

Tor, Shaul, *Mortal and Divine in Early Greek Epistemology. A Study of Hesiod, Xenophanes and Parmenides*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge Classical Studies, 2017; ISBN 9781107028166. Pp. 406 + xiii. £90.00

If mortals know one thing—if they know anything—it is that they do not know much. Most certainly, they do not know all. Who then does? God knows. Or, as the ancient Greeks would have put it: gods know. Indeed, alongside immortality and power, the Greek gods possessed ‘epistemic authority.’ For their mortal worshippers, the gods were model ‘knowers’, hence appeals to oracles or the poets’ reliance on divine inspiration for facts or events beyond their mortal ken. More widely, cosmic controlling intelligence, including exhaustive knowledge of past and future, have always been important aspects of ancient conceptions of the divine, going from Zeus’ plan at *Iliad* 1.5 down to the omniscient God of the medieval philosophers. Tor’s book is a study of the complex relations between thinking about, or just as often ‘with’ the gods, in early Greek reflections on the universe, including our place in it and how far our cognitive capacities allow us to grasp all of the above. Although the study is set within a theoretical frame, namely, the boundary between philosophy and religion and the nature of rationality, the core chapters are all close, informed readings of select ancient thinkers: Hesiod, Xenophanes and Parmenides, with a brief coda on Empedocles.

The first, preliminary chapter does a nice job of helping readers divest themselves of contemporary baggage about rationality versus religion. Contemporary assumptions about rationality are that it is predominantly if not necessarily secular, with religious belief afforded a protected status as somehow incommensurate with other forms of beliefs. Religious belief in ancient Greece by contrast was pervasive, if not institutionally regimented, although open atheism was not tolerated. Nevertheless, the absence of a systematic, pan-Hellenic theology with unified institutional support left views about the gods, and in particular modes of divine disclosure, more open to philosophical or rational challenge.

The study proper opens with Hesiod (ch. 2). Tor first considers the *Theogony*, whose contents are nothing less than a history of the universe in the form of a family tree of the gods. The stress Hesiod puts upon the Muses in the long, 115-line proem makes sense in terms of Hesiod’s lowly mortal status, and the need for him to secure divine support for disclosure of the history and structure of that otherwise inaccessible divine realm. Tor concentrates on lines 27–28, where the Muses, after abusing Hesiod and his fellow shepherds as ‘mere bellies’, declare that ‘we know how to speak many falsehoods which are like verities (*etymoisin*) and we know, whenever we wish, how to utter truths (*alêthea*).’ One standard way of reading this comment is that Hesiod contrasts his own, true, theogony with other theogonies the audience may have heard, as false. Tor argues instead for Hesiodic self-awareness of his own incapacity, as a mortal, to guarantee the truth of his own version. But even in that respect, this posture is not systematic. In the *Works and Days*, although Hesiod still

relies on divine support, in chastising and then instructing Perseus in the ways of mankind, he is much more his own authority. Overall, Tor argues that Hesiod is fundamentally ambivalent. Although only the gods possess truth, it is unclear if we mortals can grasp it, for even when they disclose it, they might be deceiving us. We are not able to tell the difference.

Tor turns next to Xenophanes. Best known for his trenchant criticisms of Homeric anthropomorphism and his introduction of ‘one god, greatest among gods and men’ (Diels-Kranz, henceforth DK, frag. B 23), Xenophanes advanced original views about knowledge and the relation of men and gods. Tor argues against the standard reading of fragment DK B 18.1, which is taken to deny all divine disclosure to man, and thinks instead that it targets more indirect forms of disclosure such as omens and oracles. As such, Xenophanes does not in principle deny divine communication to men, but rather he rejects universal disclosure, direct or indirect. Instead, over time humans enquire and find better (DK B 18.2). Yet there are still limits. In the important fragment DK B 34, Xenophanes denies that mankind possesses *to saphes* (glossed as ‘that which is clear and certain’) on the gods and—says Xenophanes—‘the other things I talk about’, presumably science and other universal generalisations. Here no certainty is possible for men, but only belief, *dokos*. In this respect Xenophanes is closer to the traditional Homeric view of an unbridgeable gap between men and gods. And lest B 34 seem too easy prey to a second-order challenge (how do you *know* that, Xenophanes?), Tor calls on fragment B 35 ‘let these things be believed as like the truths’ as a mortal qualifier of B 34 on *to saphes* and *dokos*, one that could well be true.

Parmenides gets the two longest chapters, comprising almost half of the book (pp. 163–308). Tor endorses the standard three-part reconstruction of the fragmentary work (proem, DK frag. B 1, the chariot ride to the goddess; *Alêtheia*/Truth, B 2–B 8 the goddess on the ways of enquiry and changeless Being; *Doxa*/Opinion B 9–19, the deceptive cosmology of mortals), but tackles *Doxa* first in Chapter 4 and the proem and *Truth* in Chapter 5. These chapters are the richest in the book and it is not possible in a review to do justice to the numerous insights they contain. Starting from B 16 on the human constitution, made of the opposite elements Light and Night, Tor explores the consequent mortal cognitive outlook which Parmenides presents as a doxastic *krisis* between the two elements (B 8.55). This is similar but remains inferior to the divine *krisis* of Truth between what-is and what-is-not, the difference being that the mortal account can in no way match the ‘reliability and steadfastness’ of the deductive study of what-is (p. 200). In Chapter Five Tor shows how the proem, despite the difficulty of establishing an actual destination (discussed in appendix at pp. 347–59), presupposes metempsychosis and belongs to the wider Pythagorean or mystery-religion tradition of a post-mortem journey of the separate soul. More precisely, Tor understands the encounter with the goddess as a process of divinisation in which the mortal’s life-principle or soul is identified with Light, as opposed to the bodily element Night. From there he reviews various recent attempts to solve the

single greatest difficulty in Parmenides, the relation between *Truth* and *Doxa*. This allows him to suggest, if only tentatively (p. 285) that the transformative encounter with the goddess allows the mortal to transcend his human limitations and ascertain the true nature of what-is. In this, Tor recognizes Vlastos (1946) as a predecessor, and beyond that, various ancient readings of Parmenides. For Tor, although doxastic things cannot be considered real or genuine they are still there to be experientially spoken of (p. 297). This is appealing, but space precludes a full discussion. Suffice it to say that, on such a difficult question, scholars will continue to differ.

The final chapter offers a retrospect on the connections between the readings advanced and some extensions of similar ideas in Empedocles. Tor considers, in the light of the Starsbourg papyrus (1999), how to make sense of a unified Empedocles. Unlike Parmenides, Empedocles recognizes sense-perception as an epistemic standard, but also how it leads mortals to mistake their short experience of life for all there is (B 2). Nevertheless, transmigration, as now implied by *section d* of the papyrus, provides for the extension of experience beyond one lifespan as well as a greater recognition of how each bodily frame entails cognitive constraints. All in all, however, Empedocles' final aim is to transcend mortal limitations (B 2.8-9) and to rejoin the company of the blessed gods (B 115). As such he remains the most explicit Presocratic example of the ancient epistemological ideal of philosophy as a form of assimilation to the divine.

This book should be in all university libraries. Chapters Four and Five offer the most detailed and systematic studies of Parmenides' *Doxa* and proem that I know of, and they will be standard reading for anyone wanting to work on these texts. The work gains more through its concentrated treatment of select thinkers and their interrelations than if it had attempted a comprehensive survey. Tor captures well the ambivalent status of early Greek science and philosophy, both as a positive ideal, the aspiration to a god's-eye view of the universe, and as a presumptuous encroachment upon divine prerogatives.

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