

Xenophanes (570-475 BCE.)

Founder of the Eleatic school of philosophy, Xenophanes was a native of Colophon, and born about 570 BCE. It is difficult to determine the dates of his life with any accuracy and the facts of his life are also obscure. Xenophanes early left his own country and took refuge in Sicily, where he supported himself by reciting, at the court of Hiero, elegiac and iambic verses, which he had written in criticism of the *Theogony* of Hesiod and Homer. From Sicily he passed over into Magna Graecia, where he took up the profession of philosophy, and became a celebrated teacher in the Pythagorean school. Give way to a greater freedom of thought than was usual among the disciples of Pythagoras, he introduced new opinions of his own opposing the doctrines of Epimenides, Thales, and Pythagoras. He held the Pythagorean chair of philosophy for about seventy years, and lived to the extreme age of 105.

Xenophanes was an elegiac and satirical poet who approached the question of science from the standpoint of the reformer rather than of the scientific investigator. If we look at the very considerable remains of his poetry that have come down to us, we see that they are all in the satirist's and social reformer's vein. There is one dealing with the management of a feast, another which denounces the exaggerated importance attached to athletic victories, and several which attack the humanized gods of Homer. The problem is, therefore, to find, if we can, a single point of view from which all these fragments can be interpreted, although it may be that no such point of view exists. Like the religious reformers of the day, Xenophanes turned his back on the anthropomorphic polytheism of Homer and Hesiod. This revolt is based on a conviction that the tales of the poets are directly responsible for the moral corruption of the time. 'Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods all things that are a shame and a disgrace among mortals, stealing and adulteries and deceiving of another' (fr. 11). And this he held was due to the representation of the gods in human form. Men make gods in their own image; those of the Ethiopians are black and snub-nosed, those of the Thracians have blue eyes and red hair (fr 16). If horses or oxen or lions had hands and could produce works of art, they too would represent the gods after their own fashion (fr. 15). All that must be swept away along with the tales of Titans and Giants, those 'figments of an earlier day' (fr. 1) if social life is to be reformed.

Xenophanes found the weapons he required for his attack on polytheism in the science of the time. Here are traces of Anaximander's cosmology in the fragments, and Xenophanes may easily have been his disciple before he left Ionia. He seems to have taken the gods of mythology one by one and reduced them to meteorological phenomena, and especially to clouds. And he maintained there was only one god -- namely, the world. God is one incorporeal eternal being, and, like the universe, spherical in form; that he is of the same nature with the universe, comprehending all things within himself; is intelligent, and pervades all things, but bears no resemblance to human nature either in body or mind. He taught that if there had ever been a time when nothing existed, nothing could *ever* have existed. Whatever is, always has been from eternity, without deriving its existence from any prior principles. Nature, he believed, is one and without limit; that what is one is similar in all its parts, else it would be many; that the one infinite, eternal, and homogeneous universe is immutable and incapable of change. His position is often

classified as pantheistic, although his use of the term 'god' simply follows the use characteristic of the early cosmologists generally. There is no evidence that Xenophanes regarded this 'god' with any religious feeling, and all we are told about him (or rather about it) is purely negative. He is quite unlike a man, and has no special organs of sense, but 'sees all over, thinks all over, hears all over' (fr. 24). Further, he does not go about from place to place (fr. 26), but does everything 'without toil (fr. 25). It is not safe to go beyond this; for Xenophanes himself tells us no more. It is pretty certain that if he had said anything more positive or more definitely religious in its bearing it would have been quoted by later writers.

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