenophanes he picked up, but what seems more than likely is that his teacher stood quite squarely upon Xenophanes' shoulders.

One of the most convincing cases for this line of influence is drawn up by Mark McPherran. He claims that whereas the Ionians had "tamed the gods, making them rational and naturalizing them physically within a unified realm called cosmos" Socrates had brought them "completely into line with the universal demands of morality..."⁴ McPherran goes on to show, this advance of Socrates was built upon Xenophanes previous work. The readers of this monograph do not need to be reminded of this moralizing effort of Xenophanes. But what evidence is there of a direct connection to his successor?

First are the allusions found in Aristophanes' portrait of Socrates in the *Clouds*. In this play "Socrates" uses an argument to convince Strepsiades that it is the clouds, not Zeus, that send lightning: "if Zeus were its source then we would have to think that he punishes trees for oath-breaking; but since that notion is absurd, Zeus is not the cause of lightning (395-405)."⁵ This of course brings to mind Xenophanes' teachings about the clouds and the sun. Xenophanes' thinking tended in the same

⁴ McPherran, p. 108.

⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

direction of Aristophanes' Socrates: natural phenomena should not be blamed directly on the gods, but should be traced to a natural and (often) reoccurring reality which is not personal or sentient.

Another allusion to Xenophanes in the *Clouds* is where Socrates explains that the Clouds are like the clouds of our experience: "they can take on the shapes projected by their viewers, resembling wolves, for instance, when confronted by a wolfish personality (346 ff.)."⁶ In this context it is difficult to not make the connection to Xenophanes' anti-anthropomorphizing arguments. Socrates' clouds are a direct reminder of the Ethiopians who look up and see snub nosed gods, and of horses which undoubtedly have horse-shaped gods (were they able to think theologically).

McPherran mentions another connection. The divine-human knowledge gap is evidenced in *both* Xenophanes' and Socrates' scepticism. This is seen in both Plato's early accounts and in Aristophanes' portrait. McPherran draws upon Nussbaum who puts the matter nicely: "Insofar as the Clouds are symbolic of Socratic teaching, they display it as elenetic and negative, imparting no insight into anything... leaving beyond the structure of the *elenchos* only a formless nebulosity."⁷ Plato's version is doubtless more positive about Socratic attempts at knowledge, but even here the wisdom and knowledge of the gods is superlative, and as such contrasts starkly with that of human beings.

⁶ McPherran, p. 112.

⁷ Ibid., p. 113. See also Nussbalm, M. "Aristophanes and Socrates on Learning Practical Wisdom." (In *Yale Classical Studies* 26 ed. J. Henderson. Cambridge, 1980), p. 76 ff.

This is not to argue that Aristophanes' portrait of Socrates is entirely accurate, but that:

Socrates might well have been viewed [presumably by Aristophanes and others] as a "likeness" of Xenophanes, a moralistic theological reformer, and as such would have been believed to be a phusiologos: a man possessed of theories concerning the heavens, the roots of the earth, and the materialistic sources of "all that comes to be."⁸

⁸ McPherran, p. 113.

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