

Xenophanes' Poetry: A Philosophic Revision of Homeric and Hesiodic Theology

This paper will discuss the methods and motivation behind Xenophanes' criticism of the traditional poetic depiction of divinity. In the surviving fragments and testimonia, Xenophon offers a startlingly novel picture of divinity, that of an ungenerated, singular god, always abiding in the same place, morally perfect, setting the universe in motion with his mind alone (fr. 1, 10-18, 23-26, 32, and 34, Diels and Krantz 1972). Yet he affects his criticism in the most familiar of forms, using the self-same meters as the very poets whom he is attacking, the same diction, rhetorical tropes, and stock phrases. Indeed, as Barnes (1979) points out, Xenophanes is so close to Homer in his use of language that he uses not a single word found outside of Homer; it is only *epiprepei*, in fragment 26, where Xenophanes uses a word in a sense which is distinct from that of Homer (in *Odyssey* 24.252-53, the sole occurrence of *epiprepei* in Homer, it has the sense "to appear, to be conspicuous, or prominent", whereas in Xenophon it means "to be seemly, fitting, or proper"). Xenophanes imitates the poetic form so closely not simply because the poetic form is so pedagogically effective (Hershbell 1983) (especially in a semi-literate society), or because, as Cherniss (1951) and Ring (1987) have argued, he is more rhapsode or poet than philosopher (Xenophon's activities as rhapsode are attested by Diogenes Laertius in AI, Diels and Krantz 1972); Xenophon uses poetry as a means to convey his ideas about divinity because with a *poetic* philosophy, Xenophanes can more effectively set his poetry in direct opposition to what Havelock (1983) calls the "oral mythos" of Homer and Hesiod. In anticipation of Plato, Xenophanes sought to topple the existing traditional poetic conceptions of the gods and to replace this model with his own philosophically revised one. Contrary to Guthrie's (1983) interpretation, in support of Eisenstadt (1974), his criticism shows a pronounced interest in civic utility, taking to task in particular the poets' stories of warring and adulterous deities (cf. especially fr's 11-12). In this way, then, Xenophanes use poetry's charm to affect its own undoing, offering a philosophically revised depiction of the nature of divinity.

Works-Cited

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