NOTES—KORT BERIGTE

A Note on Xenophanes' Astrophysics

It is well attested that Xenophanes of Colophon taught that the heavenly bodies, sun, moon and stars alike, consisted of clouds themselves the product of moist exhalations from the waters on the surface of the earth. Somehow they became ignited and they could be quenched; for example, at the end of a celestial body's diurnal path.¹

This is a curious view, and Kirk² appears to have doubts as to whether Xenophanes could really have held it. Feeling even stronger doubts F. M. Cleve³ recently suggested that the doxographical notices of Xenophanes' astrophysics are nothing but inane deductions from Xenophanes' verses on the rainbow⁴ which he explained as a peculiar kind of cloud.

Cleve has surely gone too far. If the passages of the doxographers dealing with Xenophanes' views on the heavenly bodies are sheer invention then the inventing was either done by Theophrastus or by the secondary authors. It is surely unthinkable that Theophrastus would make wild deductions from fragment 32, and even more incredible that Aetius, the author of the Pseudo-Plutarchean Stromateis, and Diogenes Laertius, or their respective (and different) sources should all on the basis of the same fragment concoct the same fiction.

The evidence of Aetius and the others, then, must be accepted and we must try and decide why Xenophanes held such apparently eccentric views about the celestial bodies. As Freeman⁵ has noted, a number of his opinions 'seem to have been based on some original and accurate observations—the study of the percolation of water, and its effect on land;⁶ and the observation of fossils.'² He had also noticed phosphorescence,⁸ and studied volcanic fire.⁹ Obviously, Xenophanes was a keen observer and perhaps his astrophysical theories also had an empirical basis.

Quite often the moon is visible during the day, and sometimes it is seen against a clear blue sky amongst small high cumulus clouds. On these occasions the greyish white colour of the lunar disc is exactly the same as that of the surrounding clouds. The moon further resembles the clouds in that, under

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⁵. K. Freeman, The Presocratic Philosophers, p. 102.

135
these conditions, its features exhibit exactly the same blue colour as the sky and thus appear to be gaps or holes in it and not features at all; similar gaps or holes are visible in the clouds. Was it due to his having observed the moon in such circumstances that Xenophanes suggested that it was a cloud, albeit a symmetrical and persistent one, and one which, at certain times, became ignited? Having explained the moon as a special sort of cloud it would be natural enough for him to give the same account of the other heavenly bodies.

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