

## τὰ πολλά ἥσσω νοῦ: A puzzle in Xenophanes

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In his *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* ix 19, Diogenes Laertius attributes a number of sayings to the late 6th and early 5th-century poet Xenophanes of Colophon. After summarizing Xenophanes' explanation of the role played by the sun's heat in the formation of clouds, Laertius quotes a series of his remarks about 'the being of god':

The being of god is spherical, having no similarity to man. Whole it sees and whole it hears, but it does not breathe, being wholly mind and thought and eternal. He was the first to declare that everything that comes to be is perishable and that the soul is breath. ἔφη δὲ καὶ τὰ πολλά ἥσσω νοῦ εἶναι, and that he encountered tyrants as seldom or as pleasantly as possible.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the sayings Laertius alludes to here survive in more complete form in the works of other ancient writers (e.g., in Sextus Empiricus' 'whole it sees, whole it thinks, and whole it hears'). But when Laertius credits Xenophanes with having said that τὰ πολλά were ἥσσω νοῦ he takes us into uncharted territory. No similar remark appears in any of the surviving Xenophanes fragments or ancient reports of his teachings. Since the sentence immediately preceding concerns the perishability of all things and the nature of the soul, while the sentence immediately following describes how Xenophanes dealt with tyrants, the immediate context offers no obvious clue.<sup>2</sup> However, a review of the meanings of the key terms and proposed interpretations will clarify the relevant issues and point the way toward a plausible interpretation. It will emerge that the remark reflects Xenophanes' understanding of the relationship between the divine mind and the cosmos.

### I. The meaning of τὰ πολλά, ἥσσω, and νοῦς

Τὰ πολλά is literally 'the many', as when the Zeno of Plato's *Parmenides* 128d speaks of those who 'assert the existence of τὰ πολλά'.<sup>3</sup> It can also be used to

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<sup>1</sup> I follow the Greek texts of the (B section) fragments and (A section) *testimonia* in Diels and Kranz 1952. Except where noted, translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Mejer 1978, 18 identifies this as common practice for Laertius: 'The use of an excerpt will often lead to the introduction of another excerpt from the same source (whether or not it fits the context) or on the same subject matter from another source... As a result we sometimes find a series of excerpts piled up at the end of a paragraph.'

<sup>3</sup> Τὰ πολλά appears here as the accusative subject of the verb εἶναι, in indirect discourse following ἔφη. We need not assume that εἶναι was part of the original remark, although Xenophanes might

speak of many things collectively, i.e., as ‘the multitude’ or ‘the multiplicity of things’, as when Socrates speaks (*Rep.* 596a) of ‘positing a single form in the case of each multiplicity (περὶ ἕκαστα τὰ πολλὰ) to which we give the same name’ (similarly, οἱ πολλοί: ‘the masses, the people’). Τὰ πολλὰ can also mean ‘the greater number’ or ‘most things’, as when Alcmaeon states (A1 and A3) that ‘most human things come in pairs’ (δύο τὰ πολλὰ τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων).

The adjective ἥσσων (Attic ἥττων) can mean ‘inferior to’ or ‘worse than’, as in Herodotus’ *History* ix 111, when Masistes tells Xerxes that he will find another husband for his daughter who is ‘no worse than me’ (ἐμεῦ οὐδὲν ἥσσων). It can also mean ‘physically weaker than’ as in *Iliad* xvi 722, when Apollo says to Hector: ‘Would that I were as much stronger than you as I am weaker than you (αἶθ’ ὄσον ἥσσων εἰμί, τόσον σέο φέρτερος εἶην). It can also mean ‘giving way to’ or ‘being overcome by’, as when the Socrates of Plato’s *Protagoras* 353c asks what we mean when ‘we speak of being overcome (ἥττω) by pleasures’. In its sole recorded appearance in archaic Greek poetry,<sup>4</sup> ἥσσων means ‘physically give way to’. In his reply to a boast by the poet Kleobolus, Simonides retorted that ‘all things give way to the gods (ἅπαντα γὰρ ἐστὶ θεῶν ἥσσω); and stone even mortal hands can shatter; this is the devising of a fool’.<sup>5</sup>

Νόος (in its later contracted form, νοῦς) is commonly the ‘mind’, ‘intention’, ‘will’, or ‘understanding’ of a person, as in *Odyssey* xx 365-366, when Theoclymenus reminds Eurymachus: ‘I have...a νόος in my breast that is in no wise meanly fashioned.’ There is also the νόος that is the ‘cunning intelligence’ displayed by Odysseus and Penelope (*Od.* xii 205; xix 325). Νόος can also be the particular ‘mindset’ of a person, such as the νόος of the many men whom Odysseus came to know (*Od.* i 3), as well as a specific product such as the ‘plan’ (νόος) Nestor declared to be the best (*Il.* ix 104).<sup>6</sup> Νόος appears in the surviving Xenophanes fragments when in B25 he asserts (perhaps of the ‘one greatest god’ mentioned in B23): ‘but completely without toil he shakes all things by the thought of his mind (νόου φρενὶ)’.

## II. Four Interpretations

In his edition and translation of Laertius’ *Lives*, R.D. Hicks, perhaps influenced by the somber view of the prospects for knowledge expressed in Xenophanes fragments B34 and 35, translated the remark as ‘He also said that the mass of things falls short of thought’. (I take this to mean that the human mind

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have used some form of the verb to be, e.g. τὰ πολλὰ ἐστὶν ἥσσω νοῦ.

<sup>4</sup> Fatouros, s.v. ἥσσων. The adjective appears four times in Homer (*Il.* xvi 722; xxiii 322 and 858; and *Od.* xv 365), in each instance within a comparison between individual persons, animals, or objects. It also occurs twice in Hesiod: ‘the goddess receives no less honor’ (*Theogony* 426) and ‘Father Zeus, would that you had given me a shorter span of life to be mine’ (fr. 276 West). A TLG search uncovered no additional occurrences of ἥσσων in conjunction with either τὰ πολλὰ or πάντα.

<sup>5</sup> PMG 581, Poltera 262, Bergk 57, Diehl 48, Ford trans.

<sup>6</sup> On the whole this is the view of *noos* put forward by von Fritz in his seminal article (1945), although he emphasizes the early close association of *noos* with sense perception.

cannot fully comprehend the nature of things.) Such a sentiment would not be out of place in this historical period; declarations of the weakness of human intelligence appear throughout archaic Greek poetry.<sup>7</sup> Certainly some degree of pessimism is present in Xenophanes' assertion that:

And the clear and sure truth no man knew nor will there be one who knows such things as I say about the gods and all things. For even if he were to succeed in speaking of what is brought to fulfillment, still he himself would not know. But belief is fashioned for all. (B34)

Two *testimonia* point in the same general direction. Laertius reports (A1.20) that Sotion said that Xenophanes was the first to say that all things are 'incomprehensible' (ἀκατάληπτα εἶναι τὰ πάντα), and Hippolytus similarly states (A33) that Xenophanes 'was the first to say that all things are incomprehensible' (ἀκαταληψίαν), citing B34 in this connection.

But the match with Hicks' 'falls short of thought' is not perfect. While the remark asserts the inferiority (in some sense) of many things to mind, Hicks' rendering actually assigns the inferiority to mind, in so far as it is unable to grasp the nature of the many. And what Xenophanes declared in B34 was not that human beings are incapable of conceiving of all things, but rather that with respect to 'the gods and such things as I say about all things', no man has known or ever will know 'the clear and sure truth' (τὸ σαφές).<sup>8</sup> In fact, Xenophanes puts forward a number of explanations of the nature of all things (cf. B27 and B29) even when 'belief (*dokos*) is fashioned for all (men)'.<sup>9</sup> In short, much can be thought or believed even when the certain truth cannot be known.

Perhaps, then, we should take the remark as an affirmation of the power of the human mind—i.e., that 'the multitude of things gives way to the exercise of our intelligence'.<sup>10</sup> This reading is not without some support in the surviving fragments. For one thing, Xenophanes asserted the superior value of his own intellect relative to the pleasures afforded to the city by its victorious athletes:

For our expertise (σοφία) is better than the strength of men and horses... (B2)

Also in a positive vein, in B18 he affirmed that human beings can discover 'bet-

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Semonides, fr. 1: '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.' Similarly *Hymn to Pythian Apollo* 189-193; *Hymn to Demeter* 256-257; Theognis, 139-142; Semonides, fr. 2; Ibycus, fr. 1, 23-26; Solon, frs. 1 and 13; Pindar, *Paean* vi 50-58; *Olympian* vii 25-26; and *Nemean* vi 6-7; vii 23-24; and xi 43-47; Simonides, fr. 22 and in Aristotle, *Meta.* i 1.982b28-30.

<sup>8</sup> LSJ identifies ἀκατάληπτα and ἀκαταληψία as terms introduced into philosophical discourse by later Stoic and Skeptical thinkers.

<sup>9</sup> Reading Xenophanes' πᾶσι as a neuter produces 'for all things', which would conflict with 'such things as I say about the gods and all things'. The referent of 'all things' here is plausibly understood as all constituents of the natural realm (cf. B27 and B29).

<sup>10</sup> An alternative mentioned in Lesher 1992, 197n7. In the index to his edition of *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* Diels grouped all the occurrences of νοῦς under two headings: 'Gott. Kosmos' and 'Mensch' (with Laertius' τὰ πολλά statement included in the Mensch section).

ter' through 'searching':

Indeed not from the beginning did gods intimate all things to mortals,

But as they search in time they discover (a) better.

Wide-ranging inquiries (either his own or those of others) could have served as the basis for his knowledge of religious conceptions and practices in different regions of the world (B16, A13). The presence of fossilized remains of sea creatures at various inland locations served as the basis for his theory of cyclical droughts and flooding (A33). We also find references to eclipses, volcanic eruptions, and other phenomena at distant locations (A41 and 48). He also offered naturalistic explanations of a wide range of phenomena long considered the province of divine beings and subject to their unpredictable whims: the sea, winds, rivers, clouds (B30, A1, A32), the sun (B31), Iris-rainbow (B32), floods and drought (A33), and a wide range of atmospheric and astronomical phenomena (A38, A39-46). In all these ways, Xenophanes' words reflected a degree of epistemological optimism.

Nevertheless, the case for 'many (or most) things can be understood by human intelligence' reading is less than compelling. Although Xenophanes might have taken some pride in his own achievements, as well as those of earlier Ionian inquirers into nature,<sup>11</sup> he did not hold the intelligence of his fellow citizens in high regard. This is evident in his criticism of inappropriate speech and behavior at symposia (B1), the senseless practice of awarding special privileges to victorious athletes (B2), the adoption of a luxurious lifestyle inimical to the city's well being (B3), and various erroneous beliefs about the gods (B14-17, A12 and 13). A critical attitude is also evident in the *silloi* or 'squints' he is said to have devised 'because of a certain animus against the poets and philosophers of his own era' (A22).

Moreover, fragment B36, on one interpretation, echoes the traditional indictment of human opinion as the product of happenstance:

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

On one reading, B36 asserts merely the unreliability 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 in the water. But if sweetness is a synecdoche for all attributes, then B36 is a reaffirmation of a traditional indictment of the relativity of human judgment: whatever we human beings believe to be the case is a function of the conditions we happen to have encountered.<sup>12</sup> Xenophanes' remarks about the noticeable similarities between religious believers and their gods (B14-16) provide yet another example of how the beliefs of mortal beings

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<sup>11</sup> Laetius elsewhere (B19) reports that 'Xenophanes and Herodotus admired Thales' for being able to foretell eclipses and the solstices.

<sup>12</sup> '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' (Archilochus fr. 70, 68 Diehl).

are determined by local circumstances. Lastly, Xenophanes' pessimistic assessment of the prospects for knowledge of 'the clear and sure truth...concerning the gods and such things as I say about all things' (B 34) is plausibly understood in the light of the traditional view that no human being has known or ever will know the sure truth concerning events or conditions lying outside the circle of their direct experience.<sup>13</sup> So neither of these interpretations of τὰ πολλὰ ἦσσω νοῦ in connection with the efficacy of the human mind is entirely persuasive. It is time to acknowledge that in several of the surviving fragments, as well as in a number of *testimonia*, the focus of Xenophanes' concern was not the human mind, but the divine mind.

According to the 16th-century Swiss scholar Méric Casaubon,<sup>14</sup> Xenophanes' remark reflected a particular understanding of the powers of the divine mind. As Pierre Bayle explained 'Casaubon's conjecture':

He pretends [i.e., ventures to say] that this philosopher [i.e., Xenophanes] taught that the divine mind, which made the world, endeavored to endow all creatures with a state of perfection; but that having found very strong obstacle in matter, he could not always compass [i.e., accomplish] his designs; and that on some occasions he was forced to produce evil things. Which is to say that he was sometimes vanquished; but oftener vanquisher; and that the greatest part of things were submitted to the desires and power of the divine mind, and consequently ἦσσω νοῦ εἶναι doth not mean worse than mind but subjected to it and the subject of its triumph.<sup>15</sup> (vol. 4, 3050)

Bayle then added that:

Casaubon attempts to confirm his conjecture by a passage in Plato, where it is said that necessity and the mind concurred in the production of the world; and that necessity suffered herself to be persuaded to consent that things for the most part should be governed by the best: [quoting *Timaeus* 48a, Jowett trans.]: 'for the creation of this world is the combined work of necessity and mind (νοῦς). Mind (νοῦς), the ruling power, persuaded necessity to bring the greater part of created things to perfection, and thus and after in this manner, through necessity made subject to reason, this universe was created'. (vol. 4, 3050)

Thus, according to Casaubon, when Xenophanes asserted that τὰ πολλὰ were

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<sup>13</sup> Following von Fritz 1945, 230: 'Xenophanes expresses extreme skepticism concerning the capacity of human beings for true insight. Opinion and guesswork is all that is granted to them. This may not preclude the presence of *noos* in mortals altogether, but it seems to indicate that, in Xenophanes' opinion, the *noos* of mortals was not only more restricted in scope than it was in God but also very rare.'

<sup>14</sup> Son of the better known classical scholar Isaac Casaubon.

<sup>15</sup> For the text of Casaubon's note, see *Isaac Casaubon and others* 1692, 559n.

ἤσσω νοῦ, he was saying that ‘the greatest part of things were submitted to the desires and power of the divine mind’. So, like Plato, Xenophanes held that the universe was created by an intelligent mind that sought to arrange all things for the best, but acknowledged that the material nature of things prevented the finished product from achieving perfection.

Unfortunately for the Bayle-Casaubon reading, neither the view of nature as headed toward perfection nor the idea of a creator divinity appears in any surviving Xenophanean fragment or ancient *testimonium*. On the contrary, Xenophanes consistently frames his explanations in terms of material substances and physical causes, with no suggestion that the cosmos was created in such a way as to achieve the best result. His explanation of what is today known as the hydrological cycle is typical. According to Aëtius (in A46):

Xenophanes says that the things in the heavens occur through the heat of the sun as the initial cause; for when the moisture is drawn up from the sea, the sweet portion, separating because of its fineness and turning into mist, combines into clouds, trickles down in drops of rain due to compression, and vaporizes the winds.

The explanation is remarkable for its consistent employment of mechanical forces and the absence of teleological considerations: heating, drawing up, separation, combination, compression, and vaporization. Nowhere in any surviving Xenophanes fragment or ancient *testimonium* is there an explicit or implicit suggestion that events in nature take place in the best or most desirable way.

There is also no evidence that Xenophanes believed in a creator god. In fragments B23-26 he speaks of ‘one greatest god’ who is ‘unlike mortals in body and thought’ (B23); and this is presumably the same being ‘the whole of whom sees, thinks, and hears’ (B24); who ‘completely without toil shakes all things by the thought of his mind’ (B25); and who ‘remains always in the same place nor is it seemly for him to travel to different places at different times’ (B26). Xenophanes nowhere states or implies that this or any other divinity created the universe and that, while engaged in this effort, it sought to achieve the greatest possible degree of perfection.

Given the obscurity of Xenophanes’ remark, it is hardly surprising that some have proposed to emend the text. In his commentary on the passage (1833, 401), Aegidius Managius (Giles Ménage) suspected that an error had crept into the text<sup>16</sup> and proposed as an alternative reading ἤσσω ἐνός: *multa minus posse quam unum* (‘many can be less than one’), linking the remark with the immediately following statement that ‘he encountered tyrants as seldom or as pleasantly as possible’ (meaning, presumably, that many encounters with a tyrant would be inferior to just one encounter).<sup>17</sup> While Managius’ proposal has the virtue of link-

<sup>16</sup> Menagius: *verba mihi de mendo suspecto*. Dorandi 2013, 669 also mentions ἤσσω οὐδ as a variant reading (B), but prints ἤσσω νοῦ and characterizes the scribe of the B ms. as having little knowledge of Greek (2013, 21).

<sup>17</sup> Apparently the basis for the translation by C.D. Yonge (1853): ‘He used also to say that the

ing Xenophanes' remark with its surrounding context, it ignores the fact that the relevant term here is not the adjective *πολλά* (hence capable of modifying encounters, among other things), but the substantive phrase *τὰ πολλά*, 'the many things, the multitude, or most things'.

### III. A Proposal

To solve our puzzle we will need to answer three questions: (1) Whose νοῦς was Xenophanes speaking of here?<sup>18</sup> (2) What were 'the many things' he held to be ἦσσω to that νοῦς? And (3) In what sense or manner were those things ἦσσω?

I believe that Xenophanes' remark concerned the divine νόος and its relationship with the cosmos. First there is the inherent likelihood that any mind declared to be superior to 'many things or most things or the multitude of things' would be of divine rather than mortal stature.<sup>19</sup> There is also ample evidence that Xenophanes conceived of god as a mind. In the same paragraph in which Laertius attributed *τὰ πολλά ἦσσω νοῦ* to Xenophanes he also credited him with stating that:

Whole it sees and whole it hears, but it does not breathe, *being wholly mind and thought and eternal* (σύμπαντά τε εἶναι νοῦν καὶ φρόνησιν καὶ ἀίδιον).

The identification of god with mind (or rational thought) is made in several other *testimonia*:

Xenophanes...firmly believing only that all things were one and that that was god, limited, rational (λογικόν), and changeless. (Pseudo-Galen in A35)

It was [Xenophanes] who fashioned a god distant from men, equal in every way, unshaken and unscathed, either *thought or very great in thought* (νοερώτερον ἢ ἐ νόημα). (Timon in A35)

...he firmly believed that the whole is one, and that god is bound up with all things, and is spherical, impassive, changeless, and rational (λογικόν). (Sextus in A35)

Underlying each of these *testimonia* is the conception of god as a mind or faculty of thought implied in three fragments:

One god is greatest among gods and men, not at all like mortals in body or thought (νόημα). (B23)

Whole he sees, whole he thinks (νοεῖ), and whole he hears.

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many was inferior to unity', but this could not be advice on how to encounter tyrants.

<sup>18</sup> In his index to his edition of *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* Diels grouped all the occurrences of νοῦς under two headings: 'Gott. Kosmos' and 'Mensch' (with Laertius' *τὰ πολλά* statement included in the Mensch section).

<sup>19</sup> For *τὰ πολλά* as 'the multitude of existing things' or 'the physical universe', compare Pseudo-Aristotle, *On Melissus, Xenophanes, Gorgias* 975b11-15 (on Empedocles): 'For he says, "How could anything increase the sum total, and whence could it come?" But he thinks that the multitude of things comes into being (γίνεσθαι τὰ πολλά) by the mixing and putting together of fire with the elements combined with fire, and by their parting'.

(B24)

...but completely without toil he shakes all things by the active thought of his mind (νόου φρενὶ). (B 25)

Especially relevant is the reported characterization of god as the strongest of all things and *not to be mastered by anything else*:

...and he proves that [god] is one on the basis of his being the strongest (κράτιστον) of all things. (Simplicius in A31)

For this is what god and god's nature is: to master and not to be mastered, and to be the strongest of all things (κρατεῖν, ἀλλὰ μὴ κρατεῖσθαι, πάντων κράτιστον εἶναι).<sup>20</sup> (Pseudo-Aristotle, *MXG* 977a27-28 in A28)

These assertions are entirely consistent with Xenophanes' explicit statement that god 'shakes all things completely without toil' (ἀπάνευθε πόνοιο, B25) and his characterization of the one god as 'greatest' (μέγιστος, B23).

Thus when, according to Diogenes Laertius, Xenophanes stated that τὰ πολλὰ ἦσσω νοῦ what he meant was that the multitude of things—the cosmos—gives way to—is mastered by—the divine mind. When the remark is understood in this way Xenophanes emerges as one of a number of early thinkers who held that events taking place throughout the cosmos (designated variously as πάντα, τὸ πᾶν, τὸ ὅλον, τὰ πολλά as well as ὁ κόσμος) were controlled by a supremely powerful divine intelligence. Anaximander (at least as suggested by Aristotle at *Physics* 203b14-15) held that the unlimited was able 'to surround and steer all things'. Heraclitus similarly defined wisdom as 'understanding the intelligence (γνώμη) that steers all things through all' (B41). Anaxagoras identified mind (νοῦς) as having the greatest strength (ισχύει μέγιστον) and ruling all things (πάντων νοῦς κρατεῖ, B12). Diogenes of Apollonia held that it would be impossible for the elements to be distributed as they are without the operation of an intelligence (ἄνευ νοήσιος) that 'rules all things' (πάντων κρατεῖν, B5). And in the *Philebus* (28d7-8) Plato refers generally to 'all those earlier thinkers who held that mind and a marvellous organizing intelligence (νοῦν καὶ φρόνησίν τινα θαυμαστήν) pilots the whole universe'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Similarly, *MXG* 977b27-28 and 978a2-3. The reliability of the *MXG* has often been questioned, but the work clearly contains kernels of Xenophanean ideas. Diels conjectured that the author of the *MXG* was a minor Peripatetic thinker who lived and wrote some time after the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. See the summary in Lesher 1992, 192-194 and the extended discussion in Mansfeld 1988.

<sup>21</sup> I am grateful to Alexander Mourelatos, Steven White, and an anonymous referee for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

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