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GREATEST AMONG GODS AND MEN:
THE RECEPTION OF XENOPHANES'S THEOLOGY
BY ANAXAGORAS AND DIOGENES

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Abstract: Although he has been disregarded in the past, Xenophanes has recently been vindicated as an interesting and original philosopher in his own right, particularly in his theological writings. This paper seeks to reaffirm the fundamental differences between Xenophanes' theology and the more common Homeric view of the gods, and to track the influence that Xenophanes had on later philosophers, specifically Anaxagoras and Diogenes of Apollonia. While there are no distinct verbal allusions or echoes of Xenophanes in their writings, his basic theology is clearly transmitted to the later philosophers, who then apply it in their writings about mind and air, respectively.

The primary inquiry of the majority of pre-Socratic philosophers was natural philosophy, especially cosmology and cosmogony. However, some early philosophers discussed theology as well, beginning the western theological tradition in Greece. One such person was Xenophanes (flor. 540 BCE), whose primary occupation as bard has caused many to think of him as a second-rate philosopher at best.¹ His vocation has indicated to many that he was not truly disinterested in his own philosophical writings.² However,

1. For more biographical information on Xenophanes, see Daniel W. Graham, trans. and ed., *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy: The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the Major Presocratics; Part I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 95–97.

2. See John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1908), 128. Note also: "Recent work on Xenophanes' epistemology and his cosmology has made much of his scientific work clearer and more impressive . . . He has, to a great extent, been rescued from his traditional status as a minor traveling poet-sage who railed against the glorification of athletes and made some interesting comments about the relativity of human conceptions of the gods. Instead, he has come to be seen as an original thinker in his own right who influenced later philosophers trying to characterize the realms of the human and the divine, and exploring the possibility that human beings can gain genuine knowledge and wisdom, i.e., are able to have a god's eye view of things and understand them" (Patricia Curd, "Presocratic Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Xenophanes's reputation has been redeemed in recent years, and many have especially taken note of his innovative theology. Like other early philosophers, though precious little remains of his words, we can reconstruct elements of Xenophanes's theology, as his are the first recorded writings about the gods that depart from Homeric myth. Although theology was never the main focus of any pre-Socratic, Xenophanes's thought impacted the depiction of god by later philosophers, including Anaxagoras and Diogenes of Apollonia. This paper will briefly examine Xenophanes's embryonic theology and then trace his influence on these two intellectual successors. The nature of the transmission of Xenophanes's writings to the later philosophers will be discussed, and we will find that it is difficult to ascertain exactly how his ideas were passed on to his successors. It remains clear, however, that the ideas he proposed about god took hold in Greek philosophical traditions and were favorably received and elaborated on by both Anaxagoras and Diogenes.

Xenophanes's own theological writing is preserved in just a handful of extant fragments, several of which (B11, B12, B14, B15, and B16)³ are negative in nature. Xenophanes rebukes his contemporaries for ascribing traits to the gods that mortals exhibit, for example:

ἀλλ' οἱ βροτοὶ δοκέουσι γεννᾶσθαι θεοὺς,
τὴν σφετέρην δ' ἐσθῆτα ἔχειν φωνὴν τε δέμας τε.

But mortals think gods are begotten,
and have the clothing, voice, and body of mortals. (B14)⁴

Xenophanes criticizes the human tendency to portray gods, both in appearance and behavior, as immortal beings with human characteristics. Each culture makes their gods look like themselves: Αἰθιοπέες τε [θεοὺς σφετέρους] σιμοὺς μέλανάς τε / Θρηκίκες τε γλαυκοὺς καὶ πυρροὺς [φασὶ πέλεσθαι] (B16: "Africans [say their gods are] snub-nosed and black, / Thracians blue-eyed and red-haired"). If animals could create their own gods, then they would "make their bodies / just like the body [each of them] had" (B15: σώματ' ἐποίουν / τοιαῦθ' οἷόν περ καὶτοὶ δέμας εἶχον [ἔχαστοι]). However, Xenophanes challenged his audience to think otherwise and not accept fallible, imperfect gods:

[Winter 2016 Edition], ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/presocratics/>).

3. For further information on pre-Socratic fragments, see Hermann Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker: Griechisch und Deutsch*, ed. Walther Kranz, 3 vols. (orig. ed. 1903; vols. 1–2 repr. Dublin and Zürich: Weidmann, 1966; and vol. 3 repr. Zürich and Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1964). Most so-called "fragments" from pre-Socratic philosophers are preserved in the writings of Aristotle, later philosophers, or in polemical treatises from early Christian authors.

4. English translations are taken from Graham, *Texts of Early Greek Philosophy*.

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οἱ βροτοὶ δοκέουσι γεννᾶσθαι θεοὺς, / τὴν σφετέρην δ' ἐσθῆτα ἔχειν φωνὴν τε
δέμας τε (B14: “Mortals think gods are begotten, / and have the clothing, voice,
and body of mortals”).

Instead of envisioning deities as mere representations of mortals, Xenophanes describes his god in four extant fragments:

εἷς θεός, ἔν τε θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισι μέγιστος,
οὔτι δέμας θνητοῖσιν ὁμοίος οὐδὲ νόημα.

One god, greatest among gods and men,
not at all like to mortals in body nor in thought. (B23)⁵

οὔλος ὄραϊ, οὔλος δὲ νοεῖ, οὔλος δὲ τ' ἀκούει.

All of him sees, all thinks, all hears. (B24)

ἀλλ' ἀπάνευθε πόνοιο νόου φρενὶ πάντα κραδαίνει.

But without any toil he shakes all things by the thought of his mind.
(B25)

αἰεὶ δ' ἐν ταύτῳ μίμνει κινούμενος οὐδέν
οὐδὲ μετέρχεσθαι μιν ἐπιπρέπει ἄλλοτε ἄλλῃ.

He remains ever in the same place moving not at all,
nor is it appropriate for him to flit now here, now there. (B26)

Xenophanes has a different god in mind than Zeus, who is moved to anger and lust almost constantly in Homer's work. But for Xenophanes, god must be the most perfect being there is. His statement that he is the “greatest among gods and men” (B23) leads to all his other conclusions.⁶ If he is the greatest, and causing something to move is better than being moved, then he must “shake” or move all things. He also does not move at all, since that would imply that his initial location was imperfect or inferior to the one he moved to.⁷ By combining these two conclusions, we are led back to B25, in which he “shakes” other things without physically moving himself (cf. B26).

5. See E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (London: Cambridge University Press; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1951), 181, where he argues that this statement is still faith-based, not knowledge-based.

6. I will refer to Xenophanes's god as “he” throughout, although it is not clear whether Xenophanes would assign his god any physical gender. Grammatically, however, he uses the masculine “god” (“θεός”).

7. Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers: Volume 1, Thales to Zeno*, in *The Arguments of the Philosophers*, ed. Ted Honderich (London: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1979), 84.

B24 also indicates the omniscience of god, who perceives reality with every part of his being. His perfection in knowledge and perception may be compared to the limited senses of humans, who are only able to perceive that which is spatially close to them. Humans can only see one thing at a time (at least in focus), while god can see everything at once, since all of him perceives in every way. Perhaps Xenophanes feels that differentiated body parts (eyes for sight, ears for hearing, etc.) are strong in only one function, with the result that they are lacking in every other mode of perception and are thus imperfect. In order for god to be completely perfect, all of him must perceive in every way so that one part of him is not lacking when compared to another.

Thus, Xenophanes does not conceive of god as anthropomorphic, a significant departure from Homer and Hesiod. Instead, he sacrifices god's anthropomorphism in exchange for absolute perfection, superiority, omniscience, and omnipotence. However, Xenophanes, limited by the novelty of this concept in ancient Greek thought, finds himself incapable of entirely shedding anthropomorphic features from god. Thus he still uses words like "see" and "hear," although these are the functions of human senses.

While Xenophanes largely departs from the typical Greek pantheon, it is noteworthy that he may still maintain the existence of other gods: "One god, greatest *among gods*" (B23; emphasis added). Either Xenophanes still felt that it was appropriate to have other gods, or, as Barnes points out, perhaps he is simply saying that god would be greater than other gods, even if they do not exist: "Xenophanes, I conclude, was a monotheist, as the long tradition has it; and he was an *a priori* monotheist: like later Christian theologians, he argued on purely logical grounds that there could not be a plurality of gods."⁸

This kind of god, so different from the Olympians, became fundamental and standard for many later Greek thinkers. Anaxagoras (born ca. 490 BCE) was one such philosopher, who shows evidence of building on Xenophanes's theology as he discusses his idea of $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$. Anaxagoras lived almost a century after Xenophanes, and, like Xenophanes, was born in Ionia but spent most of his life in Athens.⁹ In his cosmology, every substance exists in a mixture with at least many, if not all, other substances. Thus, there is no pure wood or water; instead, all objects are mixed with each other. "Mind," however, is the one exception.

8. Barnes, *Presocratic Philosophers*, 1:92. For his argument that leads to this conclusion, see 89–92. See also Graham, *Texts of Early Greek Philosophy*, 131. For a contrasting opinion, see Werner Jaeger, *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers: The Gifford Lectures*, 1936 (London; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947; repr., 1948–1968), 43–44.

9. See Graham, *Texts of Early Greek Philosophy*, 271–72.

At the beginning of Anaxagoras's fragment B12, he says: νοῦς δὲ ἐστὶν ἄπειρον καὶ αὐτοκρατέες καὶ μέμικται οὐδενὶ χρήματι, ἀλλὰ μόνος αὐτὸς ἐπ' ἑωυτοῦ ἐστὶν ("But mind is boundless and autonomous and mixed with no object, but it is alone by itself"). While it does exist in living things and serves as an animating force in these beings, νοῦς, or "mind," also exists "alone by itself" and is "mixed with no object."¹⁰ This parallels Xenophanes's description of god and his total perfection. Anything mixed with god must by necessity be less great than god, and therefore imperfect and lesser, since god is the greatest (cf. Xenophanes's B23). Similarly, if god (or in this case, νοῦς) has anything that is not god within it, it is imperfect, and therefore cannot be god.

Anaxagoras also claims that νοῦς is ἄπειρον, which has a spatial implication. While Xenophanes's god is omniscient and omnipotent, this description suggests that Anaxagoras adds omnipresent to the list.¹¹ "Mind" is present in every other matter, which effectively renders it omnipresent: ὁ δὲ νοῦς, ὅς ἀεὶ ἐστὶ, τὸ κάρτα καὶ νῦν ἐστὶν ἴνα καὶ καὶ τὰ ἄλλα πάντα (B14: "Mind, which always is, is very much present now where everything else is").¹² As will be shown, Anaxagoras's νοῦς is also omnipotent, as it created order in the cosmos and caused the revolution in which the whole universe now turns.

The only possible verbal parallel between the two authors is their use of νοεῖ/νοῦς (cf. Xenophanes B24). Xenophanes uses this in an extant passage and Anaxagoras uses this term extensively. Nevertheless, one word is not enough to securely identify an allusion or even an echo, and so we cannot conclude that Anaxagoras read Xenophanes, but thematic parallels are more easily identifiable than any direct linguistic relationship.

Anaxagoras asserts the intellectual omnipotence and omniscience of νοῦς, which provides important thematic overlap with Xenophanes.¹³ Throughout B12, Anaxagoras repeats that "[mind] exercises complete oversight over everything and prevails above all," that "all things that have soul, both the larger and the smaller, these does mind rule" (γνώμην γε περὶ παντὸς πᾶσαν ἴσχει καὶ ἰσχύει μέγιστον . . . ὅσα γε ψυχὴν ἔχει καὶ τὰ μείζω καὶ τὰ ἐλάσσω, πάντων νοῦς κρατεῖ), and that if it were not purely "mind," it could not rule in this way. Furthermore, νοῦς set in motion the revolution that produced the current

10. Jaeger, *Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers*, 165.

11. Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers: Volume 2, Empedocles to Democritus*, in *The Arguments of the Philosophers*, ed. Ted Honderich (London: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1979), 107. For a different reading, see Graham, *Texts of Early Greek Philosophy*, 319, who argues that since νοῦς is only present in animate things, it is not omnipresent.

12. This passage is complicated by B12, where it seems that "mind" is completely separate from all things. Perhaps B14 represents an earlier passage than B12, or B12 is some kind of nuance.

13. Jaeger, *Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers*, 164.

cosmos, just as Xenophanes's god moves everything "by the thought of his mind" (B25): καὶ ὅποια ἐμελλεν ἐσεσθαι...πάντα διεκόσμησε νοῦς, καὶ τὴν περιχώρησιν ταύτην, ἣν νῦν περιχωρεῖ τὰ τε ἄστρα καὶ ὁ ἥλιος καὶ ἡ σελήνη καὶ ὁ ἀήρ καὶ ὁ αἰθήρ οἱ ἀποκρινόμενοι (B12: "And the kinds of things that were to be . . . all these did mind set in order, as well as this revolution with which the stars, the sun, the moon, the air, and the aether which were being separated now revolve"). Finally, Anaxagoras writes that "things mixed together, things separated, and things segregated, all these did mind comprehend" (B12: καὶ τὰ συμμισγόμενά τε καὶ ἀποκρινόμενα καὶ διακρινόμενα πάντα ἔγνω νοῦς). Again, there are no noteworthy linguistic parallels (except νοῦς) between Xenophanes's and Anaxagoras's statements, but both claim that god/"mind" knows all things.¹⁴

While all of its attributes imply it, Anaxagoras does not explicitly call νοῦς "god." Indeed, it is not certain that Anaxagoras would have considered νοῦς something divine or worthy of worship at all. Cornford, for example, sees in Anaxagoras's νοῦς "an admirable scientific economy," a substance "deprived even of intelligence and life and reduced simply to motion."¹⁵ Whatever Anaxagoras considered νοῦς to be in nature, its accidental properties line up remarkably with Xenophanes's god and even contribute additional, non-contradictory characteristics to it. Furthermore, "mind" fulfills a god-like role in Anaxagoras's cosmology as its governing universal power. While it may not be a "god" in the traditional sense, neither is Xenophanes's, because of god's singularity over and instead of the Homeric gods. Similarly, both god and "mind" are the governing principles of all other things in the cosmos, thereby fulfilling divine roles.

The strand of thinking is picked up by a later philosopher, Diogenes of Apollonia (flor. 440 BCE), who may have been contemporary with Anaxagoras.¹⁶ Diogenes, though he does not innovate as much, exhibits a similar theology to Anaxagoras's. Diogenes chooses to describe air using some of the aforementioned attributes, since air is a life-giving force. As Dreßler states,

14. It is interesting to note, however, that Xenophanes says that god moves things "by the thought of his mind (νόου)" (B25), foreshadowing the importance of νοῦς in Anaxagoras's writings.

15. Francis M. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy: A Study in the Origins of Western Speculation* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957), 154; see 153–54 for his brief discussion on Anaxagoras. It is perhaps worth noting that although Xenophanes's god does exhibit intelligence and life, he is not necessarily animated or relatable either.

16. Unfortunately, we have little biographical information on Diogenes, though he is often considered the last of the pre-Socratics. See Graham, *Texts of Early Greek Philosophy*, 434–35.

Erstens sieht er, als Erbe der älteren Vorsokratiker, das Universum als geordnetes System mit festen Maßen. Zweitens meint er, ähnlich wie Anaxagoras, dass ein allmächtiger Geist hinter dieser Ordnung steht. Und drittens identifiziert er diesen Geist, anders als wahrscheinlich Anaxagoras, mit (seiner Grundsubstanz, der Luft, und diese mit) Gott.¹⁷

Fragment B5 is the most pertinent in its description of the characteristics of air: καὶ μοι δοκεῖ τὸ τὴν νόησιν ἔχον εἶναι ὁ ἀήρ καλούμενος ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, καὶ ὑπὸ τούτου πάντα καὶ κυβερνᾶσθαι καὶ πάντων κρατεῖν (“And it seems to me that the bearer of intelligence is what men call air, and by this all things are steered and it controls all things”). Diogenes was influenced by Anaxagoras to a great extent, which is evident in his use of κρατεῖν (cf. Anaxagoras B12).

Similar to Anaxagoras’s writings, there is no linguistic allusion to or echo of Xenophanes by Diogenes, though “Xenophanian” ideas about god are present in the works of the latter.¹⁸ Diogenes directly states that air (ἀήρ) is a vessel of “intelligence,” just as Xenophanes’s god perceives with all of his being. Diogenes uses νοήσις (B5: νόησιν) for “intelligence,” harking back to Anaxagoras’s νοῦς. Both words may be linked with intelligence through perception, similar to the way in which god “thinks” (νοεῖ) in Xenophanes. Additionally, air, which “steers and controls all things” (cf. B5), is also omnipotent, like Anaxagoras’s νοῦς and Xenophanes’s god, although Diogenes does not clearly state how it controls all things. It is possible that it does this through its intelligence, like god, but perhaps it simply controls all through its life-giving force.¹⁹

Xenophanes undoubtedly had a lasting influence on his successors, especially as they formulated their theologies. In all three pre-Socratic instances there is a progression from Homer and Hesiod’s anthropomorphic gods to a non-anthropomorphic image of perfection.²⁰ Rather than squabbling Olympians who are rarely able to impose their will without resistance, the pre-Socratics present a unified power that controls everything in the cosmos.²¹ Interestingly, while Xenophanes claims that god is “not at all like to mortals

17. Jan Drefler, “Diogenes von Apollonia und die Entstehung des Gottesbeweises in der griechischen Philosophie,” *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*, Neue Folge, 156 (2013): 134: “First, as an heir of the earlier pre-Socratics, he views the universe as an ordered system with set bounds. Secondly, he believes that an omnipotent spirit is responsible for this order, similar to Anaxagoras. And thirdly, he identifies this spirit, probably contrary to Anaxagoras, as [his primary element, air, and he identifies this as] god.”

18. Barnes, *Presocratic Philosophers*, 2:278.

19. Graham, *Texts of Early Greek Philosophy*: 459.

20. Gregory Vlastos, “Theology and Philosophy in Early Greek Thought,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1952): 116–17.

21. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy*, 177, argues that the Olympian gods are actually a progression away from previous gods that were abstract.

in body,” he maintains some human-like attributes such as seeing, thinking, and hearing. By the time Anaxagoras and Diogenes are writing, however, god (θεός) has become even more abstract and ethereal, symbolized instead by “mind” (νοῦς) or air (ἀήρ). Both Diogenes and Anaxagoras have strong conceptual parallels with Xenophanes, although they do not clearly allude to his work. It would be an overstatement to suggest that either philosopher had Xenophanes’s texts in front of them as they penned their own works, but his innovative ideas on god permeated Greek theology. It is unclear exactly how these ideas were transmitted, as there is little scholarship on the history of Xenophanes’s writings’ reception. Further, the specific details of the attributes of air and “mind,” innovating on Xenophanes’s god, still remain unclear (such as whether they move). These and other subjects deserve further investigation.