

Xenophanes' Reinvention of Poetic Authority
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One of Xenophanes' most intriguing and ambiguous comments is his observation that "gods did not reveal all things to mortals from the beginning, but they in time discover better by seeking" (Diels-Kranz 1968, B18). Though there have been many critical investigations of this fragment, I accept James Lesher's interpretation: Xenophanes explicitly rejects the possibility of divine communication with mankind (Lesher 1991). While Lesher's reading has been helpful in understanding Xenophanes' thought, the literary significance of this denial of divine revelation has not been fully explored. Homer and Hesiod portray themselves as wholly dependent on inspiration from the Muses as the source of their authority: Homer can provide detailed information concerning the Greek army because he has the support of the Muses (*Il.* 2.484-493); Hesiod's nautical inexperience does not prevent him from discussing sailing because he is inspired (*WD* 660-662). Xenophanes rejects the depictions of the gods found in the poetry of Homer and Hesiod (B11-B12), yet because he denies the existence of divine communication with mankind he cannot claim special access to divine knowledge through inspiration. How then can he convince his audience that his opinions on the gods and the universe are superior to those of Homer, who is, according to Xenophanes, a universal authority on such matters (B10). I shall argue in this paper that Xenophanes adopts certain epic notions, particularly the connection between first-hand experience and knowledge, but incorporates contemporary inquiry-based methods privileged in the Ionian scientific community in order to establish his own poetic authority over those of Homer and Hesiod.

Xenophanes' empiricism is evident in the fragments on natural phenomena, in which he seems to privilege first-hand experience above all else (Fränkel 1975, 334). This emphasis on autopsy and observation can be found in his theological fragments as well. Much like contemporary Ionian empiricist Hecataeus, Xenophanes traveled far and wide (B45) and used geographical observations as proofs for his criticisms of anthropomorphic depictions of the gods (B15). He associates the truth with visual clarity (τὸ σαφές, B34) and labels the fantastic stories of previous poets as fabrications (πλάσματα, B1.23). He cannot claim to have absolute knowledge (B34), since he does not claim to have information from omniscient gods, but his experiential knowledge allows him to make plausible suppositions (B35) on firmer ground than those who falsely claim to receive communications from the gods.

Although Xenophanes' empirical approach undercuts the claims to divine inspiration made by the epic poets, he incorporates epic language and motifs into his own poetry. In particular, he privileges the experiential learning that also has its place in epic poetry. Xenophanes' one god, like the gods of Homer, learns through sense experience (οὔλος ὄραϊ, οὔλος δὲ νοεῖ, οὔλος δέ τ' ἀκούει, B24). The knowledge of the Muses in the *Iliad* depends on their presence (πάρεστέ τε ἴστέ τε πάντα, *Il.* 2.485); similarly, while Poseidon is absent from Olympus he does not know of the gods' decision to help Odysseus until he sees the hero and learns for himself (*Od.* 1.22-26). Humans, too, can learn from experience in epic; Odysseus comes to understand the minds of many through his travels and experiences (*Od.* 1.3), much like Xenophanes represents himself doing (B8, B45). Xenophanes thus presents his audience with a source of knowledge familiar from the characters within traditional epic, but has applied it to the poet himself as a source for his authority, instead of claiming access to divine inspiration. Xenophanes may have embraced the persona of a radical thinker – and many of his ideas were quite radical – but his authority depended on traditional elements that were familiar to his audience and within which he could couch these radical ideas. Unlike the later thinker Plato, who made frequent attacks on poets as authorities on religious and other matters, Xenophanes did not discount poetry as a medium for religious truth, but instead adapted it so that it could accommodate the "better" discoveries made through inquiry (B18).

Bibliography

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