

Xenophanes of Colophon

Xenophanes (c. 570–475 (?) BC, *floruit* 540 (?) BC) came from Colophon, an Ionian city not too far from Miletus. He seems to have left or been banished c. 545 BC (at the time or shortly after the Persian conquest of Ionia) and thereafter based himself in Sicily while also engaging in significant travel (D.L. 9.19 = DK 21 A1, B8). He is reported to have written a poem concerning the founding of Elea and is credited with numerous observations and theories about terrestrial and celestial phenomena, but his most well known views concern theology.

[18] Xenophanes, a native of Colophon, the son of Dexius, or, according to Apollodorus, of Orthomenes, is praised by Timon, whose words at all events are:

Xenophanes, not over-proud, perverter of Homer, castigator.

He was banished from his native city and lived at Zancle in Sicily <and having joined the colony planted at Elea taught there>. He also lived in Catana. According to some he was no man's pupil, according to others he was a pupil of Bion of Athens, or, as some say, of Archelaus. Sotion makes him a contemporary of Anaximander. His writings are in epic metre, as well as elegiacs and iambics attacking Hesiod and Homer and denouncing what they said about the gods. Furthermore he used to recite his own poems. It is stated that he opposed the views of Thales and Pythagoras, and attacked Epimenides also. He lived to a very great age, as his own words somewhere testify:

[19] Seven and sixty are now the years that have been tossing my cares up and down the land of Greece; and there were then twenty and five years more from my birth up, if I know how to speak truly about these things.

He holds that there are four elements of existent things, and worlds unlimited in number but not overlapping <in time>. Clouds are formed when the vapour from the sun is carried upwards and lifts them into the surrounding air. The substance of God is spherical, in no way resembling man. He is all eye and all ear, but does not breathe; he is the totality of mind and thought, and is eternal. Xenophanes was the first to declare that everything which comes into being is doomed to perish, and that the soul is breath.

[20] He also said that the mass of things falls short of thought; and again that our encounters with tyrants should be as few, or else as pleasant, as possible. When Empedocles remarked to him that it is impossible to find a wise man, "Naturally" he replied, "for it takes a wise man to recognize a wise man." Sotion says that he was the first to maintain that all things are incognizable, but Sotion is in error. One of his poems is *The Founding of Colophon*, and another *The Settlement of a Colony at Elea in Italy*, making 2000 lines in all. He flourished about the 60th Olympiad. That he buried his sons with his own hands like Anaxagoras is stated by Demetrius of Phalerum in his work *On Old Age* and by Panaetius the Stoic in his book *Of Cheerfulness*. He is believed to have been sold into slavery by <. . . and to have been set free by> the Pythagoreans Parmeniscus and Orestades: so Favorinus in the first book of his *Memorabilia*.

Diogenes Laertius 9.18–20, trans. R. D. Hicks

[B14] But mortals think gods are begotten,
And have clothing, voice, and body of mortals.

[B15] Now if cattle, horses, or lions had hands,
And were able to draw with their hands and perform works like men,
Horses would draw the forms of the gods like horses, and cattle like cattle
And they would make their bodies just like the body each of them had.

[B16] Ethiopians say their gods are snub-nosed and black
The Thracians says theirs have light blue eyes and red hair.

Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 5.109, 110; 7.22 = DK 21 B14, 15, 16

[Xenophanes] says it is impossible, if something is, for it to have come to be, saying this about God. For what has come to be must have come to be either from what is like or what is unlike. And neither is possible. For it is no more fitting for what is like to be begotten from the like than to beget (for all the same properties belong to what is equal and alike in relation to each other), nor could the unlike come to be from unlike. For if the stronger should come to be from the weaker, the greater from the lesser, the better from the worse, or, on the contrary worse things from better, what is would come from what is not, which is impossible. According to this reasoning God is everlasting.

If God is the mightiest being of all, he says, it is fitting for him to be one. For if there were two or more, he would no longer be mightiest and best of all. For each of the many gods, being alike, would have the same character. For this is god and the power of god: to rule but not be ruled, and to be the mightiest of all. So insofar as he is not strongest, he is not God. Thus if there were many gods, and some were stronger than the others and some weaker, they would not be gods; for it is in the nature of the divine not to be ruled. But if they were equal they would not have the nature of a god, to be most powerful: the equal is neither better nor worse than its equal. So if there should be a god, and god should have this character, god would be unique. Not would a god be able to do all he wished if there were many gods; hence there is only one.

Since there is one god and he is alike everywhere seeing and hearing and having the other senses throughout; otherwise the parts of God would rule and be ruled by each other, which is impossible. Since he is everywhere alike he is spherical; for he is not here of this character and there not, but everywhere the same.

De Melisso, Xenophane, Gorgia 977a14–b2 = DK 21 A28