

THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF XENOPHANES OF COLOPHON

Rainer Kattel

University of Tartu

Abstract. Xenophanes of Colophon (ca. 570 – ca. 470 B.C.) is one of the first, if not the first, Greek philosopher to challenge the heroic and dramatic world of Homer and Hesiod. Xenophanes questioned and criticised the way people thought of Gods and of the polis. Through this monumental challenge he opened the way for a new philosophy of the polis, of human living together. In Xenophanes' philosophy, the polis becomes the central place for mortals, their lives and deeds; it becomes the totality of the human world. To fulfil the main aim of the polis – the good life –, Xenophanes introduces a new concept of the human ἀρετή, we might say: a new concept of moral and personal perfection of man. The essence of this ἀρετή consists mainly of philosophically and morally responsible σοφίη, wisdom, which dares to challenge, dares to be different, dares to be theoretical and always tries to find out what is just and right, what is proper for man.

Xenophanes of Colophon (ca. 570 – ca. 470 B.C.) lived during times of change, during the times of dawn of classical Greece.¹ In Xenophanes' thought, the hallmarks of new ideals emerge from the shadows of the day before: he is one of the first, if not the first, Greek philosopher to challenge the heroic and dramatic world of Homer and Hesiod. Xenophanes questioned and criticised the way people thought of Gods and of the polis. Through this monumental challenge he opened the way for a new philosophy – in the original meaning of the word – of

¹ This essay is based on my 1996 University of Tartu thesis in Political Philosophy. I would like to thank my advisor, Wolfgang Drechsler – to whom I owe topic and approach –, my opponent, Anne Lill, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, Otto Kaiser, and Peter R. Senn, for their kind and helpful questions and comments, as well as the Estonian Academy of Sciences for awarding the thesis a First Prize.

The following abbreviations are used:

- H Xenophanes. 1983. *Die Fragmente*. Ernst Heitsch, ed. München-Zürich: Artemis.
L Xenophanes. 1992. *Fragments*. James H. Lesher, ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
LSJ Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott and Sir Henry Stuart Jones. 1968. *A Greek-English Lexicon. With a Supplement*. 9th edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
D-K Diels, Hermann and Walther Kranz. 1968. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker. Griechisch und Deutsch*. 3 vols., 6th edition. [Zürich:] Weidmann.

the polis, of human living together. It is the philosophy of an unusual attempt to know and to examine the possibilities of a good and right life in the polis. And, as Leo Strauss has said, “if men make it their explicit goal to acquire knowledge of the good life and of the good society, political philosophy emerges”. (1988:10) What the essence of Xenophanes’ challenge and of his political philosophy might be, is to be considered in this essay.

The Presocratics

It was Plato who first defined the beginning of philosophy as being amazed, astonished, *θαυμάζειν* (*Theaitetos*, 155d 2) – being questioned. The Presocratics articulated, and tried to answer, these questions first;² hence our interest in them – their thoughts might be called the blueprint, the foundation of what is. In addition, there is something inherently fascinating in the fragments of the *Presocratic* thinkers,³ which seems to call us over the millennia:

Sie rührt uns an, diese Stimme der Griechen, als ob wir uns selbst zu hören meinten, und doch tönt sie zu uns herüber wie ein Ruf vom anderen Ufer, auf das wir nie mehr zurückgelangen können, da uns eine starke Strömung entfernt.
(Gadamer 1968:364)

Thus it can be a dangerous fascination: “*wer nach Anfängen fragt, gerät leicht ins Uferlose*” (Heitsch 1994:3); we are already at the other side and we are different; only the voice of an unusually profound thought reaches us. And this demands care.

In dealing with the Presocratics, we have only fragments of their thinking, fragments which very often have reached us entirely without context, and if there happens to be one, it is probably fragile and deformed through tradition.⁴ This does not mean that one can ignore the ancient testimonia; on the contrary, one has to be even more careful, more aware of the possibility that *we* might be wrong. In their typical shortness and cryptic brokenness, fragments have almost the character of a poem; not to mention that most of the earlier Presocratic fragments, including all the fragments of Xenophanes of Colophon, are actually parts of poems.⁵ This poem-like hermetic character of fragments allows us to treat the fragments of the Presocratics

² Cf. Sir Karl Popper’s 1958 essay, “Back to the Presocratics”, 130–131.

³ Maybe this is what Friedrich Nietzsche meant when he said: “With Plato begins something entirely new; or, as can be said with equal right, since Plato the philosophers lack something essential, in comparison with that republic of geniuses from Thales to Socrates”. (1988:809–810) But in order to see the fascination of Presocratics, one need not necessarily follow Nietzsche or Heidegger in whose opinion “the decadence of thinking infected by the so-called Socratic intellectualism, began decidedly with Plato”. (Beierwaltes 1995:7)

⁴ Cf. Cherniss 1951:319.

⁵ There are altogether about 35 (H) to 41 (D-K) or 42 (L) actual fragments of Xenophanes’ writings, all of them written in different poetic form. (See Diogenes Laertius IX 22) The numbering of the fragments in this essay, of Xenophanes as well as of all other Presocratic thinkers, follows the one of D-K.

just as they are: short, cryptic (half-)sentences within an often confusing and distorted context which we, however, cannot fully disregard.⁶

In this context, the attempt to outline the political philosophy of Xenophanes of Colophon is an attempt to find footsteps which might not have been taken at all. As Paul Celan understood his own work as a *Flaschenpost*,⁷ we may see in the same way the work, the fragments, the thought of Xenophanes: it is very probable that we just do not get it, that it does not reach us.

Xenophanes, philosophy and political philosophy

But why would anybody be interested in “a poet and rhapsode, who has become a figure in the history of Greek philosophy by mistake”? (Cherniss 1951:335) Xenophanes certainly was a poet and maybe also a rhapsode and a drinking-song writer, perhaps even a religious mystic,⁸ but he was also, and arguably first of all, a philosopher⁹ – he was “the first Greek who wrote literary criticism; the first moral philosopher; the first critic of knowledge; and the first speculative monotheist.”¹⁰ He is a philosopher whose “philosophical importance is great, and its influence was immediately felt”. (Guthrie 1962:401) Although Aristotle deemed him to have been “somewhat primitive” (*Metaphysics* 986b 26), and Heraclitus said of him that learning of many things had not taught him to have understanding, ἐχεν νόον,¹¹ it can also be said that the “Eleatics, and Heraclitus as well, are much in his debt ..., with him philosophy breaks new ground in more than one direction.” (Guthrie 1962:402)

And yet it seems most unlikely that Xenophanes has said anything interesting for political philosophy.¹² Perhaps most indicative of the relevance of Xenophanes for political thinking is the continuous and emphatic recurrence of him by the late Sir Karl Popper, both in his seminal “Duldsamkeit und intellektuelle Verantwortlichkeit” (1982: esp. 176–180) and in his most famous work, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1991).¹³ Whatever one may say about Popper, he is probably the currently most influential, most widely spread, and most applied political philosopher of this century.

Moreover, Werner Jaeger, possibly the leading classical philologist of the first half of our century, has seen in Xenophanes the beginning of the ethics of the polis, the beginning of a new concept of ἀρετή, which leads, if most probably

⁶ Cf. Gadamer 1993:30.

⁷ Cf. Gadamer 1986:7.

⁸ So Nietzsche 1988:841.

⁹ See, e.g., Guthrie 1962:401-402; Dihle 1991:98-99; H:10-12; Gomperz 1922:129-130; Jaeger 1953:51; Ziegler 1965:289-290.

¹⁰ So Popper in his 1982 essay, “Duldsamkeit und intellektuelle Verantwortlichkeit”, 177.

¹¹ Fragment B 40.

¹² As has been argued by Kirk and Raven 1957:168.

¹³ Popper 1991 calls Xenophanes “one of the first to express the attitude of the open society”. (235)

See also pp. 15, 189, 214, 235, 295, 312, and Popper 1970:152–153.

indirectly, to the writings and teachings of Plato and Aristotle. (Jaeger 1936:232–236 and 1953:62) J.H. Leshner, the author of an outstanding edition of Xenophanes, observed in his fragments the foreshadowing of the moral ideas and ideals which underlie Plato's *Politeia*. (L:52–54, 74) Finally, Ernst Heitsch recognised in Xenophanes the beginnings of critical thinking. (Heitsch 1994) Looking carefully at what Xenophanes' political philosophy might actually be is not therefore without interest.

Xenophanes of Colophon

Werner Jaeger has pointed out that Xenophanes "*ist der erste griechische Denker, der als Persönlichkeit faßbar ist*". (1953:50) However, in the case of Xenophanes, we do not even know exactly when he was born or when he died.¹⁴ He is not, so to say, dated. His personality reaches us only through the fragments of his work which, however, are powerful enough to draw the contours of an unusual personality. And in the end, one may certainly agree with Hegel that "*es ist gleichgültig, daß das Jahr seiner Geburt und seines Todes unbestimmt ist*". (1971:277)

From the life of Xenophanes, we know that at the age of twenty five he was driven out of his home city of Colophon,¹⁵ after which he wandered through the lands of Greece for "seven and sixty years". (B 8, 1) Where he wandered, how he lived and what he did for a living, we do not know exactly.

Xenophanes probably had no teacher,¹⁶ but since Plato he has almost always been somehow connected to the Eleatic School, which might be a misunderstanding that was taken by Aristotle as a historical fact. (*Metaphysics* 986b 18-21)¹⁷ Xenophanes himself, however, might have been, as Diogenes Laertius suggests (IX 21), a teacher of Parmenides.¹⁸

¹⁴ It is general consensus that Xenophanes was born around 570 and died around 470 BC. A very good discussion of the dates of Xenophanes' birth and death is given by Zeller 1919 (640 note 1); see also Thesleff 1957.

¹⁵ Diogenes Laertius IX 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*; but see also IX 21.

¹⁷ Plato says in *Sophistes* 242d 3-5: τὸ δὲ παρ' ἡμῖν Ἑλεάτικον ἔθνος ἄπο Ξενοφάνους ... which is "*natürlich eine scherzhafte und halb ironische Sprechweise*". (Jaeger 1953:251 note 65) It is very probable that Plato did not have the actual writings or even fragments of Xenophanes at his disposal anymore. And still Hegel talks about Xenophanes as one of the Eleatic philosophers. (1971:277-284) This is probably a long-lasting misunderstanding, rooted in Plato and Aristotle (see Jaeger 1953:251 note 65), and nourished through the pseudo-Aristotelian writing *de Melisso Xenophane Gorgia* (see esp. 977a-979a); see also Jaeger 1953:65; L:192-193; Kirk and Raven 1957:165-166, and Guthrie 1962:367-368.

¹⁸ Disputed by Jaeger 1953:64-65; Kirk and Raven 1957:166.

Diogenes Laertius also says that Xenophanes recited publicly his own poems as a rhapsode: ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτὸς ἔρραψῶδει τὰ ἑαυτοῦ. (IX 18) However, this does not necessarily mean, as Gomperz claims, that Xenophanes was also a rhapsode who recited the poems of Homer, arguing that καὶ in Diogenes Laertius IX 18 means that Xenophanes recited also, that is besides something else, his own poems. (1922:127) The passage in Diogenes Laertius simply says that Xenophanes is

Thus, we know actually fairly little of his life and activities; it is also very difficult to find reliable ancient testimonia on Xenophanes.¹⁹ This is likewise true concerning Xenophanes' philosophy; there are only a few casual remarks.²⁰

The modern debate on Xenophanes is much richer, more complex and controversial. Interpretations vary from seeing Xenophanes as a revolutionary social critic and a true philosopher²¹ to a protagonist of the tyranny of universal norms;²² from one of the most important theologians before Christianity (Jaeger 1953) to a robust empiricist (Fränkel 1962:382) and a figure mistakenly placed into the history of Greek philosophy. (Cherniss 1951:335)

Xenophanes was a thinker and a poet "*zwischen den Zeiten*" (H:12); in his thought "*ergreift der philosophische Geist Besitz von der Poesie*". (Jaeger 1936:230) He criticised the world of Homer and Hesiod (B 11) using their own language – poetry. A language which was panhellenic, and "*panhellenisch ist die Wirkung, die Xenophanes für seine Gedanken erstrebt*". (Jaeger 1936:230) For he wanted to change the way how people thought of God(s),²³ of the world²⁴ and of themselves:²⁵

Immer glaubt man einen Mann zu hören, der sich nichts vormachen läßt, aber in seiner Umwelt sich vernünftig orientieren will und für kosmologische, physikalische und historische Erscheinungen Erklärungen sucht; der die menschliche Möglichkeiten nicht überschätzt, doch seine Beobachtungen macht, Schlüsse zieht und das einmal als richtig Erkannte konsequent verfolgt und auch dann noch vertritt, wenn er zu geltenden Anschauungen in Widerspruch gerät. Xenophanes ... ist ein Mann zwischen den Zeiten. (H:12)

In Xenophanes we hear a voice of thought which does not strike us so much by its philosophical profoundness, contrary to Heraclitus and Parmenides, but rather by its unusual and unconventional challenge to its contemporary world and its ideals. A voice which demands to think about what one is doing.

the author of poems and also publicly recited them. Moreover, it is hardly imaginable that a Homeric rhapsode would also be a major critic and challenger of Homer, which Xenophanes is. See also Jaeger 1953:53 and note 15; Zafiropulo 1950:9 note 7; Burnet 1955:33.

¹⁹ For full testimonia on Xenophanes see esp. D-K, L:189-222 (translated into English) and Diels 1879: esp. 140-141.

²⁰ For Heraclitus and Aristotle see above; for other accounts – almost all of them in some way or other following Aristotle –, see L:204-221.

²¹ Cf., e.g., L:76, 135, 139; H:10-12; Ziegler 1965:290-291; Gomperz 1922:129; Dihle 1991:98-99; Bowra 1966:160-161; Fränkel 1962:371; Burnet 1955:33; Lesky 1971:244; Röd 1988:86.

²² So argues Paul Feyerabend 1987. If one would be willing to follow Feyerabend's argument concerning Xenophanes, this would lead almost directly to the heart of the current communitarianism/universalism debate. However, this is most difficult to justify, since the actual fragments of Xenophanes give us no clue either way which might prove or disprove statements such as those of Feyerabend.

²³ B 11, B 14, B 15, B 16, B 23, B 24, B 25 and B 26.

²⁴ B 27-33.

²⁵ B 1, B 2, B 3, B 18, B 34, B 35.

Xenophanes on God²⁶

The poems of Homer “are not the beginning but the consummation of an artistic process of which the earlier stages are no longer discernible”. (Thomson 1962:1) Homer embodies the beginning of literature – the beginning which has found perhaps no superior, maybe even no equal, in beauty and splendour. (Ibid.) Homer is, as also Xenophanes admits (B 10), “the parent of that culture which we regard as typically classical”. (Thomson 1962:2) However, Xenophanes’ strikingly unusual and daring critique of the Gods of Homer and Hesiod (B 11–12) was as well known through Antiquity as it is in our times. The anthropomorphic Gods of Homer and Hesiod are no longer acceptable to Xenophanes:

wir kommen hier an den Punkt der geschichtlichen Entwicklung, wo der latente Gegensatz der neuen philosophischen Denkart und der mythischen Vorstellungswelt, die die maßgebenden älteren Schöpfungen des griechischen Geistes beherrschte, zu offenem Konflikte ausbrach. (Jaeger 1953:54)²⁷

For Xenophanes, the human living together, the polis, needs more than the homeric Gods can offer: the polis needs more than a hope of transcendental justice. And yet, it can be argued that Xenophanes is “*überhaupt nur als Theologe*

²⁶ It has been a matter of some debate whether Xenophanes argues for mono- or polytheism, and the main reason for that debate is B 23:

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

Clemens Alexandrinus, who originally quotes Xenophanes’ fragments B 14, B 15 and B 23 (*Strom.* V 110), quotes first B 23 and then adds, with his own καὶ παλίν, right to it B 14 (ἀλλ’ οἱ βροτοὶ δοκέουσι γεννᾶσθαι θεούς, τὴν σφετέρην δ’ ἐσθῆτα ἔχειν φωνὴν τε δέμας τε), and in the same way B 15. This sequence and, if one may say so, its meaning point decidedly to the one God, putting it into direct opposition (ἀλλᾶ) to the mortals’ images of Gods who are born and have clothes, a voice and a body. Therefore, that one God is greatest among Gods and men, is probably to be understood as a form of poetic language. (See Zeller:648 note 3; Jaeger 1953:56) Although Fränkel 1962 calls Xenophanes “*Apostel eines radikalen Monotheismus*” (376), it is not certain whether Xenophanes really meant one God or “Godness”, as Jaeger 1953 suggests. (57) Although in B 19, 1; B 16, 1; B 12, 1; B 14, 1; B 1, 24; B 11, 1; B 13, 4; B 30, 2 and B 10, 1, Xenophanes uses the plural of θεός, in discussing his theological ideas the term “God” has been used, since this seems to be legitimate regarding Xenophanes’ thought. However, in the case of Xenophanes, as well as in that of other philosophers, wherever the plural stands in the original, it will be given also in English.

²⁷ See also Dihle 1995:9. Jaeger understands Xenophanes through the new natural philosophy of Anaximander and Anaximenes (1936:232-236; 1953:54–55), and this allows him to say that Xenophanes was no original thinker. (1936:236) However, some of the fragments of Xenophanes, esp. B 1, B 2, B 3, B 18, B 34, and B 35, are probably not rooted in the new Ionian natural philosophy, because the theme and especially the purpose of these fragments is arguably new. See esp. Ziegler 1965:293 and L:147.

zu begreifen". (Ibid.:62)²⁸ It is exactly in the theology of Xenophanes, if one can call it that, where he first expresses his "*fast grenzenloses Heraustreten aus allen Conventionen*" (Nietzsche 1988:841):

πάντα θεοῖσ' ἀνέθηκαν Ὀμηρός θ' Ἡσίοδος τε,
 ὅσσα παρ' ἀνθρώποισιν ὀνειδέα καὶ ψόγος ἐστίν,
 κλέπτειν μοιχεύειν τε καὶ ἀλλήλους ἀπατεύειν. (B 11)²⁹

It is not only that people should not commit all those reproachful things but, first of all, it is not proper or decent, ἐπιπρέπει (B 26, 2),³⁰ of God to do it, nor is it proper for God "to travel to different places at different time". (Ibid.)³¹ God is not like human beings, mortals, think of Him: mortals imagine God in their own image. (B 14, B 15, B 16)³² God is unimaginable for (H:114), and totally different from, human beings; completely dissimilar.³³ (L:94) God is οὐτι δέμας θνητοῖσιν ὁμοίος οὐδὲ νόημα (B 23, 2), "not at all like mortals in body or in thought" (L:31); οὐλος ὄραϊ, οὐλος δὲ νοεῖ, οὐλος δέ τ' ἀκούει (B 24), "whole he sees, whole he thinks, and whole he hears" (L:31); ἀπάνευθε πόνοιο νόου φρενὶ πάντα κραδαίνει (B 25), "completely without toil he shakes all things by thought of his mind". (L:33)

Here is the image of God or Godness which is, with its total difference and absolute wholeness and otherness, thoroughly contrasted against mortals; an image which springs from the "*Ehrfurcht vor der Erhabenheit des Göttlichen*". (Jaeger 1953:62) It is God who is almost disconnected from the world of the mortals (Fränkel 1962:383) and from the polis (Jaeger 1953:61-62), with His wholeness of seeing, hearing and knowing – an image of an all-knowing and all-

²⁸ As mentioned above, Nietzsche calls him a religious mystic. (1988:841) On Jaeger's views of Xenophanes as a theological thinker, see also Gadamer 1993:45-46.

²⁹ The translation of Lesher:

Homer and Hesiodos have attributed to the Gods
 all sorts of things which are matters of reproach and censure among men:
 theft, adultery, and mutual deceit. (23)

See also B 12.

³⁰ For the importance of ἐπιπρέπει in Greek thinking, see Jaeger 1953:62-63.

³¹ The translation is Lesher's. (33) See also Calogero 1970:285.

³² It is almost universally agreed among the authors on Xenophanes that he criticises the existing anthropomorphic image of God. Only Lesher argues that Xenophanes nowhere rejects the anthropomorphic God, but that he rather argues for a complete dissimilarity of God from mortals. (94)

³³ Empedocles, too, argues, quite like Xenophanes, that the Gods are wholly different from, and ungraspable for, mortals. (B 133) However, neither Xenophanes nor Empedocles are so pessimistic about the human ability to have knowledge of the Gods as is Protagoras, who in the end doubts even the possibility to know whether there are Gods at all. (B 4)

powerful God contrasted against the mortals' inability to know.³⁴ The mortals are left on their own:

οὔτοι ἀπ' ἀρχῆς πάντα θεοὶ θνητοῖσ' ὑπέδειξαν,
ἀλλὰ χρόνῳ ζητοῦντες ἐφευρίσκουσιν ἄμεινον. (B 18)³⁵

Mortals have to try to understand the natural world³⁶ as much as it is possible, they have to strive for the knowledge themselves, and this is the answer to the human inability to know. And mortals can only pray to God and hope that their actions and deeds would be δίκαια. (B 1, 15)

Moreover, it is not proper for human beings to imagine God in their own image, to think that God is similar to mortals.³⁷ It is not proper for mortals to pray for personal success and fame – because of the limited knowledge of mortals. (B 34, 1) Mortals cannot know for certain and yet they need to act, need to live in this world. However, one cannot rely on something one cannot even know. The human yardstick of acting, therefore, has to be something else than God; that is, something not outside of the human world. Thus, the place for mortals and their deeds is for Xenophanes the polis, the human living together – the human world itself.³⁸ Only the polis can operate as a framework in which human togetherness,

³⁴ See Deichgräber 1938:21, 28 and Gigon 1945:186. Alkmaion, in B 1, argues in the same way, confronting the knowledge, and the ability to know, of God with that of human beings.

³⁵ The translation of Leshner:

Indeed not from the beginning did Gods intimate all things to mortals,
but as they search in time they discover better. (27)

The last line is difficult, and it has mostly been interpreted as a kind of “hymn to progress” (see for examples and arguments L:150–151), which is, however, difficult to fit in with some of the other fragments of Xenophanes. Also, there is no context for that fragment (see Stobaeus' *Florilegium* 29, 41, where it stands just among other quotes). Following Leshner's translation, one can understand the fragment not as a “hymn to progress” but as meaning that searching and trying to find out is an answer to limited human knowledge. LSJ gives for ἐφευρίσκω “to find or discover”, which can support either argument.

³⁶ Leshner argues that Xenophanes tried to “displace an existing, predominantly religious outlook on the natural world”. (145; see also 146-148 and Jaeger 1936:231-232) For actual fragments, see B 27, B 29, B 33, B 30, B 31, B 32 and B 37. It is probably justified here to follow Leshner and Jaeger in arguing that the critique of Xenophanes of the human understanding of natural phenomena as religious ones is also part of his critique of the existing order and world view.

³⁷ B 14:

ἀλλ' οἱ βροτοὶ δοκέουσι γεννᾶσθαι θεούς,
τὴν σφετέρην δ' ἐσθήτα ἔχειν φωνήν τε δέμας τε.

The translation of Leshner:

But mortals suppose that Gods are born,
wear their own clothes and have a voice and body. (25)

Aristotle is probably referring to Xenophanes when he argues that since people are ruled by kings, they think also Gods should have a king. (*Politika* 1252b 25-27)

³⁸ See B 2, 15-22 and Jaeger 1953:62.

being together, can express and fulfil itself; only the polis can at all provide the necessary preconditions of the *good* life, namely: lead the citizens to ἀρετή:

σπείσαντας δὲ καὶ εὐξαμένους τὰ δίκαια δύνασθαι
 πρήσσειν - ταῦτα γὰρ ὦν ἐστὶ προχειρότερον -
 οὐχ ὕβρις πίνειν ὅποσον κεν ἔχων ἀφίκοιο
 οἴκαδ' ἄνευ προπόλου μὴ πάνυ γηραλέος.
 ἀνδρῶν δ' αἰνεῖν τοῦτον ὅς ἐσθλὰ πίων ἀναφαίνει,
 ὥς οἱ μνημοσύνη καὶ τόνος ἀμφ' ἀρετῆς,
 οὔτι μάχας διέπων Τιτῆνων οὐδὲ Γιγάντων
 οὐδὲ <τε> Κενταύρων, πλάσματα τῶν προτέρων,
 ἢ στάσις σφεδανάς, τοῖσ' οὐδὲν χρηστὸν ἔνεστι· (B 1, 15-23)³⁹

The striving for ἀρετή, the attempting to know what is good or bad for the polis (B 1, 21-23), is, in turn, good for the polis, makes it better. This is what, according to Xenophanes, human living together actually is, this almost roofless together far from God, which needs a polis as a yardstick to become true togetherness. And a true polis, which is the expression of true togetherness, needs a certain kind of, a new kind of ἀρετή. That is, a good polis needs, in order to come into being and to exist – a good man.

The Ἀρετή of Xenophanes

Leo Strauss has said, as briefly mentioned above, that political philosophy is essentially concerned with the knowledge, and with the strive for the knowledge, of the good state, of the good life. (Strauss 1988:10) However, as Aristotle argues in *Politika*, the good, the right state shows and expresses itself already in its good citizens. (1332a 32–35) Thus the question: what is or what makes a good man? is the beginning of political – in the case of Greek thinking: state⁴⁰ – philosophy. As it was Aristotle's concern to find out what makes a good citizen, so Xenophanes has the same concern in fragment B 1.

³⁹ The translation:

And having poured a libation and prayed to be able to do what is right –
 for these are obvious, are not impudent; to drink as much as allows any but an aged man
 to reach his home without a servant's aid.

Praise the man who when he has taken drink brings noble deeds to light,
 as memory and a striving for virtue bring to him.

He deals neither with the battles of Titans nor Giants
 nor Centaurs, fictions of old,
 nor furious conflicts – for there is no use in these.

In lines 16 and 17, the translation follows Heitsch and takes προχειρότερον and ὕβρις as belonging together. (94) LSJ gives for προχειρός "at hand, ready, obvious"; in the given fragment it stands in the comparative, thus it makes sense to take it together with ὕβρις. (See also note 41 below) Otherwise, the translation is Leshner's. (13)

⁴⁰ Cf. Jaeger 1936:113-114.

Xenophanes asks to pray to God to be able to do what is right, τὰ δίκαια δύνασθαι πρήσσειν (B 1, 15–16); he does not ask for personal success, fame or wealth as it was usual at these occasions of a symposion. (H:93–94) Xenophanes asks for actions and deeds which were δίκαια, righteous and just, and not part of ὕβρις⁴¹ (B 1, 17), not violating other people and especially their interests. (H:93–94)

What makes an human action righteous is thus the consideration of the being-present of others. One's own personal interests, success, wealth, luxury and fame do not come in the first place, since these are of no use at all, χρηστόν, (B 1, 23) to the polis, but more probably the opposite:

ἀβροσύνας δὲ μαθόντες ἀνωφελέας παρὰ Λυδῶν,
ὄφρα τυραννίης ἦσαν ἄνευ στυγερῆς,
ἦισαν εἰς ἀγορῆν παναλουργέα φάρε' ἔχοντες,
οὐ μείους ὥσπερ χίλιοι εἰς ἐπίπαν,
ἀύχαλέοι, χαίτησιν ἀγάλμενοι εὐπρεπέσιν,
ἀσκητοῖσ' ὀδμῆν χρίμασι δευόμενοι. (B 3)⁴²

Instead of “praising” unnecessary luxury, instead of showing what is needless and in that sense a true ὕβρις, one has to praise the man who brings noble deeds to light and strives for ἀρετή. (1, 19–20) This is the realization and acknowledgement – indeed a conviction and belief of Xenophanes – of human living together, that no man lives alone – it is a realization of human plurality.

Aristotle argues that one who can live outside of the polis, who can live in loneliness, is either an animal or God. (*Politika* 1253a 25–30) The necessary environment for human beings is the polis, i.e. not loneliness. A human being becomes a truly human being only in the polis; this is its natural home. (Ibid.) However, every human act, even every uttered word, changes the world of our own being together – changes the natural home. This is why, according to Xenophanes, one has to pray for δίκαια actions and deeds; δίκη is the precondition of the polis; ὕβρις is the beginning of the fall of the polis. The way to δίκη and the essence of it is expressed in B 2:

⁴¹ LSJ gives “wanton violence, arising from the pride of strength or from passion, insolence; an outrage”. In Homer, *Od.* 6, ἡ ῥ' οἱ γ' ὕβρισταί τε καὶ ἄγριοι οὐδὲ δίκαιοι, the terms δίκαιος and ὕβρις mean almost exactly the opposite (cf. H:95), as also, e.g. in *Kritias* B 25, 6–7, δίκη ... ὕβριν δούλον ἔχη.

⁴² The translation of Leshner:

And having learned unprofitable luxuries from the Lydians,
as long as they were free of hateful tyranny,
they used to go into the agora wearing robes all of purple,
not less than a thousand in all,
boastful, exulting in their gorgeous long-flowing hair,
drenched in the scent of prepared unguents. (17)

For a similar critique of unnecessary luxury, see also B 125 of Heraclitus.

ἀλλ' εἰ μὲν ταχυτήτι ποδῶν νίκην τις ἄροιτο
 ἢ πενταθλεύων, ἔνθα Διὸς τέμενος
 πὰρ Πίσαιο ρόηισ' ἐν Ὀλυμπίη, εἴτε παλαιῶν
 ἢ καὶ πυκτοσύνην ἀλγινόεσσαν ἔχων,
 εἴτε τι δεινὸν ἄεθλον ὃ παγκράτιον καλέουσιν,
 ἀστοισίην κ' εἴη κυδρότερος προσορᾶν
 καὶ κε προεδρίην φανερὴν ἐν ἀγῶσιν ἄροιτο
 καὶ κεν σίτ' εἴη δημοσίων κτεάνων
 ἐκ πόλεως καὶ δῶρον ὃ οἱ κειμήλιον εἴη·
 εἴτε καὶ ἵπποισιν, ταυτὰ κε πάντα λάχοι –
 οὐκ ἐὼν ἄξιος ὥσπερ ἐγώ. ρώμης γὰρ ἀμείνων
 ἀνδρῶν ἢδ' ἵππων ἡμετέρη σοφίη.
 ἀλλ' εἰκὴ μάλα τοῦτο νομίζεται, οὐδὲ δίκαιον
 προκρίνειν ρώμην τῆς ἀγαθῆς σοφίης.
 οὔτε γὰρ εἰ πύκτης ἀγαθὸς λαοῖσι μετεῖη
 οὔτ' εἰ πενταθλεῖν οὔτε παλαισμοσύνην,
 οὐδὲ μὲν εἰ ταχυτήτι ποδῶν, τόπερ ἐστὶ πρότιμον
 ρώμης ὅσσ' ἀνδρῶν ἔργ' ἐν ἀγῶνι πέλει,
 τοῦνεκεν ἄν δὴ μᾶλλον ἐν εὐνομίῃ πόλις εἴη.
 σμικρὸν δ' ἄν τι πόλει χάρμα γένοιτ' ἐπὶ τῶι,
 εἴ τις ἀεθλεύων νικῶι Πίσαιο παρ' ὄχθας·
 οὐ γὰρ παίειν ταῦτα μυχοῦς πόλεως.⁴³

It is not just and right that successful athletes receive more praise than a philosopher (B 2, 13-14) because neither the successful athletes nor the praise of them make the polis better. Obviously, what makes the polis better, brings it

⁴³ The translation of Lesher:

But if by swiftness of foot one were to gain a victory
 or in the pentathlon, there by Pisa's stream in Olympys in the sacred grove of Zeus,
 or again the painful art of boxing
 or the fearsome sport they call pankration,
 he would appear more glorious to his townsmen
 and win the front-row seat of honour at games.
 And there would be food from the city's public stores
 and a keepsake gift for him.
 And even if he were to win with horses he would get all these,
 not being as worthy of them as I.
 For our expertise is better than the strength of men and horses.
 But this practice makes no sense nor is it right
 to prefer strength to this good expertise.
 For neither if there were a good boxer among the people
 nor if there were a pentathlete or wrestler
 nor again if there were someone swift afoot –
 which is most honoured of all men's deeds of strength –
 would for this reason a city be better governed.
 Small joy would a city have from this –
 if someone were to be victorious in competing for a prize on Pisa's banks –
 for these do not enrich a city's treasure room. (13, 14)

closer to εὐνομίη, is σοφίη ἀγαθή, good or even virtuous wisdom.⁴⁴ (B 2, 14) This wisdom is the reason for noble deeds and righteous actions. The city, the society should not praise successful athletes but rather men like Xenophanes himself (2, 10-14) for their wisdom. Thus the way to δίκη is σοφίη ἀγαθή, good wisdom, or, as might be said in today's language: morally responsible wisdom.

This σοφίη of Xenophanes is already vehemently expressed in his own critique of Homer's way of describing the Gods, as well as in his critique of the human understanding of nature.⁴⁵ For Xenophanes, the world of Homer as well as his own contemporary world lack something essential: the necessary wisdom of a true polis, the thinking about a true polis, i.e., what is missing is a new concept of ἀρετή – ἀρετή of the polis.⁴⁶ Therefore, Xenophanes ranks as the highest of human activities, the most noble and most useful, the θεωρία, the theoretical, contemplative life – we might say: independence and freedom of mind and thinking. This kind of σοφίη, this courageous praise of the θεωρία, is for Xenophanes the ἀρετή: the daring and courage to look at things, at the totality of the world, differently and from a distance – daring to be theoretical, in the original sense of the word:

Theoria ist nicht so sehr der einzelne augenblickliche Akt als eine Haltung, ein Stand und Zustand, in dem man sich hält. Es ist "Dabei-Sein" in dem schönen Doppelsinne, der nicht nur Anwesenheit meint, sondern auch dies, daß der Anwesende "ganz dabei" ist. (Gadamer 1983:44)⁴⁷

Θεωρία means: to be there and to observe, to be part of and to try to understand. Thus, for Xenophanes, θεωρία itself is already a part of σοφίη. However, this kind of σοφίη is useful to the polis (2, 15–22), because, as perhaps may be said with the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer, "*Praxis, wenn sie nur wahrhaft menschliche Praxis ist, [ist] immer zugleich Theorie*". (1983:49) A good man, a good citizen is not a philosopher nor a moralist. A good man always tries to know and understand what he is doing, tries to gather wisdom, tries to understand. (B 18)

The σοφίη of Xenophanes is useful to the polis because it is essentially a polis-σοφίη – wisdom of the polis, wisdom of human living together: it is obvious in Xenophanes, "*daß die Polis und ihr Heil der Maßstab schlechthin aller Werte ist*": "*Im Namen der Polis proklamiert jetzt Xenophanes seine neue Form der Arete*".⁴⁸ (Jaeger 1936:235) It is the human courage and freedom to look

⁴⁴ Leshner's translation as "good expertise" (15) seems to me a little too technical and not encompassing the Greek original enough; Heitsch's "nützliche Weisheit" (21) is perhaps somewhat too weak concerning the ἀγαθός; the best translation is D-K's "tüchtige Weisheit".

⁴⁵ See note 36 above.

⁴⁶ See also Jaeger 1936:233.

⁴⁷ See also *ibid.*:11.

⁴⁸ Jaeger brings Xenophanes' new concept of ἀρετή to open conflict with the older ideals of ἀρετή, namely with that of Homer:

at things differently, to say different things, that makes up this σοφίη: with Xenophanes, the step “von der reinen Anschauung der Wahrheit zum Anspruch auf die Kritik und Führung des menschliches Lebens ist getan” (Jaeger 1936:236); “Philosophie hat ihre Bedeutung für den Menschen, das heißt für die Polis entdeckt”. (Ibid.) This is the σοφίη which Xenophanes himself had to such a large extent: “die Freiheit des Individuums ist mit ihm auf der Höhe”. (Nietzsche 1988:841) A freedom which, however, knows its limits. (B 1) And a wisdom which ends in not-knowing:

καὶ τὸ μὲν οὖν σαφὲς οὔτις ἀνὴρ ἴδεν οὐδέ τις ἔσται
εἰδὼς ἀμφὶ θεῶν τε καὶ ἄσσα λέγω περὶ πάντων·
εἰ γὰρ καὶ τὰ μάλιστα τύχοι τετελεσμένον εἰπών,
αὐτὸς ὅμως οὐκ οἶδε· δόκος δ' ἐπὶ πᾶσι τέτυκται. (B 34)⁴⁹

The human ability to know the certain truth is not only limited: no man has seen the truth. As if the truth was almost physically not for human beings; it is not given that the truth would be a part of the human world. However, Xenophanes does not reject the truth – there *is* the truth.

The almost too radical turn to subjectivity in the second line of the fragment does not mean that Xenophanes saw himself as a prophet who knows everything there is to know, but it rather points to the possible meaning of the first line. Nobody will ever know for certain what Xenophanes says because of – the language. What Xenophanes has said has already become a part of the common invisible body of language. Language is there only because of human beings, and it is the invisible bond of the human living together. That is why no man has seen

Nirgendwo in der Geschichte der griechischen Kultur sehen wir klarer mit eigenen Augen den unabwendbaren feindlichen Zusammenstoß der althellenischen Adelsbildung und des neuen philosophischen Menschen, der hier zum erstenmal um seinen Platz in der Gesellschaft und im Staate ringt und mit einem eigenen Ideal der menschlichen Bildung hervortritt, das allgemeine Anerkennung heischt. (1936:234)

Xenophanes “hat die Alleinherrschaft des agonalen Ideals gebrochen”. (Ibid.) Jaeger also connects Xenophanes directly with Tyrtaios, saying that Xenophanes followed in B 2 consciously the critique of athletes by Tyrtaios. (Ibid.:235) According to the latter, the most useful men for the polis are warriors or those who are good and brave in a war (III, 9-13), and not the athletes who have, among other things, ποδῶν ἀρετῆς. (III, 2) Thus, not the physical ἀρετή of athletes but the ἀρετή of warriors, bravery (III, 9), is good for the polis. It becomes clear in Tyrtaios that ἀρετή is not only morality, but perhaps first of all, a kind of perfection. If for Tyrtaios this perfection expresses itself in the physical perseverance of the polis, then for Xenophanes it becomes a perfection of the knowledge of human living together.

⁴⁹ The translation of Lesher:

... and of course the clear and certain truth no man has seen
nor will there be anyone who knows about the Gods and what I say about all things.
For even if, in the best case, one happened to speak just of what has been brought to pass,
still he himself would not know. But opinion is allotted to all. (39)

Similar ideas on the human inability to know the truth or reality are expressed by Anaxagoras (B 21) and Democritus (B 6, B 7, B 8, B 9).

the certain truth – in language it withdraws into itself, because language is almost like an ever enlarging, closed system which has no reference point outside of itself; and it will always stay inside of itself. Therefore, truth and knowledge become an opinion in language. And probably most surprising in this fragment is the positive use of δόκος: it is not given to the mortals certainly, σαφές (B 34, 1), know the truth, but they still have an opinion. Mortals cannot know for certain, but their opinions are not deemed as something wrong or even bad.⁵⁰ Opinion is human, one might even say that opinion is proper for human beings, and it is allotted to all, to everybody. (B 34, 4) It is human not to know the truth and still try to find it. (B 18, 2) Thus, the acknowledgement of the limits of human understanding and knowledge, and the acknowledgement of human opinions, is an essential part of σοφίη of Xenophanes, which in turn means a part of ἀρετή.

But if human beings do not and even cannot know the truth or cannot obtain certain knowledge; if there are so many different views and ideas,⁵¹ how, according to what, is one supposed to live in this world? What is then right or wrong? That is, how, to say it in modern terms, is one to avoid the threat of relativism? How can one guarantee the existence of the polis?

A very cryptic and broken fragment of Xenophanes, B 35, might lead to a possible answer to all those questions:

ταῦτα δεδοξάσθω μὲν εἰκότα τοῖς ἐτύμοισι ...⁵²

Already the verb, δεδοξάσθαι,⁵³ can point to a possible meaning of the fragment: something is to be opined as resembling something else. Thus, there is no claim of the absolute or of the ultimate truth in the fragment. There is something, ταῦτα, that one does not know definitely and therefore leaves it open, leaves possible different meanings open, and thus the openness itself becomes part of the meaning; that is, one has gained the certain yet open meaning which, in turn, enables one to go on.

⁵⁰ The more negative assessment of human opinion is given by Parmenides: βροτῶν δοξᾶς, ταῖς οὐκ ἔνι πίστις ἀληθῆς (B 1, 30), where it is obvious that mortal opinions are not to be trusted because there is no truth in them. Plato contrasts δόξα against ἐπιστήμη (*Theaitetos* 187b 1–9, and more negatively in *Politeia* 506c 5–6), and yet he leaves the possibility that the opinions can also be the real knowledge: ἀληθῆς δόξα ἐπιστήμη εἶναι. (*Theaitetos* 187b 9)

⁵¹ As there are different views and ideas concerning the idea of God. (B 15 and 16) Also, B 38 of Xenophanes shows how relative human knowledge is:

εἰ μὴ χλωρὸν ἔφυσε θεὸς μέλι, πολλὸν ἔφασκον
γλύσσονα σῦκα πέλεσθαι.

⁵² The translation of Leshner:

Let these be accepted, certainly, as like the realities (but ...) (39)

A similar translation is also in Drechsler 1997. This is probably the most difficult fragment of Xenophanes. For a very good discussion of it see L:169–176. The original context (see Plutarch, *Συμποσιακῶν* IX 7, 746 B) does not typically reveal much, if anything.

⁵³ LSJ gives “to be matter of opinion”.

Thus, as Wolfgang Drechsler points out, “we can act as if we had the truth, as if we were right, as long as we remember that we might be wrong”. (1997) Popper calls this kind of discursive situation “critical Pluralism”, which opposes and works against relativism. (1982:176) And this is the last step of the σοφίη of Xenophanes: one should act, and treat the others, in a discourse taking as true and real those presuppositions and opinions which are most convincing, most resembling the truth. The opinions of mortals might not be exact or certain or anything like the truth, but there is no other yardstick than human interaction, that is to say human living together – the polis.⁵⁴ The σοφίη is to know what is *proper* in human living together, in the polis, in order to guarantee the continuous existence of the polis, of human plurality. This kind of σοφίη is what Plato later calls the knowledge of μέτριον, the most important characteristic of the πολιτικός. (*Politikos* 284a 7 – 284c 3)

Xenophanes’ concept of ἀρετή is also a safeguard against the time when man would become the yardstick of everything:

πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἐστὶν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἐστὶν (Protagoras, B 1),

and when δίκη is said to be ἐρίς (Heraclitus, B 80) and war is πάντων πατήρ. (Heraclitus, B 53) It is a safeguard against isolating the human existence into the loneliness of the thinking which claims to know the truth, because for Xenophanes the only yardstick for human beings is human living together. Therefore, to know what is proper, and δίκαια, is to know what is good for the polis. And to know it and to strive for it is what Xenophanes calls σοφίη. Thus the σοφίη of Xenophanes, the way to true ἀρετή, the essence of the true ἀρετή, is what makes the polis and human living together better; and it is its guarantee.

Conclusion

The thought and personality of Xenophanes of Colophon reach us through quite many fragments, and yet it all seems to remain hidden in the times we will never know; it seems to remain in the tradition which is ours but which we cannot fully comprehend any more. But we can still, or only, see a philosopher caught between the times; a philosopher who wanted to change his own contemporary world through a daring and sometimes almost too vehement critique. For it lacked something crucial: a serious philosophy of the true polis. This is Xenophanes’ challenge to his own contemporary world: a new philosophy of the polis. On the one hand, Xenophanes is probably one of the first, if not the first, Greek philosopher to challenge the world, and its ideals, created by Homer. On the other hand, he challenged the thinking of the time still to come: the time of isolating the

⁵⁴ Cf. also Jaeger 1936:235.

human existence into the loneliness of thinking, i.e., he challenged certain characteristics of the thought of Protagoras and Heraclitus.

Xenophanes' main attention and critique is directed towards the spheres of theology and of the political, of the polis. In theological thinking he criticises the anthropomorphic Gods of Homer and Hesiod and, in turn, creates a new image of an all-knowing and all-powerful God who is essentially disconnected from the earthly lives of mortals through total otherness. Xenophanes' critique of Homer does not, however, mean that he did not admit the greatness of Homer. And yet, for him the heroic world of Homer lacked something crucial, something he might have known from his own personal experience: the true and stable polis and the thinking about the true polis. In Xenophanes' philosophy, the polis becomes the central place for mortals, their lives and deeds; it becomes the totality of the human world. God is somewhere else and He is totally different. To fulfil the aim of the polis – the good life –, Xenophanes introduces a new concept of human ἀρετή, we might say: a new concept of moral and personal perfection of man. The essence of this ἀρετή consists mainly of philosophically and morally responsible σοφίη, wisdom which dares to challenge, dares to be different, dares to be theoretical and always tries to know what is just and right, what is proper for a human being. A wisdom which knows, however, its limits and knows that Man is not God, that Man does not live alone. A wisdom which acknowledges that the truth is probably not given for human beings; that the truth cannot be a part of the human world without, however, ever rejecting the truth – this would not be the answer for Xenophanes. The human striving for the truth, the search for knowledge is the answer. A striving which, however, knows that perhaps the totality of the world cannot be explained; certain things, meanings and explanations have to stay open – in order to enable us to go further, search further. This kind of wisdom, the true essence of the human ἀρετή, is essential to the polis, since this makes the polis and the human living together better – and it is a guarantee of the polis, and its true essence.

Address:

Rainer Kattel
 Department of Public Administration and Social Policy
 Ülikooli 18, University of Tartu
 EE-2400 Tartu, Estonia
 e-mail: rainer@physic.ut.ee

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