**Knowledge and Presence in Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy**

*The most elementary act of mental analysis takes time to do; the most rudimentary sort of speculative knowledge, abstractions so simple that we can hardly conceive the human mind without them, must grow, and with difficulty. Philosophy itself, mental and moral, has its preparation, its forethoughts, in the poetry that preceded it. (*Walter Pater*, Plato and Platonism)*

**I Introduction**

In a well-known passage in Homer’s *Iliad* the singer calls on the Muses for assistance in terms that foreshadow later philosophical thought:

Tell me now, Muses who have dwellings on Olympus—for you, goddesses, are present and know all things (*pareste te iste panta*), whereas we hear only a rumor and know nothing (*kleos hoion akouomen oude ti idmen*)—who were the captains of the Danaans and their lords. (*Iliad* 2.484−486)[[1]](#endnote-1)

As he approaches the daunting task of naming all the Greek commanders who sailed to Troy, the singer calls on the Olympian Muses who are present (presumably everywhere[[2]](#endnote-2)) and know all things, whereas he has only heard a report and knows nothing. The chief difficulty here appears to be physical separation: the poet is far removed from the events of which he sings.

The epistemic challenge, however, is not peculiar to the singer. In the opening scene of the *Iliad* Achilles similarly faults Agamemnon for his failure to take the broader view:

Truly he rages with baneful mind and knows not at all how to look both before and after, so that the Achaeans might wage war in safety beside their ships” (*Iliad* 1.342−345).

The phrase “not…both before and after” (*oude*…*prossô kai opissô*) applies to those who can neither learn from the past nor anticipate the future.[[3]](#endnote-3) In the *Odyssey*, Homer contrasts the suitors who fail to sense the disaster awaiting them with the seer Halitherses who “alone saw before and after” (*ho gar hoios ora prossô kai opissô*, *Odyssey* 24.452). In his speech to the suitor Amphinomus, Odysseus identifies the inability to think of “what will be hereafter” (*opissô*) as characteristic of the species and likens the *noos* or “mind” of mortals to “the day the father of gods and men brings to them” (*Odyssey* 18.133−137). As we shall see, the narrow scope of human experience was a common lament among Greek poets of the archaic period and a number of Presocratic philosophers shared their concern. One early thinker, Xenophanes of Colophon, appears to have concurred in the traditional pessimism while Heraclitus, Parmenides, Empedocles, and Democritus all held that human beings, with or without the assistance of divine powers, could achieve knowledge, even of distant events or conditions.

**II Knowledge and Presence in Early Greek poetry**

Laments about the ignorance, foolishness, and general helplessness of humankind can be heard often in archaic Greek poetry:

[The Muses hymn the suffering of men], how they live witless and helpless (*aphradees* *kai amêchanoi*) and cannot find healing for death or defense against old age. (*Hymn to Pythian Apollo* 189−193)[[4]](#endnote-4)

One sub-theme within this broader lament is the inability of human beings to anticipate future events or conditions:

Unknowing (*nêides*) are humans and foolish (*aphradmones*), not foreseeing the good or evil that comes upon them. (*Hymn to Demeter* 256−257)

Nor does any man get what he wishes, for his desire hold the ends of sore perplexity (*amêchaniês*). We men practice vain things, knowing nothing (*eidotes ouden*) while the gods accomplish all to their intention. (Theognis 139−142)

There is no mind (*noos*) in human beings, but we live for the day like beasts, not knowing (*ouden eidotes*) how the god will bring each thing about. (Semonides fr. 1)

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. (Simonides fr. 22)

As he echoes Homer’s disparagement of the *noos* of mortals, the poet Archilochus identifies one contributing factor: mortal minds are shaped, hence limited by, the events or conditions they happen to have experienced:

Of such a sort, Glaucus, son of Leptines, is the mind (*thumos*) of mortal man, whatever Zeus may bring him for the day, for he thinks such things as he meets with (*hokoiois enkureôsin*). (Archilochus fr. 70, 68 Diehl)[[5]](#endnote-5)

One feature of the Greek language is relevant here. Each of the three most commonly used Greek verbs for knowing—*gignôskô, epistamai, and oida*—was associated to some degree with sense perception. The primary meaning of *gignôskô* appears to have been “come to know” or “know again, recognize,” with the present tense of the verb formed by reduplication on the aorist form *gnônai* with the addition of the inceptive element *skô-*.[[6]](#endnote-6) The meaning of the basic *gnô-* element is believed to have been “notice” or “take note of.” In Homer, the meaning of *gignôskô* ranges from simple perceptual awareness[[7]](#endnote-7) to ascertaining the identity of what one perceives[[8]](#endnote-8), recognizing someone or something one already knows[[9]](#endnote-9), and ascertaining the nature of the things[[10]](#endnote-10), events, or activities one has observed.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The standard Greek lexicon (LSJ) defines *epistamai* as “know how to do, be able to do, be capable of doing (with a related use of “to be assured or feel sure that”), to understand a matter, know, be well versed in or acquainted with, to know by heart, to know as a fact, and (rarely) know a person, know that”; and for the participle *epistamenos*, “knowing, understanding, skillful, skilled, versed in” and adverbially “skillfully, expertly.” In Homer, practical or skill uses of the verb predominate[[12]](#endnote-12), with only one clear instance of knowing about some matter of fact.[[13]](#endnote-13) *Epistamai* appears commonly in Greek poetry in connection with skills and expertise[[14]](#endnote-14), also occasionally designating an awareness of some fact, truth, or state of affairs.[[15]](#endnote-15) Its origin in \**epi-histamai* (“stand before” or “be confronted with”) suggests that a person *epistatai*, or becomes *epistamenos*, in becoming acquainted with, skilled in, and confident about some matter.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Similarly, as a perfect form of *eidô* (“see”), the Greek verb *oida* (“know”) originally designated a knowledge grounded in vision (meaning “I have seen”),[[17]](#endnote-17) although forms of *oida* occur in Homer in connection with faculties other than our sense of sight.[[18]](#endnote-18) But since *oida* covers the range of cognitive achievements marked out by *epistamai* and *gignôskô*, and can be used interchangeably with both, it also associates knowing with having perceived a particular person, object, event, or state of affairs. I would not claim (as some have) that during this early period the Greek verbs for knowing *just* *meant* “know by sense perception, especially by seeing” (cf. the passage just quoted from *Iliad* 20), but it would be true to say that these verbs are *typically employed* in settings in which an individual has direct experience of some matter.

Thus, even before philosophers began to reflect on the sources and limits of knowledge, the poets of archaic Greece had already developed their own, largely pessimistic view of the matter. They held, essentially: (1) that during their brief life-times mortals can directly experience only a small portion of the world; (2) that mortals can think (hence know) only in terms of what they have directly experienced; and therefore (3), that during their brief life-times mortals can think of (hence know) only a small portion of the world. When one adds to this the truism that the scope of human experience pales in comparison with the synoptic view of the world enjoyed by the gods[[19]](#endnote-19), it follows that with respect to any distant event or state of affairs it is for gods to know and mortals merely to opine.

**III Philosophical Responses to the Problem**

At some point in the early decades of the 5th century[[20]](#endnote-20), the philosophically-minded poet Xenophanes of Colophon reflected on the prospects for knowledge in terms that echoed the traditional view (B 34):

And, of course[[21]](#endnote-21), the clear and sure truth (*to saphes*) no man has seen, nor will there be anyone who knows (*eidôs*) about the gods and such things as I say about all things. For even if one were to succeed the most in speaking of what is brought to fulfillment (*ta malista tuchoi tetelesmenon eipôn*), nevertheless, he himself would not know (*ouk oide*). But opinion (*dokos*) is fashioned for all (men).[[22]](#endnote-22)

B 34 puts forward, essentially, two lines of argument in support of a single negative conclusion, both trading on the existence of a gap between things we mortals might like to know and the resources we have available to us in this connection. Xenophanes begins by reminding those in his audience of the obvious impossibility of knowing *to saphes* about “such things as I say about the gods and all things”. *To saphes*, we should remember, is not simply “the truth” or “truth in general”, but rather “the clear and certain truth”, the kind of truth individuals typically know when they are directly presented with the relevant circumstances.[[23]](#endnote-23) Not only do the gods occupy a realm far off the beaten track, but, as Xenophanes elsewhere (B 16) explains, our conceptions of divinity are infected with subjectivity: “Ethiopian gods are black and snub-nosed, Thracian gods are grey-eyed and red haired.” Thus, no characterization of the will, actions, or nature of divine beings can ever rise to the level of clear and certain truth. Equally obviously, no mortal can ever be in a position to have clear and certain knowledge of the nature of things as they exist at all places and times—so long as direct observation is regarded as a necessary condition for knowing the clear and certain truth.

Xenophanes now adds: “for even if someone were to succeed the most in speaking of what is brought to fulfillment, he himself would not know.” In this remark Xenophanes closes off what had previously been the one saving option: “speaking of what is brought to fulfillment” was typically the province of divinely inspired individuals who claim to be able to predict future events or recover obscure events from the past.[[24]](#endnote-24) But Xenophanes provides alternative, entirely naturalistic explanations for a wide range of phenomena traditionally regarded as omens and portents (rainbows, eclipses, shooting stars, etc.), thereby depriving the seer of his divinatory materials.[[25]](#endnote-25) So—and this is the first stage of the argument—mortals have not known and never will know the clear and certain truth concerning such non-evident matters as the gods and the nature of all things. And now in addition—stage two—even if someone were to speak truly concerning events as they come to pass, that person would still have only opinion (*dokos*), and not certain knowledge. The lucky guess, even the intelligent conjecture, still falls short of the sure grasp of the truth that counts as knowing. So not only is there a gap between the things we might like to know and what we are in a position to observe first-hand, it is also impossible for us to make up for this deficiency by calling on divine beings for their assistance. Again, according to Xenophanes, “…it is for gods to know and humans to opine.”[[26]](#endnote-26)

In two other respects Xenophanes’ outlook aligns more closely with that of the archaic poet than with the attitude displayed by the Ionian philosopher-scientists. In fragment B 36 he highlights the degree to which human opinion is the product of happenstance:

If gods had not made yellow honey, they would think that figs were much sweeter.

On one reading, B 36 asserts merely the subjectivity of our sense of taste; our judgments of sweetness can be affected by other taste experiences, just as our sense of the temperature of the bath water may be affected by the temperature we experience just prior to stepping into the tub. But if we take sweetness as a synecdoche for qualities in general we may read B 36 as an assertion of the relativity of human judgement in general: for all subject matters, what we human beings believe to be the case is a function of our prior experience, i.e. the local conditions we happen to have encountered. We can also see Xenophanes” remarks about the noticeable similarities between religious believers and their gods (B 14-16) as yet another example of how the beliefs of mortal beings are dictated by circumstances.[[27]](#endnote-27)

The first philosopher to challenge the older pessimism was Heraclitus of Ephesus.[[28]](#endnote-28) In a series of artfully crafted aphorisms, fashioned at some point in the early decades of the 5th century, Heraclitus put forward what he represented as his insight into the nature of things as they exist in all places and times, as well as how things change over time in accordance with a single governing principle. In the process, he also challenged the association of knowledge with direct experience and the traditional standing of the poets as paragons of wisdom. Heraclitus signals a more optimistic view at the outset of his treatise when (in fragment B1) he describes his agenda as “distinguishing each thing according to its nature and making known how it is (*kata phusin* *diaireôn hekaston kai phradzôn hokôs echei*).” Equally upbeat is his claim that the central element in his account of the cosmos and our place in it—the *logos* that is both his “message” and “the structural plan” of the universe at large[[29]](#endnote-29)—is both universal in its application and directly present to each individual.

First, the claim to universality: “wisdom (*to sophon*) is one thing: to master the intelligent plan (*epistasthai gnômên*) of how all things are steered through all” (B 41). Grasping the *logos* (in both senses) requires among other things understanding how “all things are one” (B 50) and how “things that disagree with themselves agree with themselves” (B 51), as illustrated by the bow and lyre (B 51), the up and down road (B 60), young and old, waking and sleeping, life and death (B 88), the beginning and end of a circle (B 103), etc. In addition, the *logos* “holds forever” (B 1) and is “the same for all” (B 30). Among other universal claims: “Thunderbolt steers all things” (B 64), “All things are in exchange for fire and fire for all things” (B 90), and “…all things happen in accordance with strife and necessity” (B 80).

Next, the claim to presence: “Thinking,” he claims, “is common to all” (B 113), “It belongs to all people to know themselves and to think rightly” (B 116), “although the *logos* is common, most people live as if they had their own private understanding” (B 2), and “They are at odds with the *logos*, with which above all they are in continuous contact, and the things they meet with every day appear strange to them” (B 72). But, as this last set of remarks indicates, although it lies within the power of ordinary individuals to grasp the *logos*, achieving that understanding will require more than the use of “eyes and ears.” So much seems evident from the indictment of the polymaths (at least for the Ionian inquirers Xenophanes and Hecataeus) as lacking in *noos* (B 40), and the characterization of eyes and ears as “bad witnesses for those with “barbarian” or uncomprehending souls” (B 107). Through a repeated contrasting of those with experience and those with no experience (B 1 and 17), presence and absence (B 34), contact and isolation (B 2 and 72), sleeping and waking (B 89), and hearing but not comprehending (B 34), Heraclitus insists that we must move beyond perceptual contact if we are to understand the true but hidden nature of events occurring throughout the cosmos. Mere mortals may gain access to the principles and forces that rule the cosmos, but they must do more than simply observe their perceptible effects.

Heraclitus saves his harshest condemnation for the popular poets Homer, Hesiod, and Archilochus—as in B 57: “The teacher of most people is Hesiod. They feel sure he knows the most things, a man who did not know day and night, i.e. that they are one thing.” Similarly, B 104: “What understanding or intelligence do they possess? They place their trust in the popular bards, and take the throng for their teacher, not realizing that the many are bad, and the good are few.” And in B 17 he challenges Archilochus” claim that people “think such things as they meet with” by asserting that “they do not think such things as they meet with”—people do not, in other words, think in terms of the *logos* with which they are in constant contact.

It is evident, then, that Heraclitus believed that he (and others able to profit from his instruction) could move beyond their perceptual acquaintance with “what they meet with” to acquire knowledge of the principles and forces that order the cosmos. But how did he suppose anyone could do that? The key to his positive outlook, I believe, lies in his focusing on specific phenomena whose nature (*phusis*) implicates, albeit in some non-obvious way, the presence of one or more universal principles. These phenomena include such emblematic items as the river that is both constantly changing and remaining the same, the up and down roadway that is one and the same, the barley drink that remains what it is only when it continues to be stirred, the handwriting that is both crooked and straight, the beautiful cosmos that is also refuse poured out at random, and a host of other items which are what they are as well as the exact opposite of what they are. In short, we can discover the principles that order the cosmos, specifically the principle of the unity of the opposites, by directing our attention toward the things met with on a daily basis that are emblematic of those larger principles or patterns.[[30]](#endnote-30) Grasping these non-evident universal principles, rather than listening to the popular sages, is what can “teach *nous*.”

It is also worth noting that, so far as we know, Heraclitus was the first Greek thinker to speak of the soul (*psuchê*) in connection with gaining knowledge.[[31]](#endnote-31) We are told (in B 107) that:  
  
 Eyes and ears are bad witnesses for those with uncomprehending (“barbarian”) souls.

On one plausible reading, Heraclitus’ point here is that unless we have some understanding of the ways in which the opposites agree, we are likely to be misled by the contrast and variation characteristic of sense experience. People do not understand, in other words, how there is a “backwards turning connection”—how things opposed to each other are actually in agreement with each other. Similarly, some connection between knowledge and the state of the soul is at least suggested in the difficult B 118:

A flash of light, a dry soul is wisest and best.

If we take a “dry soul” to be one purified by coming into contact with the “ever-living fire” that is synonymous with the cosmic order, then here also the soul plays an essential role in coming to understand the nature of things. These remarks have a direct bearing on problem of presence, since if we are able to understand how events taking place throughout the universe happen in accordance with a single governing principle, thanks in part to our exercise of the soul’s powers, then we are not constrained to think of things only in the way in which we encounter them in sense experience. Heraclitus did not invent the capacity to reason, but he does appear to have been the first to assert that by reflecting on hidden connections between the parts of nature we can come to understand both the larger world and our place in it.

He was not, however, the only early thinker to attempt to sever the link between knowledge and presence. Witness the words of the goddess of Parmenides’ B4:

Gaze upon things which though far off are yet firmly present to mind (*noôi pareonta*);

For you shall not cut off what-is (*to eon*) from holding fast to what-is,

Nor does it disperse itself in every way everywhere in order,

Nor gather itself together.

The goddess enjoins mortals to think[[32]](#endnote-32) about things which though far off are still firmly present to the mind, in so far as what-is has a uniform and indivisible nature (“you shall not cut off what-is from holding fast to what is”), and (in addition) what-is cannot “be dispersed in some order” or “gather itself together.” The reasoning underlying the goddess’ directive is grounded in the true but unappreciated nature of reality: we must think about and come to know[[33]](#endnote-33) what-is in only one way in so far as what-is has a specific nature—to wit: even things that are distant in some respect are still “firmly present (*pareonta* *bebaiôs*) to the mind.”[[34]](#endnote-34) That what-is exists in a firmly present, unshaking, certifiable, and inviolable manner is indicated by the “very many signs” presented in B8 which establish that what-is can never come into being or be destroyed, be divided into parts, move about from place to place, and develop over time. In addition, in so far as what-is exists in an entirely uniform manner, it cannot be accurately characterized—as perhaps Heraclitus had attempted to do—as first being dispersed in some arrangement and then gathering itself together.[[35]](#endnote-35) So when in fragment B 7 Parmenides has his goddess enjoin the youth to “judge by reasoning the much-contested testing spoken by me” [[36]](#endnote-36) he is implicitly rejecting the pessimistic assessment of human intelligence given first by the poets and subsequently by Xenophanes. Mortal thought is neither entirely derived from nor limited to the things we encounter through our sense faculties.[[37]](#endnote-37) On the contrary, by exercising our capacity for rational thinking we can discover the nature of reality, even in its most distant aspects.[[38]](#endnote-38)

In both his epistemology and his metaphysics Empedocles gives what might be termed a partial endorsement of the traditional disparagement of human intelligence. In his account of what-is (B 8, 11, 12, and 17), Empedocles reaffirms Parmenides’ rejection of the possibility of absolute coming into being and destruction, but he also posits a kind of creation and destruction made possible through the mixing and separation of the basic elements. Similarly, Empedocles laments in traditional language the narrow range of human experience[[39]](#endnote-39) and restricts the beliefs of mortals to “what they have met with”[[40]](#endnote-40), with the singular exception of one who has had the good fortune to come within earshot of Empedocles’ teachings:

For narrow are the devices that are spread throughout the body

And many wretched things bursting through blunt the thoughts,

And having beheld but a small part (*pauson…meros*) of life in their experience,

Taking off they fly like smoke, short-lived.

Each persuaded only of that which he has met with (*prosekursen*),

As they are driven everywhere, everyone claims to have found the whole.

These things are neither beheld by men, nor heard,

Nor comprehended by mind.

But you[[41]](#endnote-41), since you have turned aside here.

Shall learn as far as mortal thought can reach.

Despite the predominantly pessimistic tone of this remark, in B 131 Empedocles affirms a pluralistic view of how to achieve clear knowledge of each thing:

But come behold each thing by every device through which it becomes clear (*dêlon*)

Not regarding any sight as more trustworthy than hearing,

Nor resounding hearing beyond the clarities of the tongue,

Nor withholding trust (*pistei*) from any of the other organs

By which there is a pathway to understanding (*noêsai*)

But understand (*noei*)[[42]](#endnote-42) each thing in the way it becomes clear (*dêlon*). (B 131.9−13)

These remarks place Empedocles’ view of the prospects for knowledge somewhere in between the pessimism of Xenophanes and the optimism of Heraclitus and Parmenides. The thoughts of the mass of mankind are restricted to the circumstances in which they find themselves. Yet for those able and willing to hear Empedocles’ words and “divide up the discourse in their inner parts” (B 4), it is possible to discover the nature of the basic elements and the ways in which love and strife hold sway throughout the cosmos.

Democritus appears to have embraced a similarly complex view. Clearly, being separated from the realities constituted something of an impediment to knowledge:

According to this standard a person must know that he is separated from reality (*apêllaktai eteês*). (B 6)

In reality we know nothing (*etêi* *ouden idmen*), for the truth is in the depths (*hê alêtheia* *buthôi*). (B 117)[[43]](#endnote-43)

As he denies that we possess secure knowledge Democritus also asserts that our perception and beliefs result from an interaction involving our bodies and the object:

In reality, we understand nothing securely (*ouden atrekes suniemen*), but we perceive what changes in relation to the disposition of the body as things enter or resist. (B 9)

This explanation too shows that in reality we know nothing about anything (*eteêi ouden ismen* *peri oudenos*), but for everyone believing is an influx (*epirusmiê*). (B 7)

Some students of Democritus’ thought, both ancient and modern, have read these remarks as an unqualified rejection of the possibility of knowledge.[[44]](#endnote-44) Jonathan Barnes, for one, takes Democritus’ denial of knowledge to be definitive in so far as it is grounded in a kind of “Heisenberg indeterminacy”: in becoming aware of an object our sense faculties interact with the object and necessarily alter it to some degree. When understood as an inherent, structural problem, knowledge (of the object itself) is clearly impossible.[[45]](#endnote-45) Democritus’ remarks do not, however, line up precisely with Barnes’ analysis. What Democritus says (in B 9) is that we understand nothing securely but (*men*…*alla*) we perceive what changes, and (in B 7) that we know nothing but (*men*…*de*) believing is an influx (B 7). Thus, what Barnes takes as a conclusion followed by the supporting rational Democritus presented as two parallel claims. It is entirely possible that Democritus’ thesis was that we have no knowledge of the realities, but we do have perception and belief achieved by means of an interaction between the objects and ourselves.[[46]](#endnote-46)

In addition, any attempt to saddle Democritus with a full-blooded skepticism must find reason to discount evidence which supports a less extreme thesis. Aëtius, for example, credited Leucippus, Diogenes, and Democritus not with the unknowability of the atoms and the void, but rather with the unknowability of everything other than the basic realities:

Nothing is true or comprehensible (*katalêpton*) beyond the primary elements: atoms and the void. These alone exist by nature…(A 32)

Sextus reports finding explicit mention by Democritus of two forms of knowledge, with a clear elevation of that gained through thought (*dianoia*) over one based in sense perception:

In the *Standards* he says there are two kinds of knowledge (*gnôseis*): one through the senses (*aisthêseôn*), one through thought (*dianoia*)…He says explicitly “Of cognition (*gnômês*) there are two kinds, one legitimate, one bastard. Of the bastard kind are these: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch. And there is the legitimate kind distinct from the latter. (B 11)

In light of these remarks, a number of recent studies[[47]](#endnote-47) credit Democritus with something less than a total skepticism: we face considerable difficulty in gaining knowledge about the basic realities, i.e. the atoms and the void, in so far as our sense faculties are unable to penetrate to the level at which those realities are to be found. So it is not possible to gain knowledge about such matters on the basis of evidence supplied by our bodily senses. Nevertheless, since we can also acquire knowledge through the exercise of our capacity for rational thought, it may yet be possible for us to achieve a correct theoretical understanding of the nature of the basic entities.The present tense statements “we understand nothing” and “we know nothing” can be naturally read as expressing the conviction that at present we lack the kind of detailed understanding of the relationship between the basic realities and our cognitive faculties that would justify a claim to knowledge of the real nature of things. But there is no reason to suppose that our present condition represents an ineluctable state of affairs.[[48]](#endnote-48)

The general trend is clear: although Xenophanes reaffirmed the older association of knowing the truth with being directly present, Heraclitus held that the soul can discover the *logos* that holds everywhere and forever. Parmenides similarly claimed that human beings could achieve a rational understanding of the nature of things, even those located at some remove. And both Empedocles and Democritus contrasted an inferior form of awareness possessed by ordinary individuals with the wide-ranging understanding available to those able and willing to hear and reflect on their teachings.

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1. **Footnotes**

   I follow the translations of Homer by A. T. Murray, with minor departures. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Leaf and Bayfield comment (*ad* 485): “*pareste*: (1) ‘are present at all that happens’, or (2) ‘stand at the poet”s side.’ (1) is better.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See *Iliad* 3.109−110, 13.730−735, and 18.250. *Prossô*, literally “forward, ahead,” means “the first event to occur and already in the past,” while *opissô*, literally “behind,” means “the one behind, the next event to occur, the future.” For an explanation of this curious feature of the Greek language, see the discussion in Dunkel (1982−83), and Lesher (2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Similarly: Ibycus, fr. 1.23−26; Solon, frs. 1 and 13; Pindar, *Paean* 6.50−58; *Olympian* 7.25−26; and *Nemean* 6.6−7; 7.23−24; and 11.43−47; and Simonides in Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A 1.982b28−30. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In Fränkel’s paraphrase (1962:135): “Our world of thought and feeling is radically molded for us by the events which befall us; we are the echo, so to speak, of the conditions in which we find ourselves at a given time.” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The standard Greek lexicon (*LSJ*) gives “come to know, perceive, know, discern, distinguish, recognize, learn, perceive that, feel that, be aware of, perceive to be, know to be, take to mean that, form a judgment, think that, and understand,” as well as the extended and rarer meanings of “determine or decide, know carnally, and make known.” In the standard edition, the meaning of “know” was restricted to past tenses, but this error was corrected in the 1968 supplement. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. “And the mist I have taken from your eyes so that you might well discern (*gignôskêis*) both god and man” (*Iliad* 5.127−128). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. “Achilles turned and immediately knew (*egnô*) Pallas Athena (*Iliad* 1.205−206). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. “We will know each other (*gnôsometh’ allêlôn*) more certainly for we have signs which we two know” (*Odyssey* 23.109). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. “I knew (*egnô*) as I looked upon him that he was a bird of omen” (*Odyssey* 15.532). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. “Since you have observed it for yourself, I think you already know that (*gignôskein hoti*) a god has rolled destruction on the Danaans and given victory to the Trojans” (*Iliad* 17.687−688). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The following are typical: “Arcadian warriors skilled in warfare (*epistamenoi* *polemidzein*)” (*Iliad* 2.611); “He who knew how to fashion (*epistato teuchein*) all kinds of ornaments” (*Iliad* 5.60); “skilled (*epistamenos*) in the javelin” (*Iliad* 15.282). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. “No one took thought to rouse me from my couch, though you knew clearly in your hearts (*epistamenai sapha thumôi*) when he went on board the hollow black ship” (*Odyssey* 4.729−731). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. This is the most common use of the participle *epistamenos* “skilled in the lovely gift of the Muses” (Archilochus, fr. 1); “another through his learning in the gifts of the Olympian muses, skilled in the measure of their lovely art” (Solon fr. 1), etc. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Cf. “…although I know (*epistamenon*) what is good and honorable among men…An ox that sets his strong hoof upon my tongue restrains me, even though I know (*epistamenos*),” (Theognis, 652 and 815−816). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See Beekes and Beck, 1.445. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. See Beekes and Beck, 1.1053. The significance of this fact has been discussed by Snell (1953), Fränkel (1962), Heitsch (1966), Lesher (1981), Hussey (1990), and Lesher (2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. “We know (*idmen*) each other’s lineage and each other’s parents, for we have heard the tales told in olden days by mortal men, but not with sight of eyes have you seen my parents nor I yours” (*Iliad* 20.203−205). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Cf. Hesiod, *Works and Days* 267: “…the eye of Zeus, seeing all things and noting all things.” [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Since B 34 makes reference to “such things as I say about all things,” the phrase would appear to relate to Xenophanes’ reflections on the accounts of nature and the divine he has previously put forward, hence reflecting his thinking at a fairly late stage of his life. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Kai… men oun*: “And of course.” Denniston (1978:473) takes *oun* to be emphasizing a prospective *men* (looking ahead to the *de* clause in line four), but *men oun* might also serve to mark an obvious truth: “And of course no man has known or ever will know [this sort of truth about these sorts of things]” (cf. LSJ, *men* II 2). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Translations based on the texts as given in Diels-Kranz 1951, cited either as B (fragments) or A (*testimonia*). “All things” (*pantôn*) is best understood as “all constituents of physical universe” (cf. B 27: “for all things (*panta*) are from earth and to earth all things come in the end”). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Chantraine (1999:991) cites the Hittite form *suppi*: “pure, clear” and states that *saphês* and its cognates “exprime l’idée d’évidence, de clartê avec une vue objective.” The element of direct experience comes out clearly in *Iliad* 2.252−253 and *Iliad* 17.226−227 (the adverb *sapha*); Herodotus *History* 2.44 (*saphes to eidenai*); and Alcmaeon B 1 where the gods have *saphêneia* while mortals must draw inferences from signs (*tekmairesthai*). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. The following is a typical case of the circumstances in which one speaks of what is *tetelesmenos*: “Then among them spoke also the godlike Theoclymenus, saying:

    ‘Honored wife of Odysseus, son of Laertes, he truly has no clear understanding (*ou sapha oiden*); but do thou hearken to my words, for with certain knowledge will I prophesy to thee (*atrekeôs gar soi manteusomai*), and will hide naught…’ Then wise Penelope answered him: ‘Ah, stranger, I would that this word might be fulfilled (*epos tetelesmenos eiê*)’” (*Odyssey* 17.154−160). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Similarly, the rejection of divine revelation in Xenophanes B 18: “Not from the outset did the gods reveal all things to mortals, but as they seek in time they discover better.” Two ancient authors (Cicero and Aetius in A 52) state that Xenophanes “repudiated divination in its entirety.” The ultimate basis for Xenophanes’ skepticism, or pessimism, is arguably his conception of the divine, or at least “the one greatest god” who is “not at all like mortals in body and thought” (B 23). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Varro in Augustine, *City of God* 7.17: “…but, as Xenophon of Colophon writes, I will state what I think, not what I am prepared to maintain: *hominis est enim haec opinare, Dei scire*.” [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. There is an apparent tension between the pessimism expressed in these remarks and the optimistic outlook reflected in other Xenophanes fragments, especially the positive reference to the fruits of inquiry (*dzetountes*) in B 18. But it is important to bear in mind the restricted scope of the pessimistic B 34: “about the gods and such things as I say about all things”. This leaves open the possibility of discovering the truth concerning all sorts of mundane matters. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. I assume the usual dating of Heraclitus’ *akmê* to the 69th Olympiad (504/501 BC). It is more likely that Heraclitus followed and responded to the older pessimism embraced by Xenophanes rather than the other way around. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Following Kirk, Raven, and Schofield (1984:187): “*logos*, which is to be interpreted as the unifying formula or proportionate method of arrangement of things, what might almost be termed their structural plan both individual and in sum.” [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Here I follow Graham 2008:182: “The concrete case becomes a stand-in for a general truth. Life, or experience in general, is like a river, or like a road. Heraclitus fashions concrete descriptions of the world to function as emblems of general patterns.” The most common of those patterns is chiasmus: “All things are in exchange for fire and fire for all things, as goods for gold and gold for goods” (B 90, see also B 10, 36, 62, 88, and 126). Heraclitus also draws on the model of oracular utterance in order to explain how, like the god Apollo, the world neither tells us the truth nor hides the truth from us but signals it to us in terms we need to figure out. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. A thesis introduced and defended by M. Nussbaum (1972). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. I take it that the goddess’ directive to “gaze (*leusse*) upon things” amounts to a charge to the youth to direct his thoughts broadly, rather than to direct his faculties of sense perception toward distant objects. *Leussô* has a straightforward perceptual sense as well as an intellectual one, but her injunction in B 7 against relying on an “unfocussed eye and echoing ear” makes it clear what kind of *leussein* she is urging here in B 4. In Homer *leussô* can mean either to direct one’s sight (e.g. *Iliad*  5.771) or to think about, bring to mind (e.g. *Iliad* 3.110: *prossô kai opissô leussei*). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. The goddess does not state her thesis here in B4 in terms of *knowing* what-is, but Parmenides elsewhere (B 1.30) links “learning” (*puthesthai*) with “acquiring an unshaking heart of truth.” [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. The note of “firm presence” sounded by *bebaiôs* is echoed by *atremes*- “unshaking” at B 1.29 and B 8.4, *dokimôs* *einai*- “certifiably be” at B 1.32, *echei*- “holds fast” at B 8.15 and B 8.31, *epedêsen*- “shackled” at B 8.37, and by *asulon*- “inviolably” at B 8.48. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Some believe that Parmenides’ wording—*oute skidnamenon pantêi pantôs kata kosmon/ oute sunistamenon*—echoes the *skidnêsi kai palin sunagei* of Heraclitus B 91 and the *kosmon* of B 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. It is difficult to determine the precise meaning of *logos* in the phrase *krinai de logôi*. When it appears at B 8.50 (“here I cease my *logos*”) it is plausibly rendered as “account”, but given that the alternative here at B 7.5 is relying on the testimony of eye, ear, and tongue, *krinai de logôi* might well mean “judge by (means of your faculty of) reason” or “judge by reasoning.” [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Parmenides imparts the same lesson in B 16 (“So mind (*noos*) is present to men…for the full is thought”). As Gallop (1984:87) explains, “…since “the full” is the sole content of thought, it follows that what the human constitution thinks is the same for all men, i.e., what-is.” [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. The point has been made by Coxon 1986:187: “Xenophanes had borrowed from Homer (B 485-6) the equation of knowing with present perception and concluded that, with regard to the gods and other matters lying 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.” [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. In B 39 he criticizes “those who have seen little of the whole (*oligon tou* *pantos idontôn*).” [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Cf. also B 106: “The intelligence (*mêtis*) of men grows in proportion to what is present (*pros pareon*).” B 108 similarly states that “Inasmuch as they become different, it was ever present to them to think different thoughts.” [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. In B 1 Empedocles urges “Pausanias, son of prudent Anchites, to hearken.” [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. One would normally translate *noêsai* and *noei* by the English “thinking” and “think,” but these seem too narrow given Empedocles’ injunction not to restrict learning to any one pathway. “Understanding,” as in “the faculty of human understanding,” seems preferable here. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. The meaning of “truth” here is explained by B 125 (from Sextus Empiricus): “…but truth in existent things consists of there being atoms in the void.” [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Aristotle credited Democritus with holding that “…either nothing is true or at any rate it is unclear (*adêlon*) to us what is true” (*Metaphysics* 1009b), although this remark occurs in the context of a discussion of sense perception. Similarly, Sextus in B 8: “And yet it will be clear that there is no way of knowing how each thing is in reality.” More precisely, what Sextus stated was that “in reality knowing the nature of each thing is “problematic”, “a puzzle” or “in a state of difficulty” (*en aporôi*). [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. “[Democritus’] point is this: cognitive processes are interactions between observers and objects of observation; the processes atomically construed, consist in the impingement of atoms from the object on the body of the observer. Now any such process involves a change in the object; for it loses at least those atoms which impinge upon the observer. Consequently, we can never know the state of any object; for any attempt to discover it thereby changes it. We grasp nothing “firm”; for our very grip disturbs. Knowledge alters the known; and therefore knowledge is impossible…The *doxis epirhusmiê* argument is resolutely skeptical; and B 6, B7, B 8, and B 117 leave no room for any knowledge at all.” (Barnes 1979:259 and 261) [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Cf. the parallel *men… de* structure of Xenophanes’ B 34: “and certainly (*men oun*) the clear truth no man has seen…but opinion (*dokos de*) is fashioned for all men.” [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. See the accounts given by Curd (2001:149−169), Graham (2010:624), Guthrie (1965:458−459), and Taylor (1999:216−222), among others. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Cf. the language employed in B 10: “That in reality we do not now (*nun*) understand what kind of thing each thing is or is not, has been made clear in many ways.” Similarly, what Democritus states in B 6 is that “one is (or has been) separated from reality” (*apêllaktai*), not that one is forever cut off from it. According to LSJ, the meanings of the root verb *apallassô* range from “get rid of,” “remove,” “depart from,” “take away from,” “leave,” and “go away” to “give up” and “be done with.” While some of these translations may suggest irretrievability, others do not.

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