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PHI 340

Professor Nelson

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## Sentence Outline

Title: The Epistemology of Xenophanes

Intro: How should Xenophanes' epistemology be classified?

Thesis: The main difference in explanations of Xenophanes' writings does not come from different interpretations, but it comes from different understandings of epistemology. What we do have of Xenophanes' writings implies that he considers empirical means the necessary channel for gaining knowledge.

1. Philosophers have studied Xenophanes' epistemology in an attempt to come to a definite conclusion concerning his epistemology.
  - a. Johnathan Barns argues that Xenophanes is incorrectly classified as a skeptic.
    - i. Barns argues that the Presocratics are often misinterpreted as skeptics.
    - ii. Barns points out that Xenophanes does not deny all knowledge, only pure knowledge concerning cosmologies
    - iii. Barns concludes with stating that Xenophanes believed that, if humans want to know anything, they need to learn it through divine sources.
  - b. Robin Attfield attempts to classify Xenophanes' epistemology by studying it alongside another philosopher, Karl Popper.
    - i. Attfield notes that when Xenophanes states that humans cannot know concerning cosmology without divine help, this is actually rationalism not skepticism.
    - ii. Attfield argues that when Xenophanes writes fragment B38, Xenophanes is arguing against epistemology stating that the physical senses are unreliable.
    - iii. Attfield concludes with arguing that Xenophanes is a rationalist because he believes knowledge is independent of human experience and is only given by divine sources.
2. Barns' and Attfield's arguments, though they appear to oppose each other, in reality do not.

- a. Barnes and Attfield seem to be disagreeing on how the various fragments of Xenophanes are interpreted.
  - b. However, rather than their interpretations conflicting, on closer inspection, they appear to differ in their understanding of the differences between empiricism, rationalism, and skepticism.
3. From Xenophanes' remaining fragments concerning epistemology, it is evident that Xenophanes was the ancient equivalent of an empiricist.
- a. In [F39]<sup>1</sup>, Xenophanes wrote that humans learn by making comparisons of physical experiences.
  - b. In text 79<sup>2</sup>, Xenophanes described the senses as deceptive, but as Jonathan Barnes argued, this deception had to do with our knowledge gained of the cosmos, not everyday life (Barnes, 109).
  - c. In fragment [F38]<sup>3</sup>, Xenophanes appears to have been arguing for knowledge gained through empirical experience.

Conclusion: Although there are not many writings available concerning Xenophanes' epistemology, what does exist indicates that Xenophanes argued from an ancient empirical view, and if the differences in epistemology are clearly defined, this understanding becomes clear.

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<sup>1</sup> Graham, Daniel p 127

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.