

Reflections in classical philosophy concerning the superiority of spiritual power vs. physical vigor, by Xenophanes: Frag. 2D = 2W

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Abstract

Xenophanes of Colophon (570-475 BC), a Pre-Socratic philosopher of the Eleatic School, faced life with his outspoken spirit, criticizing any values of his time considered obsolete, such as the anthropomorphic representation of the gods. He was the first philosopher who challenged the sporting value to the spiritual one. Revolutionary and innovative, in his second elegy expresses his preference for spiritual power, and he stands ironical towards the Greeks who give the physical rhyme excessive importance. According to Xenophanes, the athletic victory is simply due to the speed of the feet and does not affect the spiritual life of the city, while, on the contrary, the one who affects the ethical values of society is the one who produces thoughts and is interested in the common good. Obviously Xenophanes feels unjust, and reacts to the great mismatch that exists between the real athletes' offer and the great honors that the society ascribes to them. Characteristically, Euripides will be influenced by Xenophanes' ideas, while Isokrates, as well as other wise and intellectuals of the Classical Ages, will highlight the superiority of spiritual values as compared to athletic offerings, arguing that the greatest spiritual value is wisdom and the resulting benefit.

Keywords: philosophy, bioethics, reception, non-human living beings, moral approach, respect, proper treatment

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Περίληψη

Ο Ξενοφάνης από την Κολοφώνα (570 - 475 π.Χ.), προσωκρατικός φιλόσοφος της Ελεατικής σχολής, αντιμετώπισε τη ζωή με κριτικό πνεύμα, επικρίνοντας με την ιδιαίτερη σατυρική του φλέβα όποιες αξίες της εποχής του θεωρούσε ξεπερασμένες. Ρηξικέλευθος και καινοτόμος, εναντιώνεται στην ανθρωπομορφική παράσταση των θεών, υποστηρίζοντας την πνευματικότητα του ανωτάτου Όντος, που μόνο με την πνευματική του δύναμη τραντάζει το σύμπαν. Ο Ξενοφάνης επισημαίνει την ανωτερότητα των πνευματικών αξιών εν συγκρίσει προς τις σωματικές επιδόσεις και την αθλητική προσφορά. Πιστεύει ότι η μεγαλύτερη αξία στον άνθρωπο είναι ο νους και όχι το σώμα, και εκφράζει απερίφραστα την προτίμησή του στην πνευματική δύναμη, ειρωνεύοντας τους Έλληνες που δίνουν στη σωματική ρώμη υπερβολική σημασία. Αυτό συμβαίνει επειδή, κατά τον Ξενοφάνη η αθλητική νίκη οφείλεται απλά στην ταχύτητα των ποδιών και δεν επιδρά στην πνευματική ζωή της πόλης, ενώ, αντίθετα, εκείνος που επηρεάζει τις ηθικές αξίες της κοινωνίας είναι αυτός που παράγει διανοήματα και ενδιαφέρεται για το κοινό καλό. Προφανώς ο Ξενοφάνης νοιώθει να αδικείται, και αντιδρά για την μεγάλη αναντιστοιχία που υπάρχει ανάμεσα στην πραγματική προσφορά των αθλητών και τις μεγάλες τιμές που της αποδίδει το κοινωνικό σύνολο. Είναι χαρακτηριστικό ότι αργότερα ο Ευριπίδης θα επηρεαστεί από τις ιδέες αυτές του Ξενοφάνη, ενώ και ο Ισοκράτης, καθώς και άλλοι σοφοί και διανοούμενοι, θα επαναλάβουν την ίδια ιδέα, υποστηρίζοντας ότι η μεγαλύτερη πνευματική αξία είναι η σωφροσύνη και η απ' αυτήν προκύπτουσα ωφέλεια.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: Ξενοφάνης, σοφία, αθλητισμός, πνεύμα, σώμα, αξίες, αθλητική νίκη, κοινό καλό

1. Introduction

Xenophanes of Colophon (570 - 475 B.C.), a Pre-Socratic philosopher of the Eleatic School, is an “*itinerant minstrel*”, who roamed for many years in the western Mediterranean and ended up in Elea of Southern Italy. Xenophanes lived his life with his perspicacious spirit, criticizing any theories and morals of his era that he considered obsolete. Preserved elegies and excerpts of his satirical poems under the title *Silloi*, reveal a groundbreaking and highly innovative mind, surely a creation of the Ionia region, which during the 6th century B.C. had become the cradle of philosophy and sciences. He evolved into a high-level critical thinker, with a humanistic moral perception. Karl Popper, in his work *The World of Parmenides*, devotes his essay *The Unknown Xenophanes. An attempt to establish his greatness*,

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arguing that Xenophanes was very close to be a precursor and dynamic representative of the main ideas of European enlightenment.⁴

Xenophanes opposed polytheism and gives a monotheistic theory about deity. He supported the rationality of supreme power, which led him in (a) the rejection of the anthropomorphism expressed by Homer and Hesiod, (b) the discovery of monotheism, and, finally, (c) to the clairvoyance that God is not alike in body and intellect with man.⁵ This completely new theory emerged in Xenophanes, according to Popper, as a solution to the greatest of all problems, the problem of the universe, that is, as a revelation of the problem of the cosmic universe. The spirituality of the supreme Being, which is found in nature, is, according to Xenophanes, the nature itself which is so imposing, that only with its spiritual power rocks the universe.⁶

Xenophanes, among others, opposes also those who admit the soothsaying theories, while fooling the Orphic and the Pythagoreans for reincarnation.⁷ Neither the bacchanalian deflections of Bacchus' believers,⁸ nor the illusionist Epimenides,⁹ do not elude from the wonderful quip of this bright mind, of the closed in on itself character.¹⁰ His sharp eye has noticed anything remarkable of the countries he passed, the differences of the people's morals, their natural quirks, even the fossils of marine animals in Syracuse, Malta and Faro. These findings draw important conclusions, while formulating theories that extend to many areas, showing his wide range of knowledge, for which the modern but younger Heraclitus accuses him.¹¹

Among the multiplicity of phenomena Xenophanes' look distinguishes the spiritual unity of the world. All of his poetry is reformation and confession, while in his elegies,

⁴ Karl R. Popper (1998), *The World of Parmenides: Essays on the Pre-Socratic Enlightenment*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 33 ff.

⁵ Xenophanes, Frag. 10-14. See William Keith Chambers Guthrie (1962), *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Volume I (Chapter 6), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 360-402.

⁶ Xen. Frag. 21 D.

⁷ Xen. Frag. 7.

⁸ Xen. Frag. 17. See Geoffrey Stephen Kirk, John Earle Raven, and Malcolm Schofield (1983), *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd ed., (Chapter 5), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 163-180.

⁹ Xen. Frag. 20.

¹⁰ See more in: *Eduard Zeller (1963), Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung, 6 Bde, 5. Aufl. Leipzig, (Reprint Hildesheim 1963). Zeller-Nestle (1928), Grundriss der Geschichte der Griechischen Philosophie, Leipzig: Reisland.*

¹¹ Xen. Frag. 40.

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which are intended for a happy feast, he opposes the fairy tales of the old world, institutes a religiousness based upon just actions.¹² He finds words so as to shed the innocent joy of life,¹³ and to condemn the humble avarice,¹⁴ thus exposing his personal conviction to the essence of the world. The basic concept of his philosophy concerning the worldview is the unity of all beings.¹⁵ This "*everything is one*" is for him the deity, indestructible, always alike to herself, that is, unchangeable.

From his words, one perceives that he distinguishes the senses from the sensual perception, recognizing the relative nature of the latter,¹⁶ and first pointing to the supremacy of the intellect in front of the uncertainty of the feeling. Xenophanes first formed the idea of spiritual progress in the evolvent of mankind. While popular beliefs considered the most important assets of civilization as gifts of worthy gods, he first understood that they were creations of man himself.¹⁷ Assessing, in fact, the virtues of the social man, he claims that the greatest virtue is "*wisdom*".

2. Material and Method

For the analysis of Xenophanes' philosophical approach concerning the comparison between spiritual power vs. physical vigor, it is used the 2D-2W fragment of his elegy. The method used for this study was the philosophical one. Researchers attempted to set from the outset the study's limitations so that they become the main guiding principles of the study, as philosophical research depends to a large extent on the framework determined by the researcher himself. Xenophanes' views and studies have attempted to analyze the particular personality of the particular philosopher and to identify the place and time related factors which influence his opinion and the development of his interest in social evolution. Achieving the above goal was done using descriptive logic. With descriptive logic and morality, which deals with what is right and what is wrong with the particular social structure being studied, Xenophanes' own particular views on the superiority of the spiritual offering towards the physical one have been investigated. Subsequently, the authors, using inductive logic, sought to answer the central research question, whether these perceptions are the reason for a timeless reflection.

¹² Xen. Frag. 1.

¹³ Xen. Frag. 22. See G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven, and M. Schofield, op. cit.

¹⁴ Xen. Frag. 21.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1 5 p. 986 b. 18 ff. Plato, *Sophists* 242 d.

¹⁶ Xen. Frag. 38, 36. See W.K.C. Guthrie, op. cit.

¹⁷ Xen. Frag. 18.

3. Analysis - synthesis and Results

Physical strength or spiritual novelty? Philosophic view of the argument. Since the 7th century B.C. Tyrtaeus expressed concerns and corresponding views in this field. He, in expressing the Spartan ideal, argues in his poems that various performances, such as the speed of the runner being tested in athletic competitions, physical strength in wrestling, and others, are rejected as insignificant. The seeming virtues are of no value, but value for the "common good" is only the prowess of the fighter who defends his homeland.¹⁸

Albin Lesky observes that some reflections on the views of Tyrtaeus are also found in Solon, whose basic idea of morality is *the healthy measure and the right meditation*.¹⁹ Solon, according to Diodorus Siculus and Diogenes Laertius argues that boxers, runners and other athletes do not offer anything to save cities, but only those who differ in wisdom and virtue can preserve their homeland when it is in danger.²⁰ He also does not think it is fair of the Athenians to honor the athletes only - even if Solon himself has established rewards for the Olympic champions - ignoring those who are sacrificed in the wars.²¹ According to *Lucian*, Solon himself explains to Anacharsis that the excessive exercise of young people in Athens seeks to make them useful in the wars, so that with their physical strength they are able to grab an enemy or carry their injured friend.²² And, it is to be understood that the state, honoring the winners with so many prizes, such as a spectacular return to the homeland in tripartite chariots, setting up statues at the expense of the state, delegating the presidency to public games and theaters, free food in the *Prytaneion*, and other public honors, was aiming precisely for that objective.²³

Xenophanes, similar to Tyrtaeus, does not welcome the virtues that other Greeks like, such as wrestling, boxing, racing. Instead, he proposes "wisdom", which offers the state a greater benefit because *its treasures become bigger*, but also because wisdom contributes more to an organized life than the sports, which are so much admired by

¹⁸ See more in Bruno Snell (1975, 4tte), *Die Entdeckung des Geistes. Studien zur Entstehung des europäischen Denkens bei den Griechen*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.

¹⁹ Albin Lesky (1971, 3tte), *Geschichte der Griechischen Literatur*, Bern und München: Franke Verlag.

²⁰ Diodorus Siculus, 9.2.5, Diogenes Laertius, 1.56.

²¹ Diogenes Laertius, 1.55.

²² *Lucian, Anacharsis or Athletics*, 28.

²³ Op. cit. 36.

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the people.²⁴ As a criterion of virtue he considers the interest of the city, hence the *xynon esthlon*, as Tyrtaeus calls the common good. By rejecting man's athletic effort, he thinks that wisdom is the only virtue and the greatest asset in human life.

Xenophanes points out the supremacy of spiritual power over body vigor,²⁵ and criticizes the problem of excessive prizes for athletes to the detriment of the people of the spirit. As it appears in his 2nd elegy (Frag. 2D = 2W), he is a fierce opponent of the prizes that cities attribute to athletes.²⁶ And not only expresses its preference for spiritual value as compared to physical, but he is also ironic to the Greeks who give the physical vigor excessive importance.

According to Xenophanes, the athletic victory is simply due to the speed of the legs, and it does not affect the spiritual life of the city. On the contrary, the one who, in his opinion, influences the ethical values of society is one who has a strong mind, produces thoughts and interests for the common benefit. When an athlete is declared a champion, at pentathlon, or at speed running race, or at wrestling, or at boxing, or at pankration, or at chariot races, he becomes reputed within the city, he is offered honorary position, is publicly fed by the Prytaneion and generally receives many prizes. However, Xenophanes argues, that the athlete does not deserve all these prizes. Spiritual art is far superior to a robust body. The practice of delivering such prizes to those who have physical strength is unreasonable and unfair, as the mighty body is placed higher than a sacred art. Assuming that a worthy athlete is among the people, this will not better regulate the life of the city, nor will it improve things, as common wealth is not reinforced by a sporting victory.²⁷

Xenophanes, with his reference to the 'wealth' of a city, generally means its moral and spiritual substance and its refulgence. Some Scholars interpret Xenophanes' critical attitude towards athletes as a result of the fact that he feels wronged. He complains, therefore, that he does not consider it fair to reward physical power instead of spiritual offering. He knows the excessive prizes of a victory, and he reacts to the mismatch between the real offering of the athletes and the great prizes attributed to them by the

²⁴ Xen. Frag. 2, 19-22.

²⁵ See Konstantina Gongaki (2003), *The conceptions of the ancient Greeks concerning Athletics*, Athens: Typothito - G. Dardanos (in greek), pp. 264 ff.

²⁶ Xen. Frag. 2 (2D=2W). See: Cecil Maurice Bowra (1938), Xenophanes and the Olympic Games, *American Journal of Philology*, 59: 257-279. Miroslav Marcovich (1978), Xenophanes on Drinking Parties and Olympic Games, C.S., 3: 1-26. Harold A. Harris (1964), *Greek Athletes and Athletics*, Bloomington and London, p. 47.

²⁷ Xen. Frag. 2. See James H. Leshner (1992), *Xenophanes of Colophon. Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary*, Toronto - Buffalo - London: University of Toronto Press (Phoenix Presocratics, vol. iv), xvi+266 pp.

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community. In fact, it is due to Xenophanes' vision of *the supremacy of mind vs of the uncertainty of feeling*, which he first pointed out, clearly projecting as the founder of a rational enlightenment, as Zeller-Nestle said.

The criticism, then, on the same issue is not enough for Xenophanes' remarks. In contrast, Euripides, another challenger and innovator, influenced by Xenophanes according to Athenaeus, sharpens criticism. In the satirical drama *Autolykos* makes harsh accusations against the athletes, describing them as *the worse of evils that exist in Greece* and accusing them, unjustly, that they are not beneficial to the city, neither in war time nor in periods of peace.²⁸ The main expresor of the view that the spiritual values, and especially the wisdom and its resulting benefits, are more important and lasting than the development of physical strength, is Socrates. He does not underestimate the offering of physical strength, at a time when the resolution of differences between city-states is done through war and in fact the athlete reflects the heroic ideal of the era. Knowing, of course, that wisdom is the highest value, in his *Apology* he claims his feeding in Prytaneion for his spiritual offering in Athens.²⁹

Plato, then referring to the *guardians* of his ideal *Republic*, defends the perspective that superior of all are the martial athletes who are in charge of protecting the city.³⁰ The ideal, however, of "*kalokagathia*" (nobility, goodness), which is a basic element of Athenian civilization, consists of the desired harmonization of the soul and body.³¹ According to Glenn Morrow,³² whenever Plato decreases the value of physical activity as an attitude, this is not the expression of a mental disdain for one-dimensional body bravery, but a dislike of the professionalism of Greek sports during the 4th B.C. century.

Apart from the abovementioned, Xenophanes' dissatisfaction with the exorbitant honors towards the athletes is reinforced, by Isocrates, who in his *Panegyricus* writes about the Olympic Games in 380 B.C. and reiterates the problem of providing high wages to physical strength, in contrast with the non-existent recognition of those who cultivate their spiritual powers for the general good.³³ But *Diogenes the Cynic*, Plutarch, Philostratus, Galen, Lucian, are some personalities of ancient intelligentsia who hold a similar attitude. Every intellectual proposes another value from the total

²⁸ Euripides, *Autolykos*, frag. 282 Nauck. From Athenaeus: *Deipnosophists*, 10.413 f - 414 c.

²⁹ Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*, 26 c-e.

³⁰ Plato, *Timaeus* 87 c - 88 c.

³¹ Plato, *Republic* C 402 a.

³² Glenn Morrow (1960), *Plato's Gretan City. A Historical Interpretation of the Laws*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 332.

³³ Isocrates, *Panegyricus* 1-2.

of spiritual values, depending on his general philosophical view. Xenophanes and Euripides, for example, as they criticize every traditional value, are expected to expand their arrows in the field of sports as well. There are also others among the critics who belong to The Second Sophistic School and therefore express the tendency to return to the ancient romance.³⁴

4. Conclusion

Most of the above mentioned, however, criticize athletes for their pratfall, but they also use them as an example for the effort they make to win. Critical comments against sport were, in the end, stereotypes that did not cause any harm to the glamor of the institution. Thus, the critique finally confirms the ideal of the "*kalos* and *agathos*" (beautiful and good) citizen, who, by harmonizing the needs of his spirit and body in a composition, gives value to his constituent parts.

In general, the aggressive, however, and radical reclassification of the scale of traditional values Xenophanes attempted, in fact, highlights his great concern for the good rule of law (*eunomia*) of the city. Behind the victory in the Panhellenic athletic games he does not see the revelation of divine favor, such as Pindar³⁵ and some modern athletic scholars. With Xenophanes the new philosophical education vigorously asserts its position in the state. It is bad for the individual, for the state and for every society to over-honor the corporality of man and to ignore his spiritual existence. It is not fair for lustiness and physical achievement "to stand in front", while *sofia* (wisdom), philosophical knowledge, spiritual culture are neglected or degraded. Therefore, the issue of the athletic life and spiritual life that Xenophanes puts forward seems the same as today. The City itself, the "common good", and the search for the work's appraisal that contributes to the city's bliss, is the criterion of Xenophanes' values. This does not seem to be anything else than the state's attempt to change a world of individual consciousness and one-dimensional people, as described by Marcuse,³⁶ with a new one - through education - of collective consciousness and respect for the bicomponent nature of man.

³⁴ Graham Anderson (1993), *The Second Sophistic: A Cultural Phenomenon in the Roman Empire*, London, New York: Routledge, pp. 69-86.

³⁵ Konstantina Goggaki (2004), *The Athletic Victory as a Value in the Pindaric Odes. Nikephoros*, 17: 123-134.

³⁶ See more in: Herbert Marcuse (1964 1st), *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Konstantina Gongaki (2013), *The Olympic Ideal. Global crisis and Perspectives*, Athens: Gutenberg (in greek), pp. 457 ff, 484 ff.

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