Xenophanes

Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 570 - 475 BCE) was a wandering poet who left Ionia when the Persians took it and spent the rest of a long life reciting his verses across the Greek world. He is the first Greek thinker whose criticism of religion survives in his own words, and the first to ask how far human knowledge can reach.

Against the poets

Homer and Hesiod, he said, had attributed to the gods everything that is a disgrace among men: theft, adultery and deceit. The gods of the poems were human beings enlarged. Xenophanes pressed the point with an argument that is still quoted: Ethiopians say their gods are dark and snub-nosed, Thracians that theirs have blue eyes and red hair. If horses and oxen could draw, they would draw their gods as horses and oxen. Every people makes its gods in its own image, and that is reason to distrust all of the images.

One god

In place of the Olympian family he described one god, greatest among gods and men, not like mortals in body or in thought. This god sees as a whole, thinks as a whole, hears as a whole, and without effort shakes all things by the thought of his mind. He does not travel about; it is not fitting. Whether this is monotheism or a purified polytheism is disputed, but the direction is clear: divinity is separated from human form and from human weakness.

Nature

Xenophanes noticed sea shells inland and fossil fish in quarries and concluded that the land had once been under the sea and would be again. The sun, he said, is a new fire each day, kindled from gathered sparks, and the rainbow is a cloud. These are guesses, but they are guesses about mechanisms, made from evidence, and offered without appeal to a god.

The limits of knowledge

His most durable sentence concerns knowledge itself. No man has seen, or will ever know, the clear truth about the gods and about everything he speaks of; even if he happened to say what is the case, he would not know it. Seeming is wrought over all. The remedy is not silence but inquiry: the gods did not reveal everything to mortals from the beginning, but in time, by searching, they find out better. That is the earliest statement in Greek of knowledge as a thing that grows.