

12-1961

Xenophanes and the Axiomatization of the God-Concept

Harald A.T. Reiche
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Follow this and additional works at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp>

 Part of the [Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons](#), [Ancient Philosophy Commons](#), and the [History of Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reiche, Harald A.T., "Xenophanes and the Axiomatization of the God-Concept" (1961). *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter*. 64.

<https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp/64>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter by an authorized administrator of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

Xenophanes and the Axiomatization of the God-Concept¹

The contrast between Anaximander's speculative-deductive approach to cosmology and Xenophanes' quasi-intuitive method of utterance, centering on the religious criterion "befitting the sublimity of godhead" - a criterion of incalculable importance for all subsequent theological concept-formation - has been familiar for some time.² It is the limited objective of the following remarks to attempt an explanation of this phenomenon by analyzing the precise meaning of Xenophanes' key-term epiprepein. As a result, the contrast in question will turn out to be a matter more of appearance than of reality, for implicit in the use of prepein and its synonyms is an impressive array of logical operations, of which Xenophanes quite consciously availed himself.

Within prepein, whether used of men or of gods, three grades of meaning can be discerned, a descriptive, a descriptive-predictive, and a normative one,³ hereafter respectively labelled prepein₁, prepein₂, prepein₃. First, there is the purely descriptive "to be conspicuous, outstanding" in respect of some activity, as in Iliad XII 104 ho d'eprepe kai dia panton and Eurip., Hel. 216 Zeus prepon di'aitheros.⁴ Even here the four semantic components constant throughout all grades of prepein can be apprehended: superlativeness of each relevant power-display (aristeuein), next as its conditiones sine qua non: spatio-temporal determinacy, radiance, and intersubjective verifiability (by means remaining to be specified). Radiance and public visibility are here treated as two complementary aspects of the same event. Grammatically, the agent functions as the subject; the activity through which he excels as part of the predicate.

A given superlative feat of aristeuein is adjudged "like the agent" (prepon₂) provided past repetition (historical continuity) has evinced it as (a) characteristic (eoikos)⁵, and (b) prospectively probable (eikos). Here by a kind of qualitative synecdoche (superlativus pro toto) both agent and witness accept the highest common denominator of past periodic attainment as the eikon of future predicted behavior. Thus, continuity in the sense of periodic repetition joins excellence as a second premise, compliance with both of which is the condition of the agent's self-identity. The attendant grammatical shift in the center of gravity is instructive: the adverbial modifier of prepein is now elevated from predicate to subject-status, and the erstwhile personal subject demoted to object-status. Witness and agent both recede behind the periodic epiphany of objective excellence, conceived as an interpersonal field, whose unity cuts across the numerical duality of agent and witness, objective and subjective, concrete and abstract. This remains true regardless of whether the areté is formulated in positive or in negative terms (i.e. through the contradictory of its contrary). As for the witness, the Panhellenic consensus that, qua reality-oriented, logos on principle terminates in, is consummated by, ergon entails the obligation (see below, p. 3) that visual-verbal recognition will be followed by recognition in deed, a deed as much "like" (prepon₂) the areté it honors as it is "like" the logos it completes. The relation between the agent's deed and the witness' visual-verbal-practical recognition, then, is much more intimate than would be the case if e.g. the witness' recognition were originally quite distinct and only ex post facto pulled across a logical gap into semantic orbit around the agent's excellence so as to participate in it. As it is, the communicatio idiomatum between recognition and excellence is in fact grounded in their intrinsic, a priori interconnection. Needless to say, this shortcircuiting of superlative operari and percipi must not be

misunderstood as implying a metaphysical presupposition about an inherent identity of *esse* and *operari* and hence of *esse* and *percipi*. What it does imply is not a metaphysical presupposition but a moral ideal whose applicability is further restricted (a) to the obligations of an elite and (b) to at best periodic, i.e. intermittent, discontinuous realization.

Prepein₂ turns into prepein₃, when both witness and agent accept the public memory of the agent's superlative past record and the extrapolation to his future record based upon it as definitively "like" (prepon₂) his true or essential self, hypostatize it, and by applying the Law of the Excluded Middle make it a criterion normatively binding on all of his future performance. At this point it becomes equivalent to the straight future indicative, in which a predication about lawful behavior conceals its sense of the contingency of that compliance. There are, of course, no outward characteristics signaling the shift from prepein₂ to 3. It has to be inferred from the context, in particular from evidence that the Law of the Excluded Middle is at work. Yet, notwithstanding the tendency toward logical formalization (conspicuous in Plato's *Eutyphro*⁸, the *typoi peri theologias* of *Rep.* II, and in Aristotle's *De Philosophia*⁸), prepein₃ invariably indicates that a definition of essence has been inductively arrived at (i.e. by synthesis *a posteriori*, not *a priori*) and that, on principle, it remains rooted in and related to direct experience and the memory thereof.

Formally, then, the movement from prepein₁ to 3 consummates a process which begins by (1) the description of a feat of prepein₁, proceeds to select periodic repetition of that feat (prepeina) as (2) the criterion of relevance and intelligibility of past, present, and future and (3) the basis for (3) an analytical definition. Finally, with the conversion of prepein₂ into 3, the analytical definition so obtained is (4) applied to the problems posed by traditional mythology, with the result (5) that a series of specific negations rounds out the definition already obtained. For the purposes of this paper, that process may usefully be thought of as "axiomatization", resulting as it does, in a coherent listing of those mutually independent excellences or properties which are "like godhead".

As we shall see, the appeal to direct experience and the memory thereof contains a potential source of error (pseudos, a term which does not specify the distinction between unintentional untruth and deliberate lie). For *ex hypothesi*, direct experience and memory must agree as to the identity (prepein₂) of feats periodically repeated in the past. Where they do not, direct evidence and recent memory (cf. historie!) must be allowed to overrule the older memory-version, even when tradition-sanctioned as ~~late~~ Homer and Hesiod. For the eyewitness, of course, the *arete* of truthfulness is constitutionally bound up with and "like" (prepon₂) his *de facto* involvement with, and verbal certification of, a given power-epiphany as objective. Objective radiance, objective-subjective visibility, and "correct" (orthos) subjective visual-verbal acknowledgment are short-circuited: they are distinct without being separate. Whence prepein₂ and 3 must simultaneously be understood as governing a *verbum sciendi* to be mentally supplied for the witness: prepei tina equals at the same time prepei tina onomazesthai ktl. A good negative example of this ostensibly ambiguous telescoping of objective fidelity and subjective veracity is to *d'aprepeos agoreueis* (Hymn. Herm. 272). A good positive example, Xenophanes DK 21 G 1 *deitai gar ho theos, eiper est' orthos theos, oudenos*, where the gods' compliance with their own past record and the human witness' reflection on that record are conflated.

Sensation being inherently involuntary, the question of contingency and hence of veracity and justice, as parts of the witness' own areté, cannot even arise here. It arises only at the point where the witness is presented with the practical choice of complying or not complying with ~~that~~ what is "like the verifiable fact of his political interdependence" (prepon = social obligation) with his fellows. The choice, that is, involves the option whether or not to match his visual-verbal with practical acceptance of reality such that the deeds are at once "like" the words and "like" the reality formulated by the words. The extent to which the witness complies or fails to comply with this particular social obligation becomes an index of his ~~own~~ areté in the eyes of still other witnesses, chief among whom, of course, as the most interested party, the agent himself. His "jealous" concern ~~in~~ this point is entirely within the area of justice. The "third man" regress potentially implicit in Xenophanes' confrontation in B 2 of his sophia concerning what is like godhead and therefore like man's practical recognition thereof, on the one hand, and what is like godhead according to the Homer-cultists and therefore like man's practical recognition thereof according to the sports-cultists, on the other, is instructive. ~~Thus~~ His words and deeds successively define ~~what~~ the quality of the witness' "assimilation" to the properties of the agent's witnessed excellence. Thus, on principle at least, the identity of the defining properties of the agent's excellence can always be inferred from an inspection of the properties of the logos and erga of a truthful witness' recognition, provided, as earlier noted, that this recognition is based on and/or verifiable by firsthand experience and is not merely based on memory unchecked against such experience.

The witness' response in both word and deed to one or all members of the class of power-epiphanies, labelled theos by virtue of their superlative quality and attributed to the kreittones, forms no exception. Here the assimilation of the witness' recognition in word and deed to the divine agent's eidé and aretai takes the familiar liturgical forms. Verbal assimilation becomes naming, listing of epithets and aretai, and prayer; practical assimilation that of such cultic dromena as pompe, hymnos, and thysia. Since Pythagoras, in addition, homoiôsis theô takes the form of the ethical assimilation of one's entire bios. Thus, the communicatio idiomatum of what is "like" a truthful witness and what is "like" a divine agent, as desiderated by the homoiôsis aretêi ideal, is no more than a special case of the intrinsic overlap, regardless of context, of excellence and recognition. Conversely, the application of "like godhead" both to the properties of the divine agent and to those of the human witness, as well as the unmistakable background-presence of the meaning "like the divine agent" even in cases where "like godhead" appears predicated of purely human, liturgical or even non-liturgical thought and action is evidence not of simple ambiguity (homonymy) but rather of the identical reappearance of the logically prior meaning in each of the other uses (= what G.E.L. Owen calls "focal meaning"), which thereby become pros hen kai mian tina physin legomena.

All recognition of what excellences are "like" an agent entail matching deeds on the part of the witness, regardless whether the agent is human or divine. Yet it is only in cases where the agent is designated by a class-concept (e.g. theos, doulos etc.) rather than by a personal name that the combination "like the agent" freezes into a fixed, quasi-formulaic compound (like theoprepes, douloprepes etc.) explicitly transferable to the witness' own expected deeds. While Ignatius is to use theoprepes in the sense of "like Christ", there appear to be no instances, prior to the generic use of Caesar and Karl in Russian, German, and Hungarian in the early mediaeval period, of combining a personal name with prepes into a fixed compound. Such combinations uniformly remained implicit (cf. the Meleager-myth in Iliad IX).

Now since the witness is ontologically co-constitutive of any, including divine, areté, the objectivity of the properties recognized remains ex hypothesi a function of their "likeness" to the properties recognizable by, because continuous with, those composing the areté of, human observers. In short, even the superlative limit-case, divine excellence, remains subject to the conditions of verification implicit in prepein₂. Thus, the very logic of prepein which enables Xenophanes to demythologize the mythological god-concept, is seen at the same time to define the absolute limits beyond which de-anthropomorphisation cannot inherently go. To go farther would be possible on either of two options. Either divine essence would have to be exalted above some or all of its ~~witnessed~~ aretai and so redefine prepein to mean not the "likeness" of the excellence witnessed to the divine ~~essence~~ essence, but the likeness of some properties deduced by pure a priori synthesis to the properties of that essence. Or, alternatively, the verification-criterion would have to be redefined to include the possibility of aretai which are "like" the divine agent yet "unlike" a (present or past) human agent. The first of these options was to be exploited, albeit partially and negatively, by Epicureans and Sceptics; the second, in the form of special revelation, by Biblical theology.

It was noted earlier that the "likeness" of the witness' visual-verbal recognition of a given power epiphany, unlike its practical recognition, can never become an issue. For, however superlative the excellence witnessed, it is always verifiable by present evidence. Now it is only in cases where there is a clear conflict between such evidence and alleged memories of visual-verbal recognition of earlier phases of the same excellence that it can become an issue. Barring either of the above two options, this is notoriously the case with the tradition-hallowed and authority-sanctioned mythology of Homer and Hesiod. Yet even here the very logic of prepein₂ and ₃, which stipulates the absolute continuity of past, present, and future periodic superlative performance, entails that the present and recent be made the standard of the more remote. The issue, then, between Xenophanes and Homer turns not on moral content primarily at all, but on verifiability. It is trivializing the real issue, therefore, if one thinks of it in terms of either of the traditional alternatives, the sociologizing and the intellectualizing one. According to the first, Xenophanes' civic Sunday school morality protests with righteous indignation against the loose morals of a decadent Olympian aristocracy (so roughly Otto). According to the second, Xenophanes attacks the obscurantist mythology of political reaction in the name of enlightened, individual rationalism (so roughly Snell). Surely, prepein holds the key to a true understanding. It contains the appeal to cumulative experience (as do eoiken, oiden, and historié), although formally hypostatized (prepein₃) and materially identified with that experience of corporate, nomomorphic interdependence whose political and cosmic implications had been fructified before Xenophanes by Solon and Anaximander respectively. A specifically moral connotation accrues to this basic experience of the universal reality of Law only per accidens; Xenophanes criticizes the gods' immorality not because it is immoral but because even when moral, e.g. at the level of the Homeric ~~gods~~ gods' criticism of divine conduct for being inconsistent with their own individual records, it is still only individual instead of contextual; because instead of penetrating to the inter- and super-individual reality of Law, where morality properly (i.e. poli-tically) speaking begins, Homer and Hesiod remain at the aesthetic surface. Thus they are guilty of errors of fact, first of all, and only secondarily of errors of value. It is their individualizing, aesthetic definition of excellence which renders their accounts both superficial and obsolete, compared to the new contextual level of discussion; just as the heroic-aristocratic definition of excellence is obsolete compared to the new corporate ethos of the polis.

Interpreted in terms of the excellence-recognition logic contained in prepin₂, Xenophanes B 23 (heis theos ktl.) states that a single, superlative power-epiphany has been and still is being recognized as "like" an (as yet unidentified) divine agent⁶, just as "walking up and down" has been and still is being recognized as "not like" this agent according to B 26. Notice, however, that verbal recognition of the fact that singularity and superlativeness among gods and men are "like the divine agent" is coupled with the simultaneous denial that his appearance and thoughts bear any "likeness" to those of men (outi homoiōs ktl.). Now in what if any meaningful sense can Xenophanes assert that the witnesses can recognize the properties of the agent's appearance and thinking (and a fortiori his singularity and superlativeness) as "like" the agent's essence yet simultaneously "unlike" properties familiar to man? The examples selected make it plain that what is at issue is not merely the witness' practical inability to match an antecedent visual-verbal recognition. What is at stake is quite unmistakably the primary act of visual-verbal recognition itself. B 24 and 25 prove that there is no need to modify our earlier reservations concerning the relevance to Xenophanes of total transcendence and/or special revelation. What visual-verbal recognition does clearly identify is the existence, qualitative identity, and superior intensity of the excellences and qualities concerned. What, in the unique case of the supreme divine agent it in effect fails to be able to match, except asymptotically, is the precise measure of the qualitative supraeminence of the seeing, thinking, hearing, and effecting involved. This failure is the exact measure of divine non-anthropomorphism. To do justice to this precise area of non-anthropomorphism (sc. to the outi...homoios of B 23) Xenophanes allows for a type of ^{positive} predication which though formally exhaustive is yet materially incomplete, through no fault of the witness. This takes its place besides straight positive predication as in B 23,1 and straight negative ~~practical~~ predication as in the anti-mythological B 12; B 1,21 and elsewhere. Certainly, if the "probabilistic" disclaimer of certainty concerning "the gods and all things mentioned" in B 34 is to be taken as applicable to the supreme god - and there is ~~not~~ no necessity for doing so - it cannot be read as anything more than a restatement in different words of our inability to match our formally exhaustive and certain, positive predications about the supreme divine agent by precise specification of the exact degree of his qualitative supremacy. Nothing in the language used about him in B 23-26 suggests that the probabilism of B 34 (if indeed that is the meaning of the fragment, and that is by no means certain: see below) is meant to apply here.

Now just as persistent inability or refusal to recognize (we might say "face") the supreme reality, visually-verbally and a fortiori in practice (i.e. in human political existence)², is bound to end in disaster, so theological and political consistency with the supreme reality is the very condition of eunomie and prosperity. Contrasting the two differential sets of possible verbal and practical attitudes to this supreme reality, Xenophanes obtains the following analogy. The Homer-cultists' verbal pseudo-recognition of what excellences are "like" the gods is to the sport-cultists' practical assimilation to that pseudo-reality³, as Xenophanes' sophie concerning the true nature of godhead (the supreme god and the other gods) is to practical recognition thereof in terms of eunomie⁴. Notice that the pseudo-excellences, both divine and human, cited are all individual, whereas the actual, true ones are all inter-individual and supra-individual.

Is it possible to be more specific? Certainly the 1:1 correspondence of verbal and practical recognition to the agent's excellence justifies endowing the supreme divine agent with the model of human eunomie. This receives independent confirmation from the fact that

all of the properties or excellences which Xenophanes visually-verbally recognizes as "like" the supreme divine agent are uniquely applicable to Dike and Nomos Basileus : majestic firstness, immutability (as compatible with the mutability of the parts as Heraclitus' Logos), synaesthetic omniscience^s (i.e. universal application) and effortless (i.e. automatic) enforcement^s. Thus, "law-likeness", nomomorphism, emerges as one of the essential features of this supreme divine agent, a nomomorphism which the analysis of prepein has shown to be meant in the sense of "periodically verifiable visual eminence". At least in outline, then, we have here the answer to the ultimate question of what manner of subject satisfies the minimal specifications listed. It must, at least, be a cosmic Law ~~itself~~, verifiable in terms of specific, superlative, periodically self-imposing astronomical and meteorological events, such as e.g. the heliacal risings and settings of the constellations, the equinoxes, solar eclipses (? B 19), etc. ¹⁶

By the same token, the subsidiary gods would turn out to be the astral bodies taken separately, fixed stars, planets, sun, and moon, as well as (in view of Xenophanes' notorious refusal to disjoin astronomy and meteorology) the various elements. If so, B 18 with its "progress" doctrine would acquire the perfectly astronomical sense that it is only over a time-span equivalent to a full cycle (naturally different from star to star) that the star-gods and element-gods reveal what is "like" their proper aretai. And the probabilistic B 34, whose relevance to the predications concerning the supreme god was called into doubt above, could (the doxographers to the contrary notwithstanding) be taken as a statement of uncertainty ~~in~~ astronomical-meteorological details/contrasting with the almost dogmatic certainty concerning the fact and basic nature of cosmic Law itself.¹⁸

Now the wording of B 11,1 implies that the agents to which Homer and Hesiod falsely attribute certain things are identical with Xenophanes' "gods", i.e., differently put, that Xenophanes took for granted that mythology either ignored or incompetently distorted its astronomical-meteorological referent. If the latter, the mythologists' failure would be: not to include the Law of universal interdependence with superlativeness and periodic recurrence as sign-posts of significant information.

To conclude, then, inasmuch Xenophanes rests his axiomatization of the god-concept on the logic of "likeness" (prepein_{2,3}) implicit in the Greek correlation of aretê and time, he rests his case for an idealistic, nomomorphic revision of theology and human society on a correspondence-theory of truth, whose referent is periodically verifiable as superlatively powerful and universally binding.

Harald A.T. Reiche
Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Footnotes

- 1 This paper utilizes material from the second chapter of my forthcoming book A History of the Categories "theoprepes" and "hieroprepes" from Xenophanes to Gregory of Nyssa, as desiderated by Jaeger, The Theology etc. (Oxf'd UP, 1947) 211 n 56; cf. idem, Scripta Minora (Roma, 1960) 480-81. Hence illustrative material from later periods is avoided; familiarity with the standard editions, commentaries, and secondary works taken for granted; De MXG discounted; polemical references suppressed.
- 2 See Jaeger, Theol. 48 - 50; cf. Paideia XIX I 213; 402 n 71.
- 3 Cf. Pohlenz, GGN '33, 53 ff à propos of Homer and tragedy, yet without correlation with aretè-time nexus and theology.
- 4 Krepein therefore, should be included among the radiance-terminology cited in Bultmann, Philol. 97, 1948, 2 nl.
- 5 The perfectum praesentis well conveys the time-dimension of knowledge.
- 6 Surely, these verbal arguments remain grounded in the experience of the Socratic existence (Phaedo 97 d ff.).
- 7 Cf. the mēden eoikota of 377 e with DK 21 B 35 eoikota tois etymoisi.
- 8 Jaeger, Arist. 158 points to the involvement of the arg ex grad., the root of the ontological argument, with the cosmological one .
- 9 Cf. my book Empedocles' Mixture, Eudoxan Astronomy, and Aristotle's Connate Pneuma (Amsterdam, 1960) 135 (Addendum to p. 128 n 6).
- 10 Right until the dignum et iustum of the Christian liturgy and beyond.
- 11 Iliad XXI 379-80, cf. Apollo, ibid. 463.
- 12 Notice the primary reality-orientation implicit interms like chrēston (B 1, 23), anōpheles (B 3, 1). In Rep. II 382 d chrēsison (said of the positive probability we strive for in reconstructing the past) carries overtones of divine favor, as against blabē.
- 13 B 10 suggests that the ideal of physical prowess as well as moral deviations are forms of this false practical recognition.
- 14 Acc. to Helian XII 59, Pythagoras had motivated the ethical exhortation to the (inter-individual !) virtues of truthfulness and euergetein by saying that they eoike tois theois. It is tempting to think of these as part of Xenophanes' ideal, too. See above, Note 9.
- 15 Solon had been the first to transfer this predicate from Zeus to Dike.
- 16 The case against assuming spherical shape seems overwhelming : see most recently Untersteiner, ed. Senofane (Florence 1955) lxx - lxxvi. Aristotle's famous gloss eis ton holon ouranon apoblepsas ktl. (Met. A 986 b 18) is no counter-argument and must, I think, be understood as rooted in the Academic usage of ouranos in De Phil. I as at once superlative and general (see book (above, Note 9) 111-12; 116-17), i.e. as at least nomomorphic like Xenophanes' supreme god.
- 17 This, in turn, may hold the key to the close correlation of time-charged words like mnēmē and promētheiē, when B 1 tries to define the new form of worship. Cf. Jaeger, Theol. 212 n 27.
- 18 Cf. Reinhardt, Parmenides 118 on the panta of B 34 . Plat. Tim. and Epicurus would furnish parallels for this combination of theological dogmatism and scientific probabilism.