HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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# **Xenophanes** (570.B.C.--early 5th cent. B.C.)

Xenophanes was born in Colophon in Ionia, on the coast of Asia Minor. (The eastern islands of the Aegean and the Asia Minor coast were exceptionally fertile in poets and philosophers; in part, perhaps, because the natural features of that area awakened a sharp sensitivity to light, landscape changes, and color, as well as to natural processes like evaporation and dewfall.). His career seems to have been that of a rhapsode, a professional singer like Homer or Pindar, and his life was one of constant travel, from one court to another. He speaks of himself, in one of the 45 fragments of his work that remain, as having been 'tossed' around from one part of Greece to another. We have to assume that his rhapsode career was devoted both to 'entertaining,' containing as it did drinking songs in various lyric meters, and to expressing his 'views of the world,' which, unlike those of any of the lyric poets we have considered earlier, were critical and philosophical.

*But if cattle and horses and lions had hands*
*or could paint with their hands and create works such as men do,*
*horses like horses and cattle like cattle*
*also would depict the gods' shapes and make their bodies*
*of such a sort as the form they themselves have.*

Several remaining fragments of Xenophanes concern the anthropocentric weakness of our concepts of god, and in at least one point he speaks of the 'positive character' of god;

One god greatest among gods and men,
not at all like mortals in body or in thought.

The critical turn of thought in Xenophanes—remember this is rhapsodic 'poetry'—spills over into his comments on the knowing process in general. He comments, for instance, on the fact that the gods have created sweet honey for our delight, but had they not, we would consider figs—a routine and commonplace item of diet—the finest taste there is. With the same mindset Xenophanes inquires into natural processes, reflecting at length about the nature and importance of clouds in shaping the atmosphere, and of the constitution of the sun and the nature of evaporation. Like the Roman poet Lucretius (1st Century B.C.) Anaxagoras finds it natural to do his philosophy in the long lines of epic verse.