

CHAPTER 17

THE HUMANIZING
OF KNOWLEDGE IN
PRESOCRATIC
THOUGHT

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1. THE OLDER PESSIMISTIC OUTLOOK

Near the outset of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle briefly considers the possibility that knowledge of the ultimate principles of explanation might exceed human capacities. Perhaps, as the poet Simonides had declared, "only God can have this privilege" (1.1, 982b28–30). Although Aristotle dismisses the idea (insofar as "jealousy would be unfitting for the divine" and "poets tell many a lie"), the poets of archaic Greece had often disparaged the intellectual capacities of mortal beings.¹ The only exceptions to this broad indictment were seers, prophets, and the poets themselves, who claimed a share in divine wisdom.² As Guthrie summed up the general outlook: "It was already a commonplace of poetry, expressed in invocations to the Muses and elsewhere, that mankind had no sure knowledge unless the gods chose to reveal it."³ The motivating impulse behind this view was probably more religious than epistemological: with respect to wisdom and intelligence, as with all other things worth having, the gods have everything while mortals have nothing.

Traces of the traditional piety, however, can be seen in the writings of a number of Presocratic philosophers. In his famous fragment B34, Xenophanes proclaimed that "no man has known or ever will know the clear and certain

truth . . . but opinion is allotted to all." One later commentator summed up Xenophanes' message in these terms: "It is for god to know and humans to opine."⁴ Heraclitus also affirmed that "Human nature does not have intelligent insights [*gnômas*], but the divine does" (B78),⁵ and so in similar terms said Alcmaeon, Parmenides, Empedocles, and Philolaus.⁶ Parmenides framed his account of the nature of what is as an insight imparted to him by a goddess, both Pythagoras and Empedocles appear to have claimed divine status, and disparaging references to "know-nothing mortals" continue to be made.⁷ In these respects, at least, the Presocratic philosophers appear to have taken the mantle of the divinely inspired poet or seer and wrapped it around themselves.

In what follows, however, I will argue that while some aspects of the older outlook remained, it would be a mistake to see the Presocratic philosophers, including those just mentioned, as perpetuating the "pious pessimism" of an earlier period. A review of the relevant fragments and *testimonia* will show that Xenophanes, Alcmaeon, Heraclitus, and Parmenides—even Pythagoras and Empedocles—all moved some distance away from the older "god-oriented" view of knowledge toward a more secular and optimistic outlook.⁸ But to get some sense of the dynamics at work in this transition we must begin, as virtually every account of early Greek thought must begin, with Homer and Hesiod.

2. KNOWLEDGE AND IGNORANCE IN
EARLY GREEK POETRY

One passage often considered the *locus classicus* for Homer's view of the cognitive powers of mortal beings is the well-known "second invocation" of the Muses in *Iliad* 2. As the singer prepares to launch into his listing of "the captains of all those who sailed to Troy," he calls on divine powers for assistance:

Tell me now Muses who have dwellings on Olympus—
For you are goddesses, you are present, and know [*iste*] all things,
Whereas we hear only a report and know [*idmen*] nothing—
Who were the captains of the Danaans and their lords.
But the vast number I could neither tell nor name,
Not if I had ten tongues, and ten mouths,
A voice unwearying, and a heart of bronze within me,
Did not the Muses of Olympus, daughters of Zeus who bears the aegis,
Call to my mind [*mnêsaiath*'] those who came beneath Ilios.
And now I will tell the leaders and their ships . . . (484–93)

These words have often been thought to show that during this early period, "knowing" was regarded as essentially synonymous with "having seen" (insofar as

the knowledge credited to the Muses is linked to their omnipresence), that the “we” referred to in the second line means “mortal beings” generally, and that the “nothing” in the third line means “no information on any subject whatsoever.”⁹ In defense of this reading, it must be granted that the knowledge claimed by or granted to the figures who appear in the Homeric poems is often grounded in their direct observation of an event or state of affairs. As Menelaus comments at one point to Antilochus:

Since you have observed it for yourself [*auton eisoroônta*], I think you
Already know [*gignôskein*] that a god has rolled destruction on the
Danaans
And given victory to the Trojans. (*Il.* 17.687–88)¹⁰

But while individuals do often come to know the truth on the basis of what they directly witness, it would be a mistake to identify “Homeric knowing” with eye-witness experience or “having seen,” and to read the prayer to the Muses as the opening salvo in a campaign of philosophical skepticism. Even here, in the context of a comparison of divine and mortal forms of awareness, it is clear that the poet offers an account based not on autopsy or direct personal experience but on reliable information provided by others who were themselves eyewitnesses to the original event.¹¹ Moreover, in *Iliad* 20 Aeneas says to Achilles:

We know [*idmen*] each other’s lineage and know [*idmen*] each
other’s parents,
Having heard words of mortal men handed down by tradition
[*epea prokluta*],
But not by sight [*opsei*] have you seen my parents, nor I yours. (203–5)¹²

And knowledge in the form of special “skills” or “expertise” is often linked with the promptings or instruction given by others. Homer speaks of a carpenter “well skilled in all manner of craft by the promptings of Athena” (*Il.* 15.411–12); of “Calchas . . . who had guided the ships of the Achaeans to Ilios by the soothsaying that Phoebus Apollo had bestowed upon him” (*Il.* 1.69–72); and of the Sirens who promised Odysseus that he would “know more” since they themselves “knew all things that come to pass” (*Od.* 12.188).

What a person learns may also be a general truth or principle acquired through extensive experience rather than a single truth based on direct observation of a particular situation:

For I know [*oida*] that cowards shrink from battle
Whereas he who would excel in battle must steadfastly stand his ground.
(*Il.* 11.408–9)

Similarly, knowledge can be gained not through simple observation but through the use of an instructive trial or testing procedure. When Zeus threatens to hurl into

Tartarus any god he catches giving aid to either side of the conflict, he boasts that such an act will confirm the magnitude of his powers:

Then you shall know [*gnôsete*] just how mighty among the gods I am.
But come, gods, make trial [*peirêsasthe*] so you will all know [*eidete*].
(*Il.* 8.18)

In the *Iliad*, the relevant testing is quite often a “trial by arms” in order to determine the superior warrior:

But come, make trial [*peirêsai*], so that these too may know [*gnôôsi*].
Straightway, I tell you, your dark blood will flow around my spear.
(*Il.* 1. 302–3)¹³

In the *Odyssey*, though, the testing often takes the form of an athletic competition:

Of the rest, if any man’s heart and spirit bid him,
Let him come here and be put to a trial [*peirêthêto*] . . .
But of the others I will refuse none and make light of none,
But I wish to know [*idmen*] and try them [*peirêthêmenai*] face to face.
(*Od.* 8.204–5, 212–13)

When, in book 6, Odysseus awakens to the sound of the voices of Nausicaa and her companions, his response sets the tone for his conduct throughout the poem:

But, come, I will make trial [*peirêsomai*], and see for myself.
(*Od.* 6.126)

Each of these three “routes to knowledge”—direct observation, the reliable testimony of others, and the setting of a test or trial—appears in Homer’s account of Odysseus’s reception by the members of his household. Telemachus discovers the stranger’s true identity when he is told the truth (*Od.* 6.188); the old hound Argos knows his master the moment he spots him (*hôs enoêsen*, 17.301); and Eurycleia and the shepherds recognize Odysseus by touching (19.468) and seeing (21.217–25) the identifying scar on his leg. Penelope, however, discovers the stranger’s identity neither from visual indicators nor on the basis of assurances given to her, but by putting the stranger to a trial or test (see *peirômenê* at 23.181). When a seemingly casual suggestion to relocate the marital bed provokes an involuntary flash of anger from Odysseus (23.181–204), Penelope gets the telltale indicator (*sêma*) she has been waiting for.

There are also many references in both poems to knowledge in the form of physical expertise gained through extensive experience:

I know [*oida*] how to wield to the right and left a shield of
seasoned hide . . .

I know [*oida*] also how to charge into the battles of swift mares,
And I know [*oida*] how to do the dance of Ares one-on-one. (*Il.* 7.238–41)

We hear of warriors who are *epistamenoî polemizeîn*—"skilled in fighting" (*Il.* 2.611), of others who are *toxôn eu eidôs*—"well skilled with bows" (*Il.* 2.718), as well as those who are *êpia pharmaka eidôs*—"skilled in soothing drugs" (*Il.* 4.218). In the *Odyssey*, there are fewer references to skill in the arts of war and medicine and more to individuals such as Odysseus who "know all manner of devices and tricks" (*eidotes . . . kerdea, Od.* 13.296–97).¹⁴

Thus, the somber tone of "the second invocation of the Muses" notwithstanding, the figures who appear in Homer's stories enjoy access to an extensive body of factual knowledge and performative expertise acquired from a variety of different sources. In general, an individual may assert *autos oida* or "I know for myself"¹⁵ on the basis of what he or she has directly perceived, or established through some form of testing or learned over time, and one may also discover a good many facts or truths through information or testimony supplied by others.¹⁶

Nevertheless, two broadly pessimistic themes relating to knowledge emerge over the course of both epics. The first, more characteristic of the *Odyssey* than the *Iliad*, is that mortals do not always immediately grasp the full significance of what they experience. While many are able to observe Odysseus when he appears in disguise among the Trojans, only Helen recognizes who he really is (*anegnôn, Od.* 4.250). And although there are many signs of impending disaster, only the seer Theoclymenus is able to "take note of" (*noeô*) the evil about to befall the suitors (*Od.* 20.351). The ability to "see through" or "see beyond" what appears or is directly apparent to the senses is in some respects a hallmark of intelligence. So frequent and central to Homer's story are these moments of discovery, or failures in discovery, that Aristotle identified "recognition" (*anagnôrisis*) as the poem's main theme (*Poetics* 1459b15).

Second, one particular body of knowledge that is consistently regarded as the special prerogative of the gods and the select few mortals with whom they choose to share it is knowledge of events or conditions in distant places and times. Virtually by definition, the gods and goddesses live forever and enjoy a synoptic view of events as they look down from their superior vantage points.¹⁷ Being able to comprehend the larger course of events spread out over time—"knowing how to look before and after" as the idea is commonly expressed—is also the characteristic excellence of those rare specimens of human wisdom.¹⁸ By contrast, the characteristic failure of "foolish mortals" is an inability to look beyond their actions and present circumstances in order to appreciate the long-term consequences. Achilles famously faults Agamemnon in just these terms:

Nor does he know how to think of what lies before and after
[*noêsai prossô kai opissô*]
So the Achaeans might safely wage war beside their ships. (*Il.* 1.343–44)

Similarly, the failure of Penelope's suitors to sense the disaster that lies ahead of them marks them all as *nêpioi*—"fools who did not know that over them one and

all the cords of destruction had been made fast."¹⁹ In his speech to Amphinomus, Odysseus identifies the inability to "see ahead" as a defining characteristic of the human race:

Nothing feebler does earth nurture than man,
Of all the things that move and breath on the earth.
For he thinks that he will never suffer evil in the time to come [*opissô*],
So long as the gods give him prosperity and his knees are quick;
But when again the gods decree him sorrow;
This too he bears with a steadfast heart.
For such is the mind [*noos*] of man upon the earth,
Like the day the father of gods and men brings to him. (*Od.* 18.130–37)

About the larger dimensions of events—how long health and prosperity will last, or what kind of fate awaits each individual—these matters must remain dark to a race of beings who can think of things only in terms of what they have "met with" or directly experienced for themselves.²⁰ "Wisdom," in such cases, consists in seeking the kind of truth that befits our mortal nature and avoiding "aiming too high."

Typically, however, the poet who gives expression to these pessimistic sentiments regards himself as a happy exception to the general rule. Hesiod proclaims that

the mind of Zeus who holds the aegis is different at different times,
and it is hard for men to conceive it [*argaleos . . . noêsai*]. (*Op.* 483–84)

Yet the Muses have selected him to sing "beautiful song" (*Th.* 22), "tell of realities" (*Op.* 10), and "celebrate the things that will be and were before" (*Th.* 32, 38). As he undertakes to relate "the mind of Zeus" (more specifically, the cycles of sea winds and weather) Hesiod invokes the Muses as his authorities, claiming that his poetic prowess more than makes up for a lack of experience:

I will show you the measures of the loud-resounding sea,
Although I am skilled [*sesophismenos*] in neither ships nor sea-faring;
For never yet have I sailed by ship over a broad sea . . .
So much is my experience [*pepeirêmai*] of many-pegged ships.
Nevertheless, I will tell you the mind of Zeus who holds the aegis,
For the Muses have taught me to sing in marvelous song.
(*Op.* 648–50, 660–62)²¹

Theognis and Pindar also present themselves to their audiences as individuals endowed with a knowledge that sets them apart from the general run of humankind:

And from whence the strife of immortals arose,
concerning these things the gods are able to prompt wise poets,

though it is impossible for mortal men to find it out.
 But since you maiden Muses know all things, you are permitted this,
 along with Memory and the cloud-wrapped father,
 so listen now, for my tongue loves to pour forth
 the choicest and sweetest bloom of song . . . (Pi. *Pae.* 6.51–58)

A servant and messenger of the Muses, if preeminent in knowledge (*perisson eideiê*), should not be begrudging of his expertise (*sophia*), but should seek out these, point out those, invent other things, for to whom is he useful if he alone is knowledgeable (*epistamēnos*)? (Thgn. 769–72).

The poetic verdict on “the *noos* of mortals” was, therefore, decidedly mixed. Human beings can discover truth and develop expertise in many different areas—either through their own efforts and devices or with the assistance of others. Direct observation, the testimony of a reliable source, and the setting of a trial or test can all provide a suitable basis for gaining insight or understanding. Nevertheless, whatever the character of its achievements, the *noos* of mortals is still constrained to operate within a narrow set of circumstances. Most people are unable to expand their understanding beyond the immediate environment in which they find themselves, and no one—without some form of divine assistance—can possibly know anything about events or states of affairs in distant realms and periods.²² There is, then, a consistent if somewhat mixed “folk epistemology” that runs through the earliest period of Greek literature. And there is good reason to believe that the first philosophers knew and responded to it.

3. PRESOCRATIC VARIATIONS ON THE TRADITIONAL THEME

Our knowledge of the teachings of the Presocratics is of course incomplete and subject to conflicting interpretations, but enough remains to support a view of the members of this group as gradually moving away from the older, essentially religious perspective on knowledge and toward a more secular and optimistic outlook. In the case of the earliest figures known to us, the Milesian philosopher-scientists Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes, we can only infer a more optimistic outlook on the basis of their wide-ranging investigations and theories; we have no comments concerning the sources or limits of knowledge from any member of this group.²³ For a number of other Presocratic thinkers, however, there is a good deal more to go on.

3.1. Pythagoras and Empedocles

If there is anything we can be reasonably sure of in connection with the semi-legendary figure of Pythagoras of Samos, it is that he was widely credited with a special body of knowledge. In one of the earliest ancient *testimonia*, Xenophanes of

Colophon reports that Pythagoras claimed to recognize (*egnôn*) the soul of a departed friend from the cries of a yelping puppy (B7). Similarly, Heraclitus B40 cites Pythagoras as one of those who prove that “much learning” (*polumathiê*) does not teach “an intelligent understanding” (*noos*), and Heraclitus B81a and 129 castigate Pythagoras as a “prince of swindlers” who “trained himself the most of all human beings in inquiry [*historiê*] and, having selected from these writings, constructed a wisdom [*sophiê*] of his own—a “much learning” [*polumathiê*] that was also a piece of skulduggery [*kakotechniê*].” Clearly, some claim to a special body of “expertise” or “learning” must have prompted these attacks.

Other ancient writers appear to have viewed Pythagoras’s “creative borrowings” in a more positive light. Diogenes Laertius (1.120) quotes the fifth-century poet Ion of Chios: “if indeed Pythagoras was really wise [*sophos*], who above all others knew and learned [*eide kai exemathen*] the opinions of men.” By far the most enthusiastic assessment is found in Empedocles’ fragment B129:

And there was among them a man of surpassing knowledge [*periôsia eidos*],
 master especially of all kinds of wise works, who had acquired the utmost wealth
 of understanding [*prapidon . . . plouton*]: for whenever he reached out with all his
 understanding, easily he saw the things that are in ten and even twenty generations
 of men.

Other accounts credit Pythagoras with attributes characteristic of supermortal status: having lived a number of different lives,²⁴ being seen at widely separated locations at the same time,²⁵ and possessing a golden thigh (a sign, as Burkert explained, of being authorized to travel to the underworld).²⁶ Other sources credit him with performing miracles and predicting the future (an impending earthquake, that a ship would sink, that Sybaris would be conquered, etc.).²⁷

Before Pythagoras’s time, the two miracle workers and “servants of Apollo” Aristaeus and Abaris had been hailed in similar terms. Within Pythagoras’s own lifetime, there were the miracle worker Epimenides of Crete and the theologian and proto-cosmologist Pherecydes from the Cyclades. The “Pythagoras legend” is richly interwoven with references to all of these individuals.²⁸ Diogenes Laertius says that Pythagoras “studied with Pherecydes . . . and went down into a cave on Ida in Crete with Epimenides . . . and entered the sanctuaries in Egypt and learned the ineffable mysteries of the gods” (2.3). Thus, whether or not the model can be traced back to the shamans of central Asia, as some have believed,²⁹ there is a sizable body of evidence that Pythagoras presented himself to others, and perhaps even saw himself,³⁰ as one who had been raised above mortal status, endowed with a superhuman grasp of the nature of things, and authorized to impart this special wisdom to others.

A generation later, Empedocles presents himself to his audience in much the same terms:

O friends, who dwell in the great city of the yellow Acragas . . .
 Hail! I, in your eyes a deathless god, no longer mortal,
 go among all, honored, just as I seem. . . . And they follow at once,

in their ten thousands, asking where is the path to gain,
some in need of divinations, others in all sorts of diseases
sought to hear a healing oracle,
having been pierced about by harsh pains for too long a time. (B112)³¹

In this way let not deception overcome your thought organ
[by convincing you] that the source of mortal things,
as many as have become obvious—countless—is anything else,
but know these things clearly, having heard the story from a god. (B23)

For I have already become a boy and a girl
and a bush and a bird and a fish [corrupt text] from the sea. (B117)

And finally they become prophets and singers and doctors
and leaders among men who dwell on earth;
thence they sprout up as gods, first in their prerogatives. (B146)³²

But while both Pythagoras and Empedocles presented themselves to their audiences or followers as divinely inspired individuals, neither appears to have regarded his special status as a precondition for all knowledge, or knowledge in general. The evidence for Pythagorean doctrines is of course late, fragmentary, and highly suspect, but a number of Pythagoras's associates appear to have regarded him as one who had passed down to others the key to understanding the nature of all things. In the *Philebus*, Plato may be describing Pythagoras's legacy to humankind when he relates:

There is a gift—so it seems to me—that the gods let fall from their abode, and it was through Prometheus, or someone like him, that it reached mankind, together with a fire exceeding bright. The men of old, who were better than we are, passed on this gift in the form of a saying. All things, so it ran, that are ever said to be consist of a one and many, and have in their nature a conjunction of limit and unlimited. This then being the ordering of things we ought, they said, whatever it be that we are dealing with, to assume a single form . . . then we must go from one form to look for two, if the case admits of there being two, otherwise for three or some other number of forms. (16d)

Testimonials to the sacred powers of the *tetraktys* reinforce this view of Pythagoras as one who imparted to humankind the important insight that the study of numbers held the key to understanding the real natures of things.³³

To the extent to which the fragments ascribed to Philolaus afford some insight into the nature of fifth-century Pythagorean thinking,³⁴ we can conclude that at least one strain in the Pythagorean tradition focused on understanding numerical relationships as the key to grasping the nature of all things. Philolaus B3 speaks of the possession or imposition of a limit as a precondition for knowledge,³⁵ and B4 restricts the knowable to the numerable.³⁶ Fragment B6 makes a broader epistemological claim concerning the natural order as well as the eternal reality from which it has been derived:

Concerning nature and harmony the situation is this: the being of things, which is eternal, and nature in itself admit of divine and not human knowledge, except [*plan ga*] that it was impossible for any of the things that are and are known by us to have come to be, if the being of the things from which the world-order came together, both the limiting and the unlimited things, did not preexist. But since these beginnings preexisted and were neither alike nor even related, it would have been impossible for them to be ordered, if a harmony had not come upon them, in whatever way it came to be. (trans. Huffman, *Philolaus of Croton*)

In other words, phenomena that occur within the natural realm are knowable to the extent they are numerable, and “that which exists eternally” or “nature in itself” can also be known insofar as it must satisfy certain general conditions. What exists eternally could not have given rise to the natural order we are familiar with (and understand through the study of numbers) unless there existed: (1) something unlimited, (2) one or more limits to impose on what was unlimited, and (3) some harmonizing force with the power to impose the latter on the former. In short, Philolaus regards what can be determined to be the case through philosophical reflection (here, the necessary conditions for things existing as they do) as representing an important exception to the standard denial of knowledge to mortal beings.

Similarly, even though Empedocles claims divine status and powers for himself, he encourages those in his audience to seek knowledge of each thing “in the way it is clear”:

But come, consider, by every device, how each thing is clear,
neither holding any sight more trustworthy than hearing
nor resounding hearing above the clarities of tongue,
nor withholding trust in any degree from the other faculties,
in whatever way a pathway is available for understanding.
But understand each thing in the way in which it is clear. (B3.4–8)

Although Empedocles subscribes to the traditional notion that “we think what we meet with” (see B2 quoted in n.6) he gives the ancient maxim a positive spin: since the thoughts of mortals are determined by what they happen to experience, they must take care to expose themselves to what is worthy of being learned:

For if, thrusting them down in your crowded sense thinking organs,
you gaze on them in kindly fashion, with pure meditations,
absolutely all these things will be with you throughout your life . . .
But if you reach out for different things, such as
the ten thousand wretched things, which are among men and
blunt their meditations,
truly they will abandon you quickly, as time circles round,
desiring to arrive at their own dear kind [lit. birth or generation].
For know that all have thought and a share of understanding. (B110)

Pythagoras and Empedocles may have claimed divine status or divine insights for themselves but both encouraged their students or followers to gain a proper understanding of the cosmos by directing their own thoughts along certain specific lines.

3.2. Xenophanes and Alcmaeon

As noted, the ancient doxographer Arius Didymus credited Xenophanes of Colophon with a pious view of the cognitive capacities of mortals:

There was a respectable tradition among the Greeks concerning Xenophanes that he rebuked in jest the audacity of others and demonstrated his own piety (in holding that) God therefore knows the truth, while "opinion is fashioned for all."³⁷

The concluding phrase placed within quotation marks is taken from Xenophanes' B34:

And indeed no man has been nor will there be one
Who knows [*eidôs*] what is clear and certain [*to saphes*]
About the gods and such things as I say about all things.
For even if at best one were to succeed in speaking of what is brought
to pass
Still he himself would not know. But opinion [*dokos*] is fashioned
for all.³⁸

Since the fragment begins *to men oun*—"and indeed"—it is entirely possible that we do not have the whole of Xenophanes' remark, or all the considerations from which its main conclusion was meant to follow. But the use of the term *saphês* by his Ionian contemporary the historian Herodotus provides a helpful clue. At several points in his *History* Herodotus speaks of what is *saphes*, or what can be known in a *saphês* manner, as what can be confirmed to be the case on the basis of firsthand observation.³⁹ Since the gods were thought to inhabit a realm far removed from that of mortal beings, it would be natural for Xenophanes to have thought that no account of their nature and activities could ever be established as correct on the basis of first-hand observation, hence known for certain to be correct.⁴⁰ And since the pioneering cosmological accounts put forward by his Milesian predecessors had asserted that a single material substance underlay *all* phenomena (past, present, and future), it would be equally impossible for any individual to confirm on the basis of firsthand observation the truth of so universal a claim, hence know for certain that it was correct—even if in fact it was correct.⁴¹ The sentiments expressed in lines 3 and 4 might then be seen as reinforcing this cautionary sentiment. The point would be that no one (moreover) should be credited with knowledge (of the certain truth concerning the gods or the nature of all things) simply on the basis of having correctly spoken of individual events as they take place (perhaps an implicit reference to self-styled paragons of wisdom who were also famous predictors of events—including the same Pythagoras whom Xenophanes ridiculed for his special knowledge). The primary message of B34,

from its opening reference to "no man" to its concluding phrase "fashioned for all" would have been that there never has been and never will be anyone who can possess certain knowledge concerning all these important but ultimately unobservable matters. Fragment B34, then, repeats the familiar refrain that while mortals may discover much about matters lying within the circle of their daily experiences, knowledge concerning events or circumstances in distant places and times must exceed their grasp.

Nevertheless, Xenophanes' allocation of human awareness to the category of "opinion" or "conjecture" (*dokos*) is not an inherently dismissive characterization. By Platonic standards, certainly, "opinion"—even when correct—would still be considered inferior to knowledge, but there is no reason to assume that Xenophanes viewed *dokos* in the same light. Xenophanes B35, for example, quoted by Plutarch to encourage a bashful speaker, speaks of "opinion" in a positive vein: "Let these be believed [*dedoxasthō*] as like the realities." The similarity between the verbal imperative *dedoxasthō* of B35 and the nominative *dokos* of B34 suggest a somewhat moderated pessimism: there never was nor will be anyone who knows the deepest truths, but *dokos*—opinion or conjecture—has been "fashioned" or made available for all mortal beings. Certainly a more positive view of the prospects for knowledge emerges from the well-known B18:

Not indeed from the outset did gods reveal all things to mortals,
But, in time, by seeking they discover something better.

The full resonance of these remarks has been much debated, but it is impossible not to sense some degree of opposition between the divine revelation or "intimation" (*upodeixan*) mentioned in line 1 and the "inquiry" or "seeking" (*zêtountes*) in line 2. Whether discovery takes place with divine assistance or without it, and whether the subject matter is the workings of the cosmos or "progress" in the conditions of life generally, there is an unmistakably upbeat quality to B18. Taken together, B18, B34, and B35 signal a departure the older poetic outlook: the poets claim that the limitations inherent in human existence will forever prevent mortals from discovering the most basic truths about the cosmos and the nature of the gods themselves, yet "something better," and "opinion" about these and other matters, still lies within our reach.⁴²

Fragment B1 of Alcmaeon of Croton reaffirms the familiar distinction between divine and mortals, but here, too, there is at least a suggestion of a partial change in outlook:

The gods possess certainty [*sapheneian*] concerning nonevident matters, but [it is given to] men to conjecture from signs [*tekmairesthai*]. (B1)⁴³

It is possible that Alcmaeon was just repeating the familiar divine-human refrain—the gods have certain knowledge and mortals must make do with mere conjecture. Yet a less traditional reading is also possible: the gods have knowledge about

matters that are far removed from human observation (*ta aphanea*), yet mortals have the capacity to learn at least some things on their own by "inferring from signs."⁴⁴

3.3. Heraclitus

Heraclitus B78 holds that "The human nature (*êthos anthôpeion*) does not possess insight, but the divine does," and B32 speaks in a similar vein of a divine being as the "one, the only wise thing." Yet when Heraclitus goes on to state that this "one wise thing is both willing and unwilling to be called by the name of Zeus" (B32), we begin to sense some movement away from the traditional identification of wisdom with the gods of Greek popular religion. The power that rules the cosmos, and is the one truly wise or intelligent being, is in some ways like Zeus, but in other ways it is not. As B53 explains, the epithet traditionally ascribed to Zeus, "father of all and king of all," is now ascribed to *Polemos*—"war" or "conflict." Fragment B41 helps to fill out the new point of view when it identifies "the one wise thing" not as Zeus but as "knowing the intelligent understanding [*epistasthai gnômên*], how all things are steered through all," thereby suggesting that wisdom may exist *in us*, insofar as we align our thoughts with the Zeus-like power that rules and orders the cosmos. Taken in isolation, B78 sounds like the standard indictment of mortal intelligence, but seen in its context, it is rather Heraclitus's way of claiming that insight and wisdom come to mortal beings not as part of their natural endowment but to the extent to which they learn how to think and speak about the cosmos.

Exactly how those who heard Heraclitus's teachings were to escape from their benighted condition to achieve some understanding of cosmic truths has never been entirely clear.⁴⁵ On some accounts, Heraclitus called for the acquisition of extensive information through sense perception—the testimony of "eye and ear" or "fact-finding travel and direct observation" (i.e., Ionian-style *historiê*)—as a preliminary first stage of inquiry. But not only is the textual basis for this reading inconclusive at a crucial point, there is no indication that Heraclitus himself ever practiced *historiê*—as there is clear evidence that his Ionian predecessors sought to gather information on conditions in other regions. On the contrary, he announces "I inquired into myself" (B101). We should see Heraclitus as urging those in his audience not to focus their attention on the appearances of things, but to try to get beyond appearances to the unifying force or forces lying behind apparently discordant phenomena.

In various ways Heraclitus makes it clear that one key feature of "this *logos*" (as well as his *logos*) is "the hidden unity of opposites"—the way many if not all natural phenomena embody an internal "tension" or "strife" among opposite qualities and forces, a conflict symbolized, perhaps also epitomized, by fire. Under the general heading "unity in opposition," Heraclitus observes (1) that things that are the same can also be different—for example, that one and the same road can be both the road down and the road up—depending on the direction one is headed, or that seawater

can be both pure and polluted—depending on whether it is fish or people who are drinking it; or that the same river contains ever-changing waters, and so on; (2) that things that are different can also be the same, for example, that classic opposites like day and night, high and low notes, and male and female can also be understood as closely linked with one another, both conceptually, and as causally related phenomena; and (3) that many entities work to sustain the existence and proper functioning of their opposite numbers—for example, that "disease makes health pleasant and good, as hunger does satiety, and weariness does rest" (B111). And because tension or conflict between the opposites is seen as a positive, creative force at work throughout the cosmos, Heraclitus concludes that "war is father and king of all" and that "all things happen by strife and necessity" (B80).

The mention in B40 of Xenophanes and the Milesian geographer Hecataeus—both exponents of *historia*—suggests that no amount of inquiry in the tradition of the Ionian philosopher-scientists can bring one to a proper appreciation of the *logos*:

The learning of many things does not teach understanding (*noos*); or else it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, and again Xenophanes and Hecataeus.

As stated in B1, "even men of experience are like men of no experience" when it comes to grasping the *logos*. The inclusion of Hesiod and Pythagoras in this indictment would suggest that poets and seers who claim to have gained truth from divine sources have done no better than those who travel about the world observing things for themselves. Fragment B107 reinforces the point that a proper understanding of the real nature of things cannot be extracted from the information supplied by the senses: "Bad witnesses are eyes and ears of those having barbarian souls." Our sensory faculties provide false or misleading testimony to those not already attuned to the hidden principle of unity. In strictly sensory terms, no two things could be more different, more "at opposite ends of the spectrum" than light and dark—or, as we might say, "as different as night and day." So if our aim is to discover how things that differ can also be the same, we must move beyond mere sensory content and into the realm of thought and reflection.

A second element in the traditional view of human *noos*, the notion that mortals "think such things as they meet with"—that their thoughts reflect only their own (extremely limited) personal circumstances⁴⁶—also undergoes a transformation in Heraclitus's hands when he complains (B17): "The many do not think such things as they meet with, nor, having learned, do they know, though each thinks he has." Although "the *logos* is common" (B2) and mortals are in "continuously in contact with it" (B72), they fail to notice it, or understand how it works in all things. Through a series of juxtapositions of opposing qualities—experienced but still inexperienced, having heard the word but not gotten the message, being in contact but still isolated, and being awake but still asleep—Heraclitus seeks to provoke his audience into considering the possibility that their usual sources of information may have failed them in some crucial respects, and that what they confidently regard as knowledge is really only a kind of ignorance.

But if neither the “much learning” of the sages nor the “much experience” provided by eyes and ears can “teach understanding,” what can? One instructive simile appears in B51:

They do not understand [*xuniasin*] how, while differing from itself, it is in agreement with itself. There is a back-stretched connection, like that of a bow or lyre.

Grasping the nature of the “back-stretched connection” in the case of the bow and lyre presumably requires coming to understand (Heraclitus’s term here and often elsewhere is *xunienai*, “to come together with” or “understand”) how each of the physical parts—the string and wooden frame—contributes to the effective operation of the whole, either the whole weapon or the whole musical instrument. The string must be pulled taut against the frame in order for either device to function properly—where there is no antecedent tension, there can be no subsequent action either. At least part of the message here is that we must go through the same processes of analysis and synthesis if we are to understand how the *logos* is at work in the cosmos as a whole. So, in general, understanding how “things that differ” are also “in agreement” requires mastering the principles of “unity in opposition” just mentioned—understanding how each of two opposing qualities has a place and essential role to play within a single larger entity; and conversely, how one entity can happily accommodate two qualities that are fiercely opposed to one another; and how bitter enemies can also mutually support and sustain one another’s existence and operation. Thus, while much that Heraclitus proclaimed bore a superficial resemblance to the usual poetic indictment of human intelligence, his message was actually quite different: most people have no clear sense of how things really are, but those who can be provoked by Heraclitus’s paradoxical remarks into considering how things that are opposed are actually in agreement are at least embarked on a path to understanding.

3.4. Parmenides

In fragment B1, Parmenides of Elea describes how an unnamed “youth” (presumably Parmenides himself at some earlier time) was transported by special powers along an exotic “roadway of a goddess”:

The mares that carry me, as far as mind might reach,
Were escorting me, when leading me they set me on a roadway
rich in song
Of the goddess that bears the knowing man down to every town.
On that way I was carried; for on it much-revealing mares carried me
Straining to pull the chariot, and maidens were leading the way (ll. 1–5)

Escorted by “maidens, Daughters of the Sun,” the youth journeys to where the paths of Night and Day converge. There the maidens persuade a “much-avenging”

Justice to open a set of heavenly gates. Proceeding along a broad roadway, the youth arrives at the house of a goddess who greets him with these words:

Youth attended by immortal charioteers
Who reaches our house accompanied by the mares that carry you,
Welcome, since no evil fate has sent you forth to journey on
This road (for it is far indeed from the beaten path of men),
But right and justice. And it is proper that you should learn all things,
Both an unshaking heart of well-rounded truth
And opinions of mortals in which there is no true trust.
But nevertheless you shall also learn these things: how the things
that seem
Had to genuinely be, all passing through all.⁴⁷

While the full significance of many of the details in these lines may never be known, it seems likely that Parmenides intended for these introductory comments to mark the account to follow as a set of truths revealed to him by a divine power.

Should we conclude then that in these lines Parmenides expressed his personal conviction that knowledge, at least on this topic, comes to mortal beings through divine revelation? Many have thought just this, in part because Parmenides elected to cast his account in verse, the traditional language of prophetic revelation;⁴⁸ in part because some aspects of the proemium call to mind the earlier figure of the shaman who could travel to distant realms to acquire knowledge;⁴⁹ and in part because some form of superhuman authentication might be regarded as essential, given the supersensible character of the account Parmenides is about to present.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, a better case can be made that Parmenides actually rejected the traditional idea of divinely revealed knowledge in favor of an alternative view of the route to knowledge. One passage often cited in support of a more “rationalist” or “humanistic” reading is B7.5–6. There the goddess urges the youth to “decide by reasoning” (*krinai de logôî*) the “much-contested testing spoken by her.” Here, too, translators have opted for different renderings, but the goddess’s injunction appears to mean something along the lines of “decide on the basis of the various considerations put forward in this poem which of the possible ways of speaking and thinking about ‘what is’ is correct.”⁵¹

In a related remark in the opening lines of B8, the goddess alludes to the many “signs” or “indicators” (*sêmata*) that necessitate a particular way of thinking about what is:

... still single remains the account of the road
That it is, and on this road are signs,
Very many in number, that insofar as it is, it is generated and
imperishable,
Whole, single in kind, steadfast, and complete (1–4)

And in lines 15–18 she announces what appears to be the outcome of these deliberations:

the decision on these matters consists in this:
 It is or it is not. But it has been decided as is necessary,
 To let go the one as unthinkable and unnameable (for it is no true
 Road), and to allow the other as genuine and real.

In the remaining lines of B8, the goddess lays out a series of carefully reasoned arguments whose conclusions seem to reinforce the thesis that one must say and think of what is only that it is: what is cannot come into being nor be destroyed, be divided into parts, move about from place to place, or develop over time in any respect.⁵² While here, too, much remains unclear, the general message must be something like “decide the correct view of the nature of what is on the basis of the well-reasoned arguments provided to you.” What the goddess does not say is anything like “accept this account as true because you have heard it from a goddess.”

Other features of Parmenides’ poem lend support to the view that the learning forecast by the goddess in B1 will involve an active effort on the part of the youth (and indirectly those in Parmenides’ audience) to determine where the truth lies. While B1.31 speaks in terms of what happened to the youth (or was done to him by special powers) at some point in the past, from B1.31 onward the goddess consistently speaks in terms of what the youth must do for himself. Employing a series of imperatives and both active and middle indicative forms, she asserts that he will or must “learn” (*mathéseai*, B1.31), “look upon things” (*leusse*, B4.1) “ponder” (*phrazesthai*, B6.2), “restrain your thought” (*eirge*, B7.2), “not permit custom to force you” (*biasthō*, B7.3), “judge” (*krinai*, B7.5), “learn mortal beliefs” (*manthane*, B8.52), “know the nature of the aither” (*eisēi*, B10.1), “learn the wandering works of the moon” (*peusēi*, B10.4), and “know the surrounding sky” (B10.5).

Parmenides also ties his discovery of the truth about what is to a set of powers that are available, both to him and to others, on a continuing basis. The contrast between the present tense employed in line 1 of B1—“The mares who carry me as far as mind might reach”—and the imperfect of line 2—“Were escorting me, when leading me they set me on a roadway rich in song” indicates that the set of powers that direct Parmenides’ thinking do so on a continuing basis, as opposed to having given him a “one-shot” revelation. And while the goddess and guiding maidens are clearly immortals, the “horses” or powers that convey Parmenides (or his *thumos*) are never so designated. The path of thought along which Parmenides travels is, moreover, described as one “that bears the knowing man down to every town,” suggesting that Parmenides saw himself as drawing on sources available to others on both previous and future occasions.

Finally, in B4 Parmenides asserts and argues for a thesis that has a direct bearing on the traditional indictment of the powers of human intelligence:

Look upon things which, though far off, are yet firmly present to
 [or by] the mind [*noōi*];
 For you [or it] shall not cut off what-is from holding fast to what is,

For it neither disperses itself in every way everywhere in order,
 Nor gathers itself together. (B4.1–4, Gallop trans.)

Many have sensed in these lines a subtle response to the river mentioned by Heraclitus that “disperses and gathers” (B91), but B4 has a broader target in its sights: the connection between knowledge and “presence.” Coxon usefully places the fragment in its broader historical context:

It is reasonable to believe that fr. [4] is part of [Parmenides’] answer to Xenophanes himself. Xenophanes had borrowed from Homer (B485–6) the equation of knowing with present perception and concluded that, with regard to the gods and other matters beyond the range of the senses, human beings can have no knowledge but only belief. [Parmenides] answers that the mind not only may have an immediate awareness of “absent things” but that its vision of Being is “steady,” as the apprehensions of the dense and rare manifestation of a physical substance cannot be.⁵³

Parmenides here rejects the traditional assumption that the only possible objects of human knowledge are the events or conditions mortals can directly experience through use of their sense faculties. Since what is “all alike” (B8.22), to know the nature of what is at some place and time is to know the nature of what is at all places and times. And once the essential link between knowledge and presence has been broken, with the human mind declared capable of knowing truths that pertain to all times and places, the rationale behind the traditional indictment of the *noos* of mortals disappears. In short, Parmenides not only suggests at different points, and in various ways, that human beings have the capacity to reason their way toward a correct understanding of the nature of what is; he also directly attacks the underlying view of the conditions of knowledge on which the traditional indictment of human intelligence had been based.

Yet if Parmenides sought to “humanize knowing”—that is, bring those in his audience to a fuller appreciation of their capacity to understand the nature of things through the exercise of their own rational faculties—why would he choose to frame his account in the traditional language of poetic inspiration and fashion a prologue rich in the imagery and language of divine revelation? Here, too, there are many possible alternative explanations. On some accounts, Parmenides’ decision to versify should be seen, in effect, as a selection of the default mode for discourse on any serious subject. Others have suggested that Parmenides cast his account in verse form in order to plant it securely in the minds of his audiences. It has also been thought that versification might have made his difficult doctrines more palatable, as well as prevented inaccurate and incomplete summaries of the argument. Perhaps presenting his account to his audience as the fruits of divine inspiration would help secure its acceptance; and framing his discovery in the language Homer had used to describe a famous journey might have enhanced the perceived aesthetic merit of his composition. While there may well be some truth in many of these suggestions, I suspect there was something more pointed in Parmenides’ choice of format. In early Greek philosophy, as in other aspects of

early Greek life, it is useful to remember the agonistic dimension of creative activity, as new ways of speaking and thinking emerged alongside, and often in conflict with, older and well-entrenched points of view. In this instance, we should consider the possibility that Parmenides adopted the traditional way of speaking, with its attendant assumptions and commitments, precisely in order to move beyond it.⁵⁴ If, as seems virtually certain, Parmenides came to appreciate the ability of the human mind to reason its way to insights about the nature of what there is, he would have had good reason to try to find an effective way to subvert the dominant paradigm, that is, to show that the traditional disparagement of the powers of human intelligence was in error. What more convincing proof of mastery over a competing way of speaking and thinking could Parmenides have given than to use that mode of expression in order to present a doctrine antithetical to its main assumptions?⁵⁵ And what more fitting way to signal the transition from a god-centered to a human reason-centered understanding of the route to knowledge than to have a goddess declare that what can be known about the nature of what is is what can be established through the use of reasoned argument?

To sum up: over a period of several centuries a number of Presocratic thinkers declared and defended views of human knowledge that departed from the pessimistic outlook characteristic of earlier Greek poetry. Although the philosophers retained some trappings of the older outlook, and generally endorsed the basic contrast of divine and human capacities, they often encouraged those in their audiences to seek an understanding of the natural realm, near and far, by means of inquiry and reflection. Pythagoras and Empedocles presented themselves to their audiences as divine—or at least divinely inspired—beings, but they also explained how those who listened to their inspired words could achieve some measure of knowledge on their own. Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Alcmaeon, Parmenides, and Philolaus all described ways of thinking or inquiry that could lead to useful results, even in circumstances in which a completely secure grasp of the truth was not possible. The gods have not been declared entirely otiose, but they no longer work alone.

NOTES

1. See *h.Cer.* 256–57: “Unknowing [*nēides*] are humans and foolish not foreseeing the good or evil that comes upon them”; *h.Ap.* (189–93): “Humans . . . live foolish and helpless, nor are they able to find healing for death or defense against old age”; Archil. fr. 70: “Of such a sort, Glaucus, is the mind [*thumos*] of mortal man, whatever Zeus may bring him for the day, for he thinks such things as he meets with”; Semon. fr. 1: “There is no mind [*noos*] in men, but we live each day like grazing cattle, not knowing [*ouden eidotes*] how God shall end it”; Thgn. 141–42: “Mortals think vain things, knowing nothing, while the gods accomplish all to their intentions”; Simon. fr. 22: “You who are a human being, never say what tomorrow will bring, nor when you see someone prosper,

how long this will last. For change is swifter than the changing course of the wide-winged fly”; Sol. fr. 13: “We mortal men, good and bad, think in this way: each holds his opinion before something happens to him, and then he grieves, but before that we rejoice open-mouthed in vain expectations”; fr. 1: “All that we do is fraught with danger; no one can ever know where a thing may end, when it has once begun . . . for us no visible limit of wealth is appointed; those blessed beyond others with wealth hunger for double the sum”; and fr. 16: “This, the hardest part of knowledge [*gnōmosunēs*], to grasp in thought [*noēsai*] the invisible measure that alone holds the limits of all things”; Pi. *O.* 7.25–26: “Around the spirit of man drift endless errors; helpless to find out what now or at the last will be best for him”; *N.* 6.6–7: “We know not where, according to what the day or night brings to us, fate has appointed as the end toward which we hasten”; *N.* 7.23–24: “But the heart of the mass of men is blind indeed”; *N.* 11.43–47: “What comes from Zeus is not accompanied by any sure sign [*saphes tekmar*]. We embark on bold endeavors, yearning after many exploits, for our limbs are fettered by importunate hope. But streams of foreknowledge [*promatheias*] lie far from us.”

2. The connection between poets and seers in early Greek thought is well documented. See Detienne, *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*: “The prehistory of the philosophical *Alêtheia* leads us to the system of thought of the diviner, the poet, and the king of justice, three figures for whom a certain type of speech is defined by *Alêtheia*” (37). See also Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae*; Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, and Chadwick, *Poetry and Prophecy*, who comments: “The fundamental elements of the prophetic function seem to have everywhere been the same. Everywhere the gift of poetry is inseparable from divine inspiration. Everywhere this inspiration carries with it knowledge—whether of the past, in the form of history and genealogy; of the hidden present, in the form commonly of scientific information; or of the future, in the form of prophetic utterance in the narrower sense. . . . The lofty claims of the poet and seer are universally admitted, and he himself holds a high status wherever he is found” (14).

3. *HGP* 1, 398.

4. Varro in August. *De civ. D.* 7.17: “scribam . . . ut Xenophanes Colophonius scriptis . . . hominis est enim haec opinari, Dei scire.” Similarly Arius Didymus (A24): “God therefore knows the truth, while opinion is allotted to all.” It is not certain that the *pasi* of Xenophanes’ conclusion actually meant “all men” rather than “all things,” but that is how Varro and Arius Didymus understood it.

5. Heraclitus B78: ἦθος γὰρ ἀνθρώπειον μὲν οὐκ ἔχει γνώμας, θεῖον δὲ ἔχει. The precise meaning of the remark is contested, but clearly some contrast of divine and mortal capacities is intended. My translation follows that of DK (“Einsichten”), but the wide range of meanings of *gnômê* allows for multiple translations—“discerning judgments,” “opinions,” “decisions,” “intentions,” “purposes,” etc. The root sense of *gnômê* is “means of knowing”—either an identifying mark on an object or the faculty of intelligence. The various secondary meanings of the term relate back to its core meaning as so many products of the capacity. The particular choice of “insight” is warranted by Heraclitus’s evident interest in the degree to which human beings have either failed or succeeded in grasping the *logos* (B1, 50, 114) or in achieving some degree of *xunesis* (B2, 17, 34, 51), *phronesis* (B17), or *noos* (B40, 104). The same range of choices applies to the *gnômên peri pantos* that Anaxagoras credits to the *nous* and that orders or controls the cosmos (B12).

6. Alcmaeon B1: “The gods possess certainty [*sapheneian*] concerning non-evident matters, but [it is given to] men to conjecture from signs [*tekmairesthai*]”; Philolaus B6: “Concerning nature and harmony the situation is this: the being of things, which is eternal, and nature in itself admit of divine and not human knowledge.” Similarly, Parmenides

contrasts the reliable account given by the goddess with the unreliable beliefs of mortals (B1.29–30 and B8.50–52). In B2, Empedocles echoes Homer's characterization of mortal *noos* as dictated by external circumstances:

having seen only a small portion of life in their experience
[mortals] soar and fly off like smoke, swift to their dooms,
each one convinced of only that very thing which he has chanced to meet,
as they are driven in all directions. But each boasts of having seen the whole.
In this way, these things are neither seen nor heard by men

nor grasped with understanding. (Based on the Greek text in DK and following the translation in Inwood, *The Poem of Empedocles*, B2.3–8.)

7. See Xenophanes' disparaging reference to what "mortals think" about the gods (B14) and "however many things they have made evident for mortals to look upon" (B36); Heraclitus's references to those who have heard the *logos* but failed to understand it and who base their beliefs on the accounts given by supposed experts (B1, 17, 34, 51, 56, 86, and 104); Parmenides' reference to *brotoi eidotes ouden* (B6.4) and the "beliefs of mortals in which there is no true trust" (B1.30 and B8.51–54); and Empedocles' reference to "fools [*nêpioi*] for their meditations are not long lasting" (B11), etc.

8. This account differs from several alternative ways of understanding early Greek ways of thinking about knowledge: (1) the view defended in Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, and elsewhere, that the meaning of the Greek expressions for "knowing" evolved from the time of the Homeric poems down to Parmenides; (2) the view defended by Barnes in *PP* that Xenophanes introduced a modified form of skepticism that continued unabated through the course of Presocratic philosophy; and (3) the view defended in Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae*, Most, "The Poetics of Early Greek Philosophy," Kingsley, "Empedocles for the New Millennium," and elsewhere that Parmenides and Empedocles conceived of knowledge as divinely revealed truth.

9. Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, among others, claimed that over the space of several centuries the main Greek expressions for "knowing" (*noein*, *gignôskein*, and *eidenai*) showed clear evidence of semantic development, away from an early identification with eyewitness experience and toward a more "reason-based" or "intuitive" conception of knowing. For a critique of the different versions of "the developmental thesis," see Leshner, "Parmenides' Critique of Thinking"; Leshner, "The Emergence of Philosophical Interest in Cognition."

10. See also *Od.* 16.470: "And I know [*oida*] at least one other thing, for I saw it with my own eyes [*idon ophthalmoisin*]; similarly *Il.* 11.741; 14.153–54; 17.84–86, 115–16; *Od.* 5.77–78, 215; 8.560; 15.532; 16.470–71, among many others.

11. Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae*, comments: "As a man among men, the poet depends on hearsay; but as divinely inspired, he has access to the knowledge of an eyewitness, 'present' at the feats he illustrates. The Muses are, in fact, credited with the same mantic powers as the seer, transcending the limitations of time" (76–77). It has been recently argued by Zellner, "Scepticism in Homer," that the prayer in *Iliad* 2 should be read not as an expression of a "folk epistemology" or "Homeric skepticism" but as a pious contrast of divine and human powers. But, as I argue in what follows, there are additional reasons to believe that Homer reflected on the narrowness of human experience and the consequent difficulty of knowing about matters far removed in space and time. The Muse prayer taken by itself expresses neither pessimism nor skepticism (since the poet is able to present a reliable account of events that took place in an earlier time), but it does reflect the view that on at least some occasions, mortal beings are able to discover the truth only with the assistance of divine powers of inspiration.

12. Among many other instances: Aegisthus learns his fate when the gods "spoke to him, sending keen-sighted Hermes" (*Od.* 1.38); Echenor the Corinthian learns his from the expert seer Polyidus (*Il.* 13.666); and Odysseus learns what the future holds for him from the words of the ghost of the seer Teiresias (*Od.* 11.100).

13. For other examples of "peirastic knowledge" see *Il.* 13.448–49, 457; 16.243; 18.269–70; and 21.226.

14. As has often been noted, Homer also speaks of "knowing" where we might speak of experiencing certain feelings and desires, or harboring certain dispositions. Menelaus says of Patroclus *pasin gar epistato meilichos einai*—"for he knew gentleness to all," while Nestor and Menelaus are described as sailing home from Troy *phila eidotes allêloisin*—"knowing friendliness to one another" (*Od.* 3.277). For a detailed discussion of this aspect of early Greek thought, and its relationship to classical accounts of the relationship between thought and action, see O'Brien, *The Socratic Paradoxes and the Greek Mind*, and Warden, "The Mind of Zeus."

15. For this use of *autos* meaning "of one's own accord" or "by oneself," see Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, sec. 1209a, and *Od.* 16.470; *Od.* 5.215: "I know for myself [*oida kai autos*] that in appearance and stature wise Penelope fails to compete with you"; *Od.* 1.216: "For never yet did any man know for himself [*autos anegnô*] his own parentage"; and *Od.* 3.26, where the goddess explains to Telemachus that in part he will devise an effective strategy "by himself" [*alla men autos eni phresi sêisi noêseis*] and in part a god will prompt him [*de kai daimôn hupothêseai*]. See also *Il.* 13.729; 17.686–88; *Od.* 6.188.

16. See also the common expression "tell me so that I/we may know" (as in *Il.* 1.363 and elsewhere). So natural is the idea of learning from the words of others that the verb *peuthomai/punthanomai* commonly means "to learn about some matter from another person." Similarly, *akouô*, "hear," can mean "learn of or come to know about by hearing," as at *Il.* 24.543: *to prin akouomen olbion einai*—"we hear/know that earlier you had been prosperous." The same attitude is reflected in the odd remark at *Od.* 6.185 that when two like-minded people become husband and wife, "they become a great sorrow for their enemies and a joy to their friends, but they hear this best themselves—*malista de t' ekluon autoi*" (see also *Il.* 13.734: *malista de kautos anegnô*—"but he knows this best himself").

17. See *Il.* 8.51–52: "And [Zeus] himself sat on the mountain peaks exulting in his glory, looking upon both the city of the Trojans and the ships of the Achaeans"; Hesiod, *Op.* 267: "the eye of Zeus, seeing all things and noting all things," among many similar remarks.

18. See the description of Calchas in *Il.* 1.69–72: "who knew what was, what had been before, and what was yet to be." Similarly, at *Il.* 3.109, Menelaus comments: "Always unsteady are the wits of the younger generation, but in whatever an old man takes part, he looks both before and after, that the results may be far the best for either side." Both Polydamus and Halitherses are praised for being able to "see *prossô kai opissô*" (*Il.* 18.250; *Od.* 24.452).

19. The fact that *nêpiê* means both "foolish" and "childish" makes it a natural foil for *noos*, the quality of mind associated with the extensive experience characteristic of those who have achieved an advanced age.

20. See the passages quoted in note 1 here.

21. Similar testimonials to the powers of the Muses appear in Ibycus 3.23; Solon, 1.49; Bacchylides 19.1, 5.31, 9.3; Pindar *Pae.* 7.5–8.

22. This aspect of early Greek poetry is summarized in Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy*: "Poetry was an important channel through which stories of the gods and heroic ancestors were transmitted and disseminated in Greek society; in so far as these myths embodied the religious traditions and moral norms of the community, the poets could be

seen as having a crucial formative influence on the beliefs and values of the Greeks at large" (39). I would add only that the advice provided by Hesiod in the *Works and Days* concerned not simply religious traditions and moral norms but also a range of practical matters.

23. Barnes, in *PP*, for example, speaks of "the pantological knowledge" of Anaximander simply on the basis of what other ancient writers tell us about the breadth of his cosmological interests (20).

24. Heracl. Pont. fr. 89 = D.L. 8.4.

25. Ael. *V.H.* 2.26 and elsewhere.

26. See Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, 160.

27. Similar achievements were credited to Phercydes. For the references and a discussion of the larger significance of these stories, see Burkert, *Lore and Science in Early Pythagoreanism*, 144–47.

28. For a detailed description of these individuals and their association with Pythagoras, see Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, 120–65.

29. See Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae*, and Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, 120–65.

30. It would be wrong, I think, to dismiss out of hand these claims to a divine connection as mere pretense or pose. As Dodds and others have explained, during this early period it was natural to think and speak of virtually any abnormal occurrence as the work or manifestation of a divine power. Achieving an intellectual breakthrough, experiencing a sudden flash of insight, solving a difficult puzzle, remembering a long-forgotten fact—each of these would naturally be regarded as something "given" or "revealed" by a superior power. See Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, esp. chap. 3, "The Blessings of Madness"; see also the discussion of the nature of a divinity in Whitman, *Homer and the Homeric Tradition*, esp. ch. 10, "Fate, Time, and the Gods."

31. Following the text and translation in Inwood, *The Poem of Empedocles*.

32. See A1.57, 60, 68–70; A2, A13, A14, and A21.

33. See "And so the Pythagoreans used to invoke the tetrad as their most binding oath: 'Nay, by him that gave to our generation the *tetraktys*, which contains the fount and root of eternal nature'" (Aëtius 1.3.8); "For 1 is the point, 2 is the line, 3 the triangle, and 4 the pyramid . . . and the same holds in generation too, for the first principle in magnitude is the point, the second the line, the third surface, and the fourth the solid" (Speusippus in *Theol.Ar.* 84.10 de Falco); "The sixth *tetraktys* is of things that grow. The seed is analogous to the unit and point, growth in length to the dyad and the line, growth in breadth to the triad and the plane, growth in depth to the tetrad and the solid" (Theo Sm. 97.17 Hiller).

34. For a recent defense of this view of the Philolaus material see Huffman, *Philolaus of Croton*.

35. "For there is not going to be anything that is going to know at all, if everything is unlimited." For a defense of this translation, see Huffman, *Philolaus of Croton*, 116 ff.

36. "And indeed all the things that are known have number. For it is not possible that anything whatsoever be conceived or known without this."

37. In Stob. 2.1 (DK 21A24). Similarly, Varro in August. *De civ. D.* 7.17.

38. Following Hussey, "The Beginnings of Epistemology," and others, I adopt the *geneto* of Plutarch's text of the fragment rather than the *iden* in Sextus's version (as defended by Fränkel). The dates of Xenophanes' birth and death are uncertain, but he is reported to have visited the court of Hieron, tyrant of Syracuse, who ruled from 478 to 467 BCE. Since B34 probably refers back to what Xenophanes himself has said about the nature of "all things," it seems reasonable to assign this remark to a later stage of his career.

39. See Hdt. 2.44: "And wishing to gain sure knowledge of these things [*thelôn de toutôn peri saphes ti eidenai*] from a point where this was possible, I took ship to Tyre in Phoenicia, where I heard there was a very holy temple of Heracles. There I saw it [*eidon*] richly equipped. . . . Then I went to Thasos where I also found a temple of Heracles. . . . Therefore what I have discovered by inquiry clearly shows [*ta men nun historêmena dêloi saphêôs*] that Heracles is an ancient god."

40. In a set of well-known remarks, Xenophanes relates "what mortals think or suppose" (*dokeousi*) about their gods (B14) and suggests that mortals have an inherent tendency to conceive of the gods as endowed with features very much like their own (see B15 and B16).

41. This view of the significance of B34 is defended by Hussey, "The Beginnings of Epistemology," 22–23, and by Leshner, *Xenophanes of Colophon*, 166–69.

42. Additional support for this view is provided by Xenophanes' remarks about natural phenomena traditionally regarded as having religious significance—the sun, clouds, rainbow, meteors, eclipses, etc. Perhaps nowhere does the Ionian spirit of inquiry come out more clearly than in the *testimonium* of Hippolytus (A33) that reports the discovery of fossilized remains of ancient sea creatures at inland locations, as evidence for a broader theory of cosmic flooding and drought. The extent of Xenophanes' engagement in natural science is discussed in Leshner, *Xenophanes of Colophon*.

43. The text in DK runs *peri tôn apheneôn, peri tôn thnêton, saphêneian men theoi echonti, hôs de anthôpois tehmairesthai*, but others omit the phrase *peri tôn thnêton* ("concerning things mortal"). I follow LSJ in supplying *dedotai* ("it is given").

44. A methodological remark made by Thucydides near the outset of his history makes it clear that *tekmeresthai* can represent a significant addition to information obtained through firsthand observation: "As to the events of the period just preceding this one, and those of a still earlier date, it was impossible to get clear information [*saphôs . . . heurien*] on account of the lapse of time; but from evidence [*ek de tekmeriôn*] that in pushing my inquiries to the furthest point I find that I can trust [*moi pisteusai*], I think they were not really great events, either as regards the wars then waged or in other particulars" (Th. 1.1.1).

45. Pritzl, "On the Way to Wisdom in Heraclitus," sees Heraclitus as championing the empirical route to knowledge. Leshner, "The Emergence of Philosophical Interest in Cognition," finds the emphasis placed on interpretation and reflection. Barnes, in *PP*, denies that Heraclitus has a view on this topic.

46. See Archil. fr. 70: "Of such a sort, Glaucus, is the consciousness [*thumos*] of mortal man, whatever Zeus may bring him for the day, for he thinks such things as he meets with." See also Semon. fr. 1; Thgn. 141–42; Sol. frs. 1, 13, 16; Pi. O. 7.25–26; N. 6.6–7; 7.23–24; 11.43–47; etc.

47. Translation mine, based on the text in DK. Lines 1–30 of B1 were quoted by S.E. M. 7.111; ll. 28–32 were quoted by Simp. in *Cael.* 557.20.

48. "In archaic Greece, the language in which gods speak through human voices is in general that of metrical verse. . . . Whatever other purposes it served in archaic Greece, then, the dactylic hexameter also seems to have functioned as an unmistakable sign that the ultimate source of the text it articulated was not human but divine" (Most, "The Poetics of Early Greek Philosophy," 353). But this seems to me most unlikely. Parmenides almost certainly knew of Hesiod's poetically framed claim that "Truly, first of all Chaos came into being [*geneto*], and next Broad-bosomed Earth, the ever-sure foundation of all" (Th. 116–17) and rejected it at B8.7, 9–10, and 26–28. Xenophanes had already repudiated the accounts of the gods given (in verse form) by Homer and Hesiod, as both socially destructive and false to the true nature of the divine. Even in the *doxa* section of Parmenides'

poem, doctrines are expressed in metrical form that Parmenides could not possibly have thought were correct. Among those mortal errors was the decision to conceive of light and dark as "opposites in body [with] signs apart from one another" (B8.55–59) rather than thinking of things (as explained in B9) as "full of light and obscure night together, of both equally." Not only does the goddess express these erroneous mortal beliefs in verse form, she even describes the presentation of these errors as a "deceitful ordering" (*kosmon . . . apatêlon*) and "seemly arrangement" (*diakosmon eoiikota*), phrases that highlight the poetic character of her presentation.

49. "However the tradition may have come to him, his journey to, or round the heavens recalls the heaven-journey of the shaman's ritual drama. He travels on a chariot, attended by the daughters of the Sun, on the way of divinity, which conducts the man who knows (*eidota phôta*) 'as far as his heart desires' and 'far from the beaten track of men'" (Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae*, 117; similarly, Kingsley, "Empedocles for the New Millennium"). But others have found equally convincing indications that the youth is descending into a lower realm, or traveling to various cities in the manner of Odysseus. It is also been suggested (by Mourelatos) that Parmenides deliberately kept the references vague in order to avoid any such identifications.

50. "For Parmenides and Empedocles the choice of poetic form seems designed to resolve a crucial philosophical problem: given that all human beings are subject to the delusion of appearance, how can the philosopher know the truth of what he claims to know? For them, only a god could possibly be the source of a set of transcendent truths to which a mere mortal, if left to his own devices would have had no access" (Most, "The Poetics of Early Greek Philosophy," 353). Similarly Cornford: "Parmenides' originality lies in his perception that that there is a gulf, which cannot be bridged, between that realm of timeless, metaphysical truth and the welter of changing qualities which the senses, and the opinions of mortals founded on the senses, falsely mistake for realities. Henceforth the immortal and divine element in man is no longer merely the spirit which, when it leaves the sleeping body, communes with gods in prophetic dreams and visions and discerns the course of past, present, and future time; it has become the faculty of which thinks and give a rational account of metaphysical reality beyond the boundaries of time and change" (120). This line of thought might carry some weight if Parmenides had adopted the traditional understanding of human knowledge as grounded in direct experience. But it is clear from B4 that he believed that *noos* has the capacity to discover the nature of what is as it must be at all times and places.

51. A view endorsed by Vlastos, review of *Principium Sapientiae*, and Curd, "The Presocratics as Philosophers." For a discussion of the various alternative translations of *poludêrin elenchon* see Leshner, "Parmenides' Critique of Thinking."

52. I follow the general analysis of the structure of the arguments as explained in Coxon, "The Philosophy of Parmenides."

53. Coxon, "The Fragments of Parmenides," 187.

54. This view of the significance of Parmenides' decision to present his account in verse, and to borrow heavily from his poetic predecessors, is put forward in Wright, "Philosopher Poets," although not with respect to Parmenides' view of the nature and sources of knowledge.

55. Plato appears to follow Parmenides' lead in adopting the language and techniques of an opposing approach in order to demonstrate his mastery over it. In the *Symposium*, for example, Plato demonstrates his complete mastery of the encomium speech in order to reveal its inadequacies as a means for expressing the truth. And, as Rachel Barney, *Names and Nature in Plato's Cratylus*, has shown, in the *Cratylus* Plato gives the etymological

approach to knowledge a thorough run for its money in order to reveal its inferiority to philosophical dialectic.

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CHAPTER 18

PRESOCRATIC
THEOLOGY

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IF, IN the context of early and classical Greek thought, we take the term "theology" to mean "a notion (however precisely or imprecisely systematized) of God/gods/the gods and his/their putative relationship, causal and directive, to the world and its operations, and to ourselves within that world," or something of that order, the first ascription of such a notion to a Presocratic philosopher is to be found in Aristotle's comment that "Thales thought that all things are full of gods" (*de An.* 411a8).¹ The statement as it stands is tantalizing, since we have no means of knowing for sure whether Thales ever used the exact spoken or written words "all things are full of gods," but it seems safe to infer from their trenchancy and premodernity of locution that Thales could well have thought or said something like that if by "god" he meant something such as "powerful life-principle." The evidence for this, though still coming to us at very tentative second hand and without formal asseveration, is to be found in Aristotle's earlier statement that "Thales, too, from what they tell us, seems to have thought that the soul was something that causes motion, if indeed he did say that the [Magnesian] stone possesses soul because it moves iron" (*de An.* 405a19–22).

The cautious inference one can draw from this, as Kirk has pointed out, is that for Thales there were a great number of forces in nature, possibly many more than most people assumed, and manifested most strikingly in the qualities of magnetic stone, that suggest not just the presence of life but a degree of life, and a power to bring about change/motion (*kinesis*), that one might wish to call divine. As such, the view is not in itself strikingly different from other animistic theories of nature, except perhaps in the boldness of its extension, if the Magnesian stone really were included in Thales' roster of "gods." But lack of evidence allows us to venture little