

A red circle graphic that partially encircles the word "SYNTHESIS".

# SYNTHESIS

Journal for Philosophy

---

ISSUE 3

*This page intentionally left blank*

# SYNTHESIS

Journal for Philosophy

3

## Ancient Philosophy in Dialogue

*Edited by*

*Erminia Di Iulio & Francesco Aronadio*

December 2023

## **Editors in-chief**

*Francesco Aronadio*  
*Francesco Fronterotta*

## **Editorial Board**

*Enrico Berti †*  
*Annalisa Coliva*  
*Paolo Crivelli*  
*Erminia Di Iulio*  
*Matteo Favaretti Camposampiero*  
*Franco Ferrari*  
*Gabriele Galluzzo*  
*Laura Anna Macor*  
*Jenny Pelletier*  
*Federico Maria Petrucci*  
*Alice Ragni*  
*Nicholas D. Smith*  
*Ernest Sosa*  
*Achille Varzi*  
*Giovanni Ventimiglia*

## **Editorial Assistant**

*Marco Picciafuochi*

## List of contributions

Epistemology of Testimony in Early Greek Thought by Erminia Di Iulio (Università di Roma "Tor Vergata") .....	7
Socrates and the Epistemology of Testimony by Nicholas D. Smith (Lewis & Clark College) .....	37
Intentionality and Referentiality in Plato's Conceptual Apparatus by Francesco Aronadio (Università di Roma "Tor Vergata") .....	61
Plato and Raz on Rule of Law by Susan Sauvé Meyer (The University of Pennsylvania) .....	91
Peripatetic Grounding by Maddalena Bonelli (Università di Bergamo) .....	111
Il <i>Commento</i> al primo libro della <i>Metafisica</i> di Alessandro di Afrodisia come fonte del trattato II 4 [12] delle <i>Enneadi</i> by Livia Blundo (Università di Roma "La Sapienza") .....	131
<i>Tradere</i> / <i>Tradire</i> Gamma 1-2: spunti per una nuova interpretazione dell'ontologia in epoca moderna by Alice Ragni (Universität Münster) .....	161



Erminia Di Iulio  
(Università di Roma “Tor Vergata”)

## Epistemology of Testimony in Early Greek Thought<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Although ‘epistemic justification’ is one of the main concerns within forensic contexts, questions such as ‘under what conditions testimonial speeches can be regarded as true?’ are much more ancient than lawcourts. Indeed, they are as ancient as Greek culture itself, for the problem of ‘knowledge-transmission’ worries Greek culture from its very beginning, being essentially linked to the familiar question of ‘poetic authority’. My aim is to investigate the development of ‘poetic/epistemic authority’ in ancient Greek thought: I will take Antiphon as my starting point, and I will work backward. Indeed, Antiphon is particularly significant, for he represents an ‘in-between’: he is the endpoint of a story beginning with Homer and the starting point of another story leading to the formalization of oratory (forensic oratory) as a separate discipline. The paper is divided into 5 sections: section 1 shall consider a significant passage from Antiphon’s *On the Chorus Boy*; section 2 takes into consideration the ‘Homeric paradigm’ arguing that it puts forward an extreme ‘Preemption Thesis’; section 3 lingers on Hesiod and his role in the evolution of Early Greek epistemology; section 4 takes Xenophanes as the turning-point in pre-platonic epistemology (of testimony); section 5 addresses Parmenides’ *Poem*.

**Keywords:** epistemology of testimony; poetic authority; Greek poetry; early Greek philosophy; oratory.

### Introduction

I think that no one will jump on their chair if I claim that ‘epistemic justification’ is one of the main epistemic concerns within forensic contexts. Indeed, I take this claim to be uncontroversial because it seems sufficiently clear that – whether or not the plaintiff and the defendant do speak the truth – the main (epistemic) purpose of someone who speaks in front of the jurors is persuading them that their claims are, so to speak, both justified and justifying (as far as possible). That is, the speaker needs to prove that their assertions are

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper constitutes a substantial extension of what I argued in Di Iulio (2022).

## SYNTHESIS

a) supported by evidence and therefore b) adequately justified and also c) justifying – at least partially. Obviously, by saying so, in no way do I wish to dismiss the relevance of ‘truth’; I just aim to stress that, because the jurors cannot know the truth of facts, for they lack the appropriate access to them, the only way in which they can hope to assess the truth of beliefs is to establish whether such beliefs are appropriately justified or not.

To be clear, from the jurors’ point of view three main related epistemic issues (whose significance clearly goes beyond forensic contexts) can be identified: 1) how is it possible to come to know something about which first-hand experience is lacking? 2) under what conditions a belief is appropriately or adequately justified and therefore justifying, at least partially? 3) under what conditions knowledge-transmission (or justification-transmission) and knowledge-generation (or justification-generation) are possible, if any? Because all these questions fall under ‘epistemology of testimony’, we are entitled to conclude that forensic contexts have a lot to say about it.

Despite this, my focus will not be on ‘legal epistemology’ or ‘forensic oratory’ strictly speaking – although I understand that both would be more than worthy of a careful analysis. Instead, I shall focus on Antiphon and early Greek thought. In more detail, I will take Antiphon as my starting point, and I will work backward. To my eyes, Antiphon is particularly significant, for he represents a sort of an ‘in-between’: he is the endpoint of a story beginning with Homer and the starting point of another story leading to the formalization of oratory (forensic oratory) as a separate discipline.

The paper is divided into 5 sections: section 1 shall consider a significant passage from Antiphon’s *On the Chorus Boy*; section 2 takes into consideration the ‘Homeric paradigm’ arguing that it puts forward an extreme ‘Preemption Thesis’; section 3 lingers on Hesiod and his role in the evolution of Early Greek epistemology; section 4 takes Xenophanes as the turning-point in pre-platonic epistemology (of testimony); section 5 addresses Parmenides’ *Poem*.



## 1. Antiphon

In Antiphon's *On the Chorus Boy*, the speaker is charged with homicide and offers a speech, written by Antiphon, to defend himself. At some point he claims:

[...] ὅπου μὲν γὰρ λόγῳ τις διδάσκει περὶ τῶν πραχθέντων, μάρτυρας δὲ μὴ παρέχειτο, μαρτύρων ἂν τις τοὺς λόγους τούτους ἐνδεεῖς φαίη εἶναι: ὅπου δὲ μάρτυρας μὲν παρέχειτο, τεκμήρια δὲ αὖ τοῖς μαρτυροῦσιν ὅμοια μὴ ἀποφαίνοι, ταῦτα ἂν τις ἔχοι εἰπεῖν, εἰ βούλοιτο. [31] ἐγὼ τοίνυν τοὺς τε λόγους ὑμῖν εἰκότας ἀποφαίνω, καὶ τοῖς λόγοις τοὺς μάρτυρας ὁμολογοῦντας καὶ τοῖς μάρτυσι τὰ ἔργα, καὶ τεκμήρια ἐξ αὐτῶν τῶν ἔργων [...]. (Antiph. 6, 30-31; text after Gagarin 1997)

[...] If someone should tell you with words what happened without presenting any witnesses, you would say his words are in need of witnesses; and if someone should present witnesses without providing any evidence in support of the witnesses, you could make the same objection, if you wanted. [31] But I am now presenting you with a plausible account, with witnesses who support this account, with facts supporting the witnesses, and with evidence derived from these very facts [...]. (trans. Gagarin 1998, slightly modified)<sup>2</sup>

§ 30 is a peculiar passage, for it seems as though the speaker is suspending his narration in order to reflect upon how the epistemology of testimony works, enumerating the conditions that must be met for a testimony to be reliable; accordingly, § 31 is aimed at showing that the speaker's own speech meets all these conditions. Such conditions seem to be three:

- 1) There must be a 'content of testimonial speech' – that is, the *information*;
- 2) There must be 'eyewitnesses' – that is, the *epistemic authority*;
- 3) There must be other 'evidence' (τεκμήρια) supporting the eyewitness – that is, *non-testimonial evidence* supporting the reliability of the authority;

---

<sup>2</sup> Although Gagarin translates τεκμήρια with 'arguments', I opted for rendering it with the more neutral 'evidence', in order to emphasise that τεκμήρια might and might not point to a linguistic content.

## SYNTHESIS

Let us focus on each separately.

The *information* is a λόγος which is εἰκός, that is a ‘plausible account’ or, we might say, a ‘coherent reconstruction of events’. Obviously, what is relevant here is the meaning of εἰκός which Gagarin translates with ‘plausible’ and I rendered also with ‘coherent’. Although I am fully aware that ‘plausible’ and ‘coherent’ are not (necessarily) synonym, I suggest that the understanding of εἰκός with ‘coherent’ is supported by Hoffmann (2008), where it is persuasively argued that εἰκός denotes something which is reasonable, likely, and plausible, inasmuch as *it meets the expectations of the community*. Thus, it seems that, when the speaker says that the information he is communicating is εἰκός, he means that it is not inconsistent – *prima facie*, it is not denied – by the doxastic background of the jury. The eyewitnesses are brought into play, due to their epistemic superiority – where such a superiority depends on the fact that they do possess a direct access to what happened.

To sum up, the jury is called to judge the truth-value of the speaker’s testimony; even in absence of immediate defeaters, the jury needs evidence supporting the testimony in order to establish whether it is true. Because the jury cannot rely upon the speaker – for the reliability of the speaker is precisely what must be ascertained –, it needs further evidence. Such evidence surely includes the eyewitnesses who should confirm or deny the testimony. However, eyewitnesses constitute testimonial evidence and therefore a non-conclusive one: eyewitnesses can lie. At this point, τεκμήρια come into play. That τεκμήρια points to *non-testimonial evidence* is remarked by the expression ἐξ αὐτῶν τῶν ἔργων.

To conclude, what kind of epistemology of testimony is this? There are three main options: reductionism, non-reductionism and holistic coherentism. Surely, we are not dealing here with ‘non-reductionism’ that is built upon the ‘presumptive right’, according to which:

A hearer is justified (or warranted) in believing what a speaker says if they do not have an undefeated defeater that indicates that the speaker’s testimony is false or unlikely to be true. (Leonard 2021)

Obviously, in law-courts ‘not having undefeated defeater that indicates that the speaker’s testimony is false’ is not enough.

It seems then that we are left with ‘evidential reductionism’ and ‘holistic coherentism’. What should we pick up? ‘Holistic coherentism’ claims that

[...] beliefs are justified only insofar as they cohere well with a broad system of beliefs that is itself coherent. A sufficiently coherent system of beliefs will include beliefs about the reliability of belief sources (testimony, perception, reason). But these reliability beliefs are themselves justified by their coherence with the rest of the system, not by some antecedent source of justification. [...] – beliefs *about* testimony and beliefs *based on* testimony becoming justified by fitting together into a broad and coherent system of beliefs. (Smith 2019: 168)

Evidential reductionism states that

[...] reliance on non-testimonial evidence is the only way testimony can give us justified beliefs. If you believe *p* on the basis of testimony, then you had better have reason – derived from personal experience – for thinking that the person who told you that *p* is reliable (in the present circumstances, anyway). (Smith 2019: 167)

The question we are facing is that: is the speaker’s testimony epistemically significant *per se*? That is, does it constitute a reason or evidence (although perhaps one among others)? Or does its epistemic value need to be further grounded on non-testimonial evidence?

According to the passage quoted above, τεκμήρια ἐξ αὐτῶν τῶν ἔργων seems to function as the ground of testimonial epistemic chain. If this is true, Antiphon is displaying a kind of Reductionism. Nonetheless, I believe that this is not the case. Let me spell this out. On the one hand, I mentioned earlier that the fact that the speaker’s testimony is εἰκός (viz. coherent and undefeated) does not constitute a sufficient reason to the jury for taking it as true (as non-reductionism wishes). On the other hand, however, the jury does not seem to judge only on the basis of τεκμήρια ἐξ τῶν ἔργων (as reductionism calls for). Indeed, as § 30 states quite clearly, non-testimonial evidence needs to be consistent with the speaker’s testimony and *vice versa*: testimonial and non-

## SYNTHESIS

testimonial evidence need to support each other and therefore both are necessary. If so, holistic coherentism and not reductionism is in play.

Although in no way does this analysis of Antiphon aim to be conclusive, it is still significant for present purposes, because it illustrates how ‘fine-grained’ the testimonial account provided by Antiphon is. Once again, this is unsurprising when we realize that forensic contexts are essentially concerned with questions which regard the *reliability of testimony*. However, and this is precisely my point, questions such as ‘under what conditions testimonial speeches can be regarded as true?’ are much more ancient than lawcourts. Indeed, they are as ancient as Greek culture itself, for, as a matter of fact, the problem of ‘knowledge-transmission’ worries Greek culture from its very beginning, being essentially linked to the familiar question of ‘poetic authority’.

Indeed, when it comes to early Greek epistemology, it is well known both a) that ‘eyewitnesses’ and ‘first-hand knowledge’ play the main role and b) that ‘masters of truth’ (to borrow an effective expression from Detienne) – whether poets or philosophers<sup>3</sup> – ground their own authority in their privileged

---

<sup>3</sup> As for early Greek culture, we need to resist the temptation to draw a strong distinction between ‘poetry’ and ‘philosophy’. As Glenn Most (1999: 332-362) puts it: ‘philosophy did not yet exist as a largely separate segment of social discourse, and the authors we call philosophers wrote not only for one another but also for the larger society of which they were a part. Hence it is not surprising that they had a more conscious, and perhaps more fruitful, dependence upon the basic texts of their culture (which in the case of Greek culture were poetic texts) than many modern philosophers do’ (1999: 336). Indeed, it is only with Aristotle that philosophers and poets are distinguished once and for all: ‘as far as we know, Aristotle was the first author to distinguish terminologically between what he called *mythologoi* and *theologoi* on the one hand and *physikoi* or *physiologoi* on the other. On his view, the former group were really storytellers, poets narrating myths about heroes and gods, and any views about the nature of the world that might be extracted from their works were incidental, obscure, and philosophically uninteresting; the latter group, beginning with Thales, were engaged in basically the same kind of investigation of the physical world as Aristotle himself was and, even though their theories were, unsurprisingly, deficient in comparison with his own, nonetheless they were philosophically serious, that is, they were worth studying, pillaging, and refuting. Only such a distinction, combined with specific views about the true nature of *poiesis* as the telling of *mythoi*, could permit Aristotle to declare famously in the opening chapter of his *Poetics* that Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common except their meter, so that it would be right to call the one a poet and the other a *physiologos* rather than a poet (1447b17-20).’ (1999: 332-333). Along the same lines, Shaul Tor in his book notably entitled *Mortal and Divine in Early Greek*

relationship with the gods. Besides, these two points are deeply related: gods' knowledge exceeds humans' both qualitatively and quantitatively, precisely because gods are paradigmatically understood as 'eyewitnesses'. In short, at the beginning, 'epistemology' and 'epistemology of testimony' are deeply related. Let us call this the 'Homeric paradigm'.

## 2. The 'Homeric Paradigm' and the 'Preemption Thesis'

Before proceeding, I wish to spell something out. In saying that, according to the 'Homeric paradigm', external validation by the gods is a (necessary) requirement for human knowledge I do not mean to claim that Homeric individual is *completely* incapable to acquire *any* piece of knowledge whatsoever. Likewise, in emphasising the epistemic relevance of 'eyewitnesses' I do not intend to affirm that Homeric and archaic knowledge is to be reduced to 'seeing' or 'having seen', strictly speaking<sup>4</sup>. Instead, what I wish to stress is that 'knowledge' is first and foremost 'first-hand knowledge', such that any other kind of knowledge is to be grounded in it. To put it roughly, this means that it is not 'knowledge without any specification' which is unattainable for humans, but, more rightly, 1) that knowledge whose objects exceed humans' cognitive abilities and 2) that knowledge directed toward objects and events that are not present or available to the knowing subject (e.g., because those objects or events are

---

*Epistemology. A Study of Hesiod, Xenophanes and Parmenides*: 'we have sometimes tended to imagine that early philosophers engaged with other, earlier philosophers in a primary or consciously distinctive way, and we have often marginalised their engagements with figures and attitudes not conventionally classified as "philosophical", as though the early philosophers knew when they were and when they were not responding to fellow philosophical colleagues' (Tor 2017: 54).

<sup>4</sup> As convincingly argued by Leshner (1981, 2008, 2009), in both the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* it is repeatedly stated that humans can variously acquire knowledge. Such various routes to knowledge a) are independent from the gods and b) are not reducible to pure and simple observation. More in detail, Leshner identifies three routes to knowledge: 1) direct observation, 2) reliable testimony of others, 3) setting of a test or trial.

## SYNTHESIS

located in a remote past). Such knowledge thus depends upon the gods<sup>5</sup> and the privileged connection ‘masters of truth’ entertain – or pretend to – with them.

All of this is masterfully depicted in the renowned ‘catalogue of ships’:

Ἔσπετε νῦν μοι Μοῦσαι Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχουσιν  
ὕμεις γὰρ θεαὶ ἐστε πάρεστε τε ἴστε τε πάντα,  
ἡμεῖς δὲ κλέος οἶον ἀκούομεν οὐδέ τι ἴδμεν·  
οἳ τινες ἡγεμόνες Δαναῶν καὶ κοῖρανοι ἦσαν·  
πληθὺν δ' οὐκ ἂν ἐγὼ μυθήσομαι οὐδ' ὀνομήνω,  
οὐδ' εἰ μοι δέκα μὲν γλῶσσαι, δέκα δὲ στόματ' εἶεν,  
φωνὴ δ' ἄρρηκτος, χάλκεον δέ μοι ἦτορ ἐνείη,  
εἰ μὴ Ὀλυμπιάδες Μοῦσαι Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο  
θυγατέρες μνησαίαθ' ὅσοι ὑπὸ Ἴλιον ἦλθον· (Il. II, 484-492)

Tell me now, you Muses who have dwellings on Olympus— for you are goddesses and are present and know all things, but we hear only a rumour and know nothing— who were the leaders and lords of the Danaans. But the multitude I could not tell or name, not even if ten tongues were mine and ten mouths and a voice unwearying, and the heart within me were of bronze, unless the Muses of Olympus, daughters of Zeus who bears the aegis, call to my mind all those who came beneath Ilios. (trans. Murray)

As Benzi rightly points out:

[...] in the passage, the poet's ignorance is contrasted with the goddesses' omniscience, which derives from their having been direct witnesses of the events. Given such a rigid dichotomy between divine and mortal knowledge, the only way for the poet to fulfil his task is to ask the Muses for their assistance in providing him with the information that he lacks. Thus, despite the epistemic gap between gods and humans, the inspired poet can have access to that knowledge from which other mortals are debarred and thereby communicate it through his poetry. (Benzi 2018: 18, emphasis mine)

---

<sup>5</sup> ‘For being able to tell the truth entails the capacity of speaking of details in their proper order, as in the case of a sequence of events. But this requires, as a necessary condition, that the poet knows the exact course of events. According to the archaic visual model of knowledge, however, human beings can only claim to know what they have seen and that to which they have been perceptually present. As a consequence, without divine aid, the poet is epistemically incapable of narrating the spatio-temporally remote events which constitute the object of his song.’, Benzi (2018: 18).

Indeed, the catalogue of ships is clearly built upon the opposition between 'being present-knowing' and 'not being present-not knowing'<sup>6</sup>: it is the link between 'being present' and 'knowing' which grounds the epistemic superiority of the Muses. Because they are, in some sense, everywhere, their experience transcends humans', narrowly bound to 'here' and 'now':

[...] the *noos* of mortals is still constrained to operate within a narrow set of circumstances. Most people are unable to expand their understanding beyond the immediate environment in which they find themselves and no one – without some form of divine assistance – can possibly know anything about events or state of affairs in distant realms and periods. (Leshner 2008: 464)

Wholly specular to the linkage between 'being present' and 'knowing' is the alleged identification between 'not being present', 'relying upon hearsay' and 'knowing nothing'.

For present purposes, this latter identification is cogent. Besides, not only is this remarkable *per se*, but, as a matter of fact, it might also be quite problematic, for it seems to cast ambiguity on Homeric poetry<sup>7</sup>. Following Leshner and Cornford<sup>8</sup>, it is easy to note that Homer himself does not possess any autoptic knowledge of the events he tells about: he relies upon hearsay and spreads the word accordingly. To put it clearly, if the poet *acquires (and transmits)* his own knowledge by means of and thanks to 'testimony', the reduction of 'testimonial knowledge' to 'knowing nothing' is, at very least, quite humorous, for the epistemic authority of the poet should be guaranteed precisely by relying upon gods' words.

This being the case, should we conclude that Homer is promoting a radical scepticism according to which each and every human being (he himself included) – inasmuch as they know nothing autoptically – knows nothing at all?

---

<sup>6</sup> Contra Zellner (1994), who takes this passage as only religiously connoted, I believe that it is epistemically worthy of analysis.

<sup>7</sup> 'In one sense, the Homeric poet places himself on an epistemological par with his audience ("we know nothing"). In another sense, however, this common ignorance procures for him an authority which is difficult to contest: we are all ignorant, but his inquiries are answered by knowledgeable goddesses' (Tor 2017: 82).

<sup>8</sup> Leshner (2008: 460, 478, n. 11)

## SYNTHESIS

And what about those characters from the poems who are said to know something either first-hand or second-hand? In order to solve these puzzles, few considerations are in order.

To begin with, v. 486 seems to claim that *all* humans (note that Homer uses the first plural person here) lack a specific kind of knowledge, i.e., *that* knowledge denoted by the verb οἶδα – thus making room, at least in principle, for other possibilities. This might mean that, whereas humans lack first-hand knowledge, because it belongs only to the gods, they do have access to second-hand knowledge. The dichotomy would therefore be not between ‘autoptic knowledge’ and ‘ignorance’, but precisely between ‘first-hand knowledge’ and ‘second-hand knowledge’<sup>9</sup>. Such a reading however faces objections, the most intuitive being that it is inconsistent with all those passages in the Homeric poems, where characters do exhibit that kind of knowledge denoted by the verb οἶδα.

There are other options. The first one, which is, on my view, the less convincing, consists in distinguishing, so to speak, ‘narration’ and ‘meta-narration’. The second one, which seems to be more solid, attempts to weaken the passage, by denying that it rules out any possibility for humans to grasp autoptic knowledge. That is to say, the sense would be that humans cannot know *autoptically those things* only the Muses can know (autoptically). Besides, the passage emphasises that the gap obtaining between the cognitive capacities of humans and those of the Muses depends on the *objects* such capacities are directed toward: in the following lines, Homer points to his incapacity to grasp and verbalize such a huge amount of information, for they exceed human capacity. To put it clearly, it seems that the epistemic gap between gods and humans cannot be understood as either exclusively quantitative (for the are cases in which humans do produce a catalogue) or exclusively qualitative (for

---

<sup>9</sup> At stake would be ‘[...] una evidente contrapposizione tra la sfera della visione, e quindi il contatto diretto con la realtà degli eventi che costituiscono la materia del canto, e la sfera dell’udito, coincidente con il racconto di quegli stessi eventi, a cui possono accedere gli uomini grazie alla mediazione operata dall’aedo’ (Serra 2012: 255). After all, the poet is ‘professionista dell’ascolto, non della visione’ (Ioli 2018: 97).



there are cases in which humans do know autoptically): these two things *taken together* open the gap.

If this reading makes any sense at all, it means that, true, humans – Homer included – do not have a direct access to what Homer tells, but, true as well, thanks to his privileged connection with the gods, Homer himself can obtain testimonial knowledge of what the Muses tell him. In a nutshell, even though Homer’s knowledge of what happened in Troy is merely testimonial, he cannot have doubts that what the Muses tell him is true, for they possess the purest form of knowledge – about that, we cannot over emphasise that the epistemic connection between the Muses and Homer is essentially *asymmetric*. To sum up, not only is divine communication true, but it also assures the receiver (Homer in the present case) with an excellent reason to take/recognise it as such.

In the face of it, I would take it reasonable to understand the ‘Homeric paradigm’ along the line of the ‘Preemption Thesis’, according to which ‘testimony’ by (epistemic) authority transmits both (true) information and (appropriate) justification. More exactly, it seems that ‘Homeric paradigm’ submits – in its own way – each and every thesis of the famous (and controversial) ‘Preemption Thesis’ put forward by Linda Zagzebski (2012):

**Content-Independence:** An authoritative utterance gives the subject a reason to follow the directive which is such that there is no direct connection between the reason and the action for which it is a reason (...) there are cases in which an authoritative person or community’s belief gives the subject a content-independent reason for belief. If the epistemic authority had believed a different proposition, the subject would have had reason to believe the other proposition instead. (Zagzebski 2012: 106-107)

**Pre-emption Thesis:** The fact that the authority has a belief *p* is a reason for me to believe *p* that replaces my other reasons relevant to believing *p* and is not simply added to them. (Zagzebski 2012: 107)

**Dependency Thesis:** If the belief *p* of a putative epistemic authority is authoritative for me, it should be formed in a way that I would conscientiously believe is deserving of emulation. (Zagzebski 2012: 109)

**Justification Thesis:** The authority of another person’s belief for me is justified by my conscientious judgment that I am more likely to form a true belief and avoid a

## SYNTHESIS

false belief if I believe what the authority believes than if I try to figure out what to believe myself. (Zagzebski 2012: 110)

In a nutshell, if my doctor tells me that ‘P’, I am entitled – or, more strongly, I am required – to believe that ‘P’. Indeed, as Keren already pointed out in (2007: 373) ‘by expressing her belief that *p*, a person who has authority on *p* does not merely give us a reason to likewise believe that *p*. More than that, she gives us a second-order, preemptive reason for disregarding other relevant evidence which we may have concerning *p*’.

As I mentioned, it does not seem unreasonable to conclude that the ‘Homeric paradigm’ meets all the constraints required by the Preemption Thesis<sup>10</sup>. Besides, such a picture is helpful in drawing the line between ‘(authoritative) testimony’ and ‘rumour’ or ‘hearsay’: in the former case, it is a necessary condition that the speaker does possess knowledge of what they are talking about, in the latter case, obviously, it is not. Surely, this does not mean that the information conveyed by the rumour is always and necessarily false, (indeed, there are many cases in which rumours turn out to be true), however it is neither justified nor justifying – such that the receiver cannot claim to know that it is true. Zellner (1994) effectively pointed out that *kleos* can denote both ‘testimony’ and ‘false rumour’: in my view, the distinction between these two is not, so to speak, intrinsic, but extrinsic, in that it depends on the source who pronounces it: hearsay can be both justified (and therefore it constitutes testimony) and unjustified or not properly justified (in this case it is mere rumour).

This examination on Homer’s epistemology and epistemology of testimony, albeit rapid and somewhat rough, should be sufficient to validate the first impression I mentioned earlier, that is, that in archaic Greek culture, epistemology and epistemology of testimony really go hand in hand. Indeed, Homer exploits the gap between humans and gods, sets the distinction between

---

<sup>10</sup> It might be convenient to mention that Zagzebski’s account is largely based upon Joseph Raz’s account of political and practical authority. Without linger on this, I would just suggest that the fact that Zagzebski’s conception of epistemic authority is so deeply indebted to ‘political authority’ might partially explain why it fits so properly with Homer’s conception of epistemic authority.

first-hand knowledge and second-hand knowledge, establishes the condition under which ‘true testimony’ and ‘false rumour’ are to be distinguished. In short, he raises fundamental questions (and provides answers) concerning humans’ epistemic capacities and justification-conditions. Finally, he paves the way to Hesiod’s ground-breaking challenge: ‘what if the authority tells lies?’.

### 3. Hesiod and the ‘Ambiguous Interpretation’

The underlying conviction of this paragraph is that Hesiod plays a key role in the evolution of the conception of ‘epistemic authority’ and in the evolution of Greek epistemology more broadly<sup>11</sup>. As for my specific point of view, Hesiod is the one who instils doubts that ‘authority’ does not guarantee *per se* that the information conveyed is true – indeed, authority can lie. In Strauss Clay’s words: ‘whereas Homer gave us no reason to question his Muses’ veracity, Hesiod has his goddesses vaunt their own ambiguity; their tales resemble those of Odysseus: some may be true, but others may not be; and as human beings we cannot discern the difference’ (2015: 109).

This is notably stressed by Hesiod himself:

αἶ νύ ποθ' Ἡσίοδον καλὴν ἐδίδαξαν ἀοιδὴν,  
ἄρνας ποιμαίνονθ' Ἑλικᾶνος ὑπο ζαθέοιο.  
τόνδε δέ με πρῶτιστα θεαὶ πρὸς μῦθον ἔειπον,  
Μοῦσαι Ὀλυμπιάδες, κοῦραι Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο·  
- ‘ποιμένες ἄγραυλοι, κάκ' ἐλέγχεα, γαστέρες οἶον,

---

<sup>11</sup> Shaul Tor has enthusiastically and persuasively argued in favour of ‘Hesiod epistemologist’: ‘[...] Hesiod crystallises the major contours of an emerging religious enterprise of systematic reflection on the conditions of speculative inquiry. We will find in Xenophanes, Parmenides and Empedocles illuminating polemical responses to Hesiod, which are nonetheless influenced by, and essentially continuous with, this epistemological breakthrough. Indeed, it may be plausibly argued that Xenophanes and Parmenides pitch their polemical responses as reactions specifically to the way in which Hesiod first articulates and introduces the Muses’ relation to him’ (Tor, 2017; 53). In short, according to Tor, Hesiod is ‘our earliest extant thinker who critically isolates the question of the conditions of human speculation, articulates a coherent framework within which to consider it and integrates it into a broader conception of the human condition. In short, we must not say that ‘Before [Xenophanes] there is no reflective discussion about knowledge.’ (2017: 52).

## SYNTHESIS

ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα,  
ἴδμεν δ' εὖτ' ἐθέλωμεν ἀληθέα γηρύσασθαι.  
- ὥς ἔφασαν κοῦραι μεγάλου Διὸς ἀρτιέπειαι,  
καί μοι σκήπτρον ἔδον δάφνης ἐριθιλέος ὄζον  
δρεψασαι, θηητόν· ἐνέπνευσαν δέ μοι αὐδὴν  
θέσπιν, ἵνα κλείοιμι τὰ τ' ἐσόμενα πρὸ τ' ἐόντα,  
καί μ' ἐκέλονθ' ὕμνεῖν μακάρων γένος αἰὲν ἐόντων,  
σφαῖς δ' αὐτὰς πρῶτόν τε καὶ ὕστατον αἰὲν ἀείδειν. (Th. 22-34)

One time, they taught Hesiod beautiful song  
while he was pasturing lambs under holy Helicon. And this  
speech the goddesses spoke first of all to me, the Olympian  
Muses, the daughters of aegis-bearing Zeus: 'Field-dwelling  
shepherds, ignoble disgraces, mere bellies: we know  
how to say many false things similar to genuine ones, but  
we know, when we wish, how to proclaim true things.'  
So spoke great Zeus' ready-speaking daughters, and they  
plucked a staff, a branch of luxuriant laurel, a marvel, and  
gave it to me; and they breathed a divine voice into me, so  
that I might glorify what will be and what was before, and  
they commanded me to sing of the race of the blessed ones  
who always are, but always to sing of themselves first and last. (trans. Most)

As Benzi points out:

[...] the Muses' words leave Hesiod, and thereby his audience, in a state of unsolvable ambiguity concerning the truth-value of the content of their revelation. For, given their epistemic limitations and their total dependence on the Muses, both the poet and the audience are deprived of any means to judge about the truth or falsity of what they apprehend from the divinity. Indeed, for the ignorant audience, the false things which the Muses are able to inspire are, in fact, indistinguishable from the truth. (Benzi 2018: 19, emphasis mine)

This very ambiguity regarding the truth-value of the Muses' words and its relationship with the poet's cognition has been variously understood. Following Tor (2017), we might say that this passage can be read either 'positively' or 'negatively'.

The 'positive reading' entails two possibilities, that is, the a) 'truth-only interpretation' and b) the 'divine knowledge interpretation'. According to the first, Hesiod would be remarking his own privileged poetic status, for the Muses

would have chosen *only* him to reveal their truth, whereas to the other poets (Homer included) they would have tell lies resembling truths<sup>12</sup>; the second option adds to this picture that Hesiod would actually possess knowledge of the truths he is telling. Even the ‘negative reading’ entails two possibilities: a) the refutation of the truth-only interpretation, such that Hesiod would be acknowledging that not everything he is telling is true and b) the so-called ‘ambiguous interpretation’, according to which neither Hesiod nor his audience are really able to assess the truth value of the Muses’ words.

As we have seen, both Strauss Clay (2015) and Benzi (2018) embrace the ambiguous interpretation. Moreover, Tor points out that ‘we cannot over emphasise the textual fact that at no point do the Muses say that to Hesiod they will dispense only truths and never verisimilitudinous falsehoods’ (2017: 72-73), such that:

It is only due to the divine origin of his poetry [...] that the subsequent account could indeed comprise truths. That, however, Hesiod’s own voice – his own authority – remains human [...] coheres with his lack of means to exclude the prospect of falsehoods. Hesiod’s transformation through the Muses’ inspiration does not amount to the acquisition of the Muses’ own capacity to articulate, and to discriminate between, truths and falsehoods which lie beyond the reach of human cognition. (Tor 2017: 80)

All in all, even though Hesiod’s *Theogony* surely is meant to convey truths, Hesiod himself is not in the position to guarantee (to his audience) that his own words do *not* contain falsehoods at all. In the face of it, it seems reasonable to conclude that Hesiod is pointing out that ‘testimony’ – even ‘testimony’ pronounced by the authority, such that the epistemic relation between the speaker and the hearer is still asymmetrical – does not automatically transmit information *plus* justification. In short, testimony does not transmit ‘knowledge’. This is because the hearer 1) cannot be sure that the source is reliable and 2) cannot verify on their own the truth-value of the speaker’s words; but, in order

---

<sup>12</sup> See among others Arrighetti (2018: 28): ‘la sua [di Esiodo] posizione di privilegiato delle Muse non si fonda sul fatto che le Muse, in quanto divinità, sanno tutto, ma in quanto esse scelgono proprio Esiodo per trasmettergli un messaggio di verità che può venir negato a tutti gli altri poeti. Esiodo dunque contrappone sé, non a tutti gli altri uomini, ma a tutti gli altri poeti’.

## SYNTHESIS

to acquire knowledge, the hearer should be able to do either of them. That is, the hearer should be in the position to know *either* if the source is reliable or if what the source is conveying is true.

Such a dilemma has been recently pointed to by Nicholas D. Smith. His view is that

**Reliable Source Doctrine (RSD).** A belief source K can produce justified beliefs for S only if S is justified in believing that K is reliable (Smith, 2019: 159).

When it comes to testimonial knowledge, this principle means that:

**Reliable Source Doctrine for Testimony (RSDt).** Testimony can produce justified beliefs for S only if S is justified in believing that testimony is reliable (Smith 2019: 161).

Once we assume that RSDt is correct, an aporia necessarily follows: in order to establish whether testimony is reliable we should be able to assess *either* whether the source is reliable before knowing if their testimony is or whether the testimony is reliable before knowing if the source is<sup>13</sup>.

It should be clear, or so I hope, that such a dilemma is the same displayed in the *Theogony* by Hesiod: because the Muses can tell lies resembling truths and because we cannot verify the truth-value of their assertions (because they denote things which exceed human cognitive capacities), we are not entirely justified in taking them (and their testimony) to be reliable. Recalling the example I used above, this means that if my doctor tells me that 'P', I am entitled to believe that 'P' and to take my doctor's word as a reason for assent to 'P', but, being unable to verify if 'P' is true, I cannot say to know that 'P'.

---

<sup>13</sup> More in detail (2019: 161): '1. Testimony can produce justified beliefs for us only if we are justified in believing that testimony is reliable. 2. We can be justified in thinking that testimony is reliable only if we have justified beliefs that derive from testimony, which provide support for this conclusion. 3. Either (i) we must have justification for thinking that testimony is reliable prior to gaining justification for the beliefs we derive from testimony, or (ii) we must have justification for the beliefs we derive from prior to gaining justification for thinking that beliefs we derive from testimony are reliable. 4. By 2, (i) cannot be the case. 5. By 1, (ii) cannot be the case. 6. Hence, testimony cannot produce justified beliefs.'

Let us briefly take stock. As we have seen, one of the conditions required by Antiphon's testimonial account is that testimonial evidence needs to be supported by non-testimonial one, in order to settle the reliability of witnesses/authority (because they can lie). In some sense, we might argue that Hesiod's muses are the ancestors of Antiphon's witnesses, for they can lie too. The result is that even Hesiod, despite his privileged status (for he has been personally chosen by the Muses), could be deceived by them – that is, by those who should precisely guarantee and ground his superior status. The 'eyewitness/authority', then, becomes a 'myth'. By saying so, by claiming that 'Hesiod raises the concern of authority telling lies', thus generating the 'myth of the eyewitness', I do not mean that such a concern is raised by Hesiod, so to speak, 'out of the blue': as a matter of fact, in Homer there are many cases of gods deceiving or lying to humans. The main difference between Homer and Hesiod, in my view, lies in the impact of such concern: that is, the (more or less explicit) awareness that gods are not always epistemically reliable does not impact *Homer's own* relationship with the Muses in the same way as it impacts Hesiod's.

#### 4. Xenophanes and the 'Evidentialism Reductionism'

We have seen in the previous section that Hesiod's epistemology widens the gap between human and divine: the poet is unable to recognise the truth-value of the gods' words<sup>14</sup>.

The incapacity of the knowing subject to discern the truth-value of their own beliefs is, as is well known, the core of Xenophanes' epistemology (B 34 DK), which has been variously understood in the philosophical tradition. For the sake of clarity, we might say that Xenophanes has been understood either as promoting some kind of scepticism (or 'proto-scepticism' as Long 1966 put it) or as submitting a fallibilist (perhaps empiricist and naturalist) epistemology<sup>15</sup>. As a

---

<sup>14</sup> See Leshner (2009).

<sup>15</sup> In no way do I aim to address Xenophanes's thought conclusively. I shall confine myself to take into consideration those elements that are significant for my objectives. On Xenophanes see Leshner (1978, 1991), Ioli (2003), Bryan (2012), Sassi (2011, 2015), Aronadio (2005, 2016), Tor (2017).

## SYNTHESIS

matter of fact, in order to establish whether Xenophanes is sceptic or fallibilist, it is crucial to identify his own view on epistemic authority, for it is not possible to evaluate Xenophanes' epistemology without making clear what is the relationship obtaining, according to him, between 'knowledge', 'certainty' 'humans' and 'gods'.

Indeed, both the issues of 'epistemic authority' and 'testimonial knowledge' obtain on a twofold level: vertically, they pertain to the relationship between mortals and gods; horizontally, they concern the relationship between Xenophanes and his audience. Indeed, we might ask whether and to what extent these two questions can actually be distinguished: both Homer's and Hesiod's authority among their peers (horizontal) were grounded in their privileged relationship with the gods (vertical). Once we get rid of the former, what is left of the latter?

It seems then that we need to answer two questions: 1) does Xenophanes break the link human-gods? and 2) if yes, on what is his 'epistemic authority' built upon? And therefore, what kind of 'epistemology of testimony' does Xenophanes submit?

Whatever reading of Xenophanes' thought we are inclined to embrace, we can hardly provide a negative answer to the first question: Xenophanes' philosophy does constitute a strong rejection of traditional theology and of the traditional interpretation of poetic authority. However, in no way does this mean that the divine dimension is completely, radically and anachronistically ruled out. As Shaul Tor (2017) persuasively argued, it seems fair to conclude that Xenophanes' gods do play a role along the human route to knowledge – they just do not function as ground for poetic authority. According to Tor, Xenophanes is committed to reject the traditional account of divine revelation (i.e., via divination<sup>16</sup>) in order to make room for his own account:

---

<sup>16</sup> Tor focuses extensively on B 18 DK (οὗτοι ἀπ' ἀρχῆς πάντα θεοὶ θνητοῖσ' ὑπέδειξαν, ἀλλὰ χρόνῳ ζητοῦντες ἐφευρίσκουσιν ἄμεινον) that he translates as follows: 'Indeed gods did not from the beginning intimate all things to mortals, / But as they search in time they discover better' (2017: 116). The sense is that: 'given Xenophanes' qualification of the manner of disclosure (*hypedeixan*), the markers "from the beginning" and "all things" do not restrict a rejection of disclosure simpliciter, but further qualify the particular notion of indirect, cryptic disclosure, which Xenophanes rejects. That



Xenophanes rejected the view that the gods cryptically communicate any and every truth. He retained, however, the core principle that, *by disclosing objects of experience to them, the divine purposefully enables mortals to reason out conjectures about states of affairs external to their experience, the world around them and their place within it. Xenophanes most probably reconceptualised disclosure as the purposive facilitation of mortal judgement through the facilitation of mortal experience as a whole* ('universal disclosure'). (Tor 2017: 144, emphasis mine)<sup>17</sup>

It would thus be incongruous to say that the gods are not involved in human epistemological endeavour, for, by equipping humans with their cognitive abilities, the gods make *zētēsis* and its (fallibilist) fulfilment possible<sup>18</sup>. As I mentioned above, this means, on the one hand, that Xenophanes' gods are, somehow, linked to humans, but, on the other, that they are not linked to some individual specifically. If this is the case, if Xenophanes rules out the possibility of grounding one's own (epistemic) authority in the privileged connection to the gods<sup>19</sup>, how can his claims of superiority be vindicated?

It seems reasonable to suggest that Xenophanes' authority is to be understood in terms of *epistemic superiority*: this is the first time that a poet (we need to bear in mind that Xenophanes writes in verses) does not need the external validation of the gods, for his own superiority is wholly intrinsic:

---

is, Xenophanes does not severally reject the isolated claims that the gods disclosed (i) from the beginning, (ii) everything and (iii) cryptically. Rather, the qualifications (i)–(iii) combine to express a unified view of how disclosure works, i.e. the view that from the beginning gods cryptically disclosed everything, which Xenophanes rejects' (2017: 118–119). And further: 'the Homeric poet uses the usually mantic *deiknymi* to express a notion of poetic inspiration. Xenophanes, in employing the very same phrase, with the conspicuous addition of the prefix *hypo*, may thus be reacting critically also to the elusive notion of poetic inspiration, itself [...], often closely associated with divination' (2017: 123).

<sup>17</sup> 'Like his opponents, Xenophanes takes it that the nature of divine disclosure determines the epistemic potential of mortals. But, whereas divination and poetic inspiration enable those individuals who experience them to transcend the limitations of other mortals, Xenophanes most probably rendered disclosure the fundamental condition of all mortal discursive activity (universal disclosure)' (Tor 2017: 146).

<sup>18</sup> Tor is thinking of B 28, 36 e 38 DK. Cf. Tor (2017: 133–143).

<sup>19</sup> 'By contrast with tradition, then, divine inspiration can no longer be the means through which mortals can overcome their epistemic limitations. As a consequence, poets cannot rely on divine inspiration to lay their claims to knowledge and thereby authority' (Benzi 2018: 23).

## SYNTHESIS

Xenophanes is so confident in his own wisdom that he harshly criticizes and ridicules peoples' beliefs as well as some of the most renowned wise men of Greece, like Homer, Hesiod and Pythagoras. Given humans' confinement to opinion though, what is Xenophanes' claim to authority and consequent criticism of rival wisdom practitioners based upon? I suggest that the answer to this question is found in Xenophanes' emphasis on the importance of enquiry. [...] through empirical enquiry, men are able to improve their beliefs about the world around them. This means that they can discard opinions which do not match empirical data and thereby advanced new and improved explanations of phenomena. (Benzi, 2018: 24)

Such that:

According to Xenophanes, then, poetic authority derives from the capacity of providing an account which approximates the result of experience better than others, but which nonetheless remains subject to continuous revision and improvement. (Benzi, 2018: 25)

If this picture makes sense, what about Xenophanes' audience? Does the fact that it is Xenophanes who is speaking constitute a preemptive reason to take his words as true? Does his audience acquire *both* (true) information and justification? I do not possess a conclusive answer, but I can propose the following conjecture. My guess is this: the emphasis Xenophanes puts on the empirical verification presumes that the hearer is able to verify on their own the accuracy of the information they receive. This means that the hearer/reader is not expected to be wholly dependent on Xenophanes (epistemically speaking), so that the epistemic relation between Xenophanes and his audience is not that of radical *deference* – at least, not in the same way as it was that between Homer and Hesiod and their audience.

Besides, the nature of Xenophanes's philosophical message requires that the reader/hearer is capable of evaluating it by comparing the new pieces of information with their pre-existent set of beliefs and, above all, with empirical evidence.

All in all, I would suggest that, thanks to Xenophanes, the Preemption Thesis embraced by both Homer and Hesiod gives way to some kind of Evidentialism, according to which an external validation – namely, a validation which is

external to the testimonial relation – is required in order to transform a piece of information into knowledge. In short, testimony is not a basic source of knowledge (anymore), for the possibility for the hearer to acquire knowledge by means of testimony is bounded to the availability of other, non-testimonial, evidence<sup>20</sup>. If this is the case, what kind of ‘epistemology of testimony’ is coming into play?

My suggestion is that Xenophanes is promoting a kind of ‘evidential reductionism’, along the following lines:

Reductionists maintain that because a hearer must have positive reasons for accepting a speaker’s testimony, testimonial justification can be reduced to a combination of other epistemic resources that the hearer possesses, i.e., the hearer’s memorial, perceptual, and inferential capacities. For this reason, *Reductionists can maintain that a hearer’s testimonial-based beliefs are justified by evidence, where this evidence comes from the hearer’s inferences, i.e., inferences from the premise that the speaker said that p, to the conclusion that p is true.* (Leonard 2021, emphasis mine)<sup>21</sup>

On this view, what is relevant in the testimonial dynamic is the hearer who is urged to evaluate on their own the truth-value of the information they are receiving, not the source – whose epistemic authority is (strongly) dismissed.

To sum up, we have seen how, at the beginning, the testimonial dynamic counts two elements: the authoritative speaker and the hearer (that is, the Muses and Homer/Hesiod). Testimony constitutes a basic source of (second-hand) knowledge, for it transmits *both* true information and justification. From Xenophanes onward, ‘authority’ gives way to ‘evidence’ and testimony is no longer understood as providing ‘justification’ to the hearer. In other words, whereas testimony conveys ‘(true) information’, ‘justification’ stems from further evidence. As a consequence, ‘testimony’ ceases to be a basic source of knowledge, because in fact the hearer does not acquire knowledge *solely* on the basis of testimony.

---

<sup>20</sup> This seems to be consistent with Keren (2007: 375, 381).

<sup>21</sup> By contrast, non-reductionists maintain that ‘testimony’ alone does constitute (at least *prima facie*) justification for the hearer.

## SYNTHESIS

### 5. *Parmenides and Holistic Coherentism*

As we have seen, Xenophanes – in dismissing the Preemption Thesis, according to which the fact that the authority believes that ‘P’ constitutes a preemptive reason for me to believe that ‘P’ – represents a turning-point in the history of ‘epistemic/poetic authority’. As we are about to see, Parmenides (even though his philosophy can be understood, under many respects, as a response to Xenophanes’ objections) is wholly consistent with Xenophanes<sup>22</sup>. Let me spell this out.

To begin with, we need to remark that Parmenides speaks in verses. This is by no means an accident:

Rather, the epic mode appeared ‘naturally’ available to Parmenides as the most suited to convey especially serious subjects. In particular, the use of the hexameter signals (as it will in Empedocles) that the author himself is godlike; it is worth remembering that the Greek gods expressed themselves through poets as well as oracles, and the latter were also composed in verse, almost exclusively dactylic hexameter. In conclusion, the reasons for Parmenides’s formal choice are inseparable from the object of his thought, presented as a transcendent truth revealed by a goddess. (Sassi 2018: 153)

Many scholars have been remarking the poetic character of Parmenides’ *Poem* and his debt (although a nuanced one) toward the previous poetic tradition and Hesiod in particular<sup>23</sup>. Benzi recently pointed out how Parmenides’

---

<sup>22</sup> Once again, nothing of what I am going to say about the relation between Parmenides, Hesiod and Xenophanes is meant to be conclusive or exhaustive.

<sup>23</sup> See Mourelatos: ‘what we have from Parmenides is not a philosophical treatise but a poem in hexameters. On the face of it, the very form of the work places him in the tradition of Greek epic poetry. It stands to reason that before we can begin analyzing his thought as that of a philosopher, we must understand his relation to this older tradition. A comparative study of the Parmenides fragments against the background of Homer, Hesiod, and the Homeric Hymns provides, at the very least, a key toward understanding the syntax and semantics of Parmenides’ poem, the precise sense of his metaphors and images, and the wider context of his mythical allusions’ (2008: 1). On poetry and philosophy in Parmenides see, among others, Havelock (1958), Cerri (1995), Tulli (2000), Mourelatos (2008: 1-46), Ioli (2018: 75-79), Sassi (2018: 151-160).

epistemic authority is defined in contrast to Hesiod, in that, on the one hand, like Hesiod, Parmenides alludes to some kind of ‘divine investiture’<sup>24</sup>, but on the other, he is prone to solve Hesiod’s ambiguities. I completely agree with Benzi when he says that

*Parmenides solves the problem of poetic ambiguity by redefining truth in terms of logical deduction. In this way, Parmenides also justifies his claim to authority and superiority over competitors [...] Parmenides’ proem stands as a statement of authority, since it constantly emphasizes the philosopher-poet’s special status, eventually sanctioned by the goddess’ favourable reception and her promise to reveal a truth undisclosed to other mortals. However, in contrast to Hesiod, the guarantee of the truth of divine revelation does not derive from Parmenides’ having been chosen by the goddess, but rather from the fact that the account of What-Is expounded in the poem is the result of logical deduction. (Benzi 2018: 31, emphasis mine)*

Benzi’s analysis takes its starting-point B1 DK:

χρεὼν δέ σε πάντα πυθέσθαι  
ἤμὲν Ἀληθείης εὐπειθέος ἀτρεμέος ἦτορ  
ἦδὲ βροτῶν δόξας, ταῖς οὐκ ἔνι πίστις ἀληθής. (B1 DK, 28-30)

You must be informed of everything,  
both of the unmoved heart of persuasive reality and of the beliefs of  
mortals, which comprise no genuine conviction. (trans. Coxon)<sup>25</sup>

Benzi remarks that this passage from Parmenides’s *Poem* recall quite evidently Hesiod’s proem with the precise aim of displaying the distance

---

<sup>24</sup> It may seem curious that, whereas Hesiod wants to have his voice heard, and starts his theogonic song with a sudden change of scene (with the likely proverbial expression of line 35: ‘but why should I talk about a rock or a stone?’), the speech of Parmenides’s goddess unravels without a break and coincides with the contents of the poem itself. One would be tempted to conclude that Parmenides’s persona is set aside in giving the floor to a superior authority. But if we consider the context of performance, in which the wise man strove to present his personal experience and the revelation that ensued, we must maintain that it was still his voice that was being echoed, and that the listeners ended up seeing themselves in the ‘you’ to whom the goddess is speaking (Sassi 2018: 155).

<sup>25</sup> Text Coxon (2009).

## SYNTHESIS

between Hesiod's Muses who tell lies resembling truths and Parmenides's Goddess, for:

[...] first, the truths and the falsehoods resembling genuine things are replaced, respectively, by the heart of truth and opinions; secondly, and most significantly for the present enquiry, the goddess is explicit about what she will tell Parmenides and does not leave room for ambiguity, since Parmenides will learn *both* truth *and* opinions but having being warned beforehand of the truth value of what he will apprehend. (Benzi 2018: 27)

Despite this:

[...] the goddess' declaration per se is not sufficient to ensure that she is not deceiving Parmenides. For, as shown by Hesiod, the gods can tell humans lies without them being able to detect them. How, then, can Parmenides ground his claim to authority? (Benzi 2018: 27)

Benzi's reasonable suggestion is that even though he claims to be part of the poetic tradition, still, Parmenides is extremely careful in providing his audience with the appropriate instruments to recognise the truth-value of this assertions.

In Sassi's words:

To be sure, Parmenides is the addressee of a revelation, but he presents this revelation as the result of a personal inquiry. An indication of this is given by the long series of stops he makes prior to arriving before the goddess, whose welcome speech then develops in the space of relatively few lines. Conversely, at the beginning of the Theogony, the arrival of the Muses is introduced by a long preamble in which the goddesses themselves approach the poet, who realizes his privileged position from a quasi-aggressive apostrophe before receiving the symbolic gift of the laurel branch and an inspired voice. (Sassi 2018: 155)

This is crucial. I mentioned that, when it comes to epistemic authority and epistemology of testimony, Parmenides follows in the footsteps of Xenophanes. As we have seen, Xenophanes's main claim is that the hearer is urged to judge the content of testimony on their own, without relying upon the authority of the source. To a large extent, Parmenides agrees, for, although his message is communicated by a goddess, his hearer is supposed to judge on their own. This

is because Parmenides's philosophical message is displayed as an *argumentation*:

Parmenides' decisive move to solve the issue of poetic ambiguity consists in *redefining the criteria of truth by shifting them from narration to logical argumentation*. For, as long as poetry was conceived as a means of reporting events distant in place and time, as in Homer, there always remained the possibility that what the poet sang did not correspond to actual state-of-affairs. The same consideration holds in the case of Hesiod, as the truths to which the Muses inspired him still related to events of which humans could not have knowledge, and thus were devoid of any guarantee. By contrast, *if poetry is used to illustrate a truth which is the result of a logical argument, there is no room for uncertainty*. (Benzi 2018: 30-31, emphasis mine)

Such that:

since the truth revealed by the goddess consists in the conclusions of a deduction, *Parmenides (and the audience) can actually check the validity of what he has been told*. Indeed, the goddess herself invites him to put to the test her account by judging it through reason. Parmenides' characterization of *alêtheia* as the result of rational deduction thus provides the poet with that independent criterion of truth whose absence condemned Hesiod's poetry to unsolvable ambiguity. (Benzi 2018: 28, emphasis mine)

Contrary to Xenophanes, however, Parmenides's hearer does *not* need an external validation (that is, as we have seen, a validation which is external to the testimonial relation) in order to transform a piece of information into knowledge. Contrary to Xenophanes, the possibility for Parmenides's hearer to acquire knowledge is *not* bounded to the availability of other, non-testimonial, evidence. All they have to do is to check *on their own* the logical validity of Parmenides's words.

In the face of it, my suggestion is that while Xenophanes promotes some kind of evidential reductionism, Parmenides is submitting a kind of Holistic Coherentism. In Smith's words:

Holistic coherentists do not think that the justification for either sort of belief is prior to the other – it is only when we have enough together in a coherent way that

## SYNTHESIS

any of them become justified; and then they become justified all at once. (Smith, 2019: 160)

When it comes to testimony, as we have seen, Holistic Coherentism claims that:

neither our justification for our testimonial beliefs nor our justification for thinking that testimony is reliable needs to be prior to the other. According to holistic coherentism, beliefs are justified only insofar as they cohere well with a broad system of beliefs that is itself coherent. A sufficiently coherent system of beliefs will include beliefs about the reliability of belief sources (testimony, perception, reason). But these reliability beliefs are themselves justified by their coherence with the rest of the system, not by some antecedent source of justification. [...] – beliefs *about* testimony and beliefs *based on* testimony become justified by fitting together into a broad and coherent system of beliefs. (Smith 2019: 168)<sup>26</sup>

The basic idea is that, contrary to Homer's, Hesiod's and Xenophanes's audience (let alone Antiphon's jurors!), Parmenides's reader/hearer cannot doubt that Parmenides is telling the truth, because his message is consistent – at least, potentially – with their own pre-existent sets of beliefs. It is not by accident, perhaps, that Parmenides speaks of 'persuasive truth', thus suggesting that truth is *justifying per se* (i.e., there is no further need for a reassurance from the authority of the speaker). I wish to be very clear on this, because in no way am I claiming that all Parmenides does is to say that his truth is persuasive. On my view, the reason why he is *entitled* to say so is that his truth is a *truth of reason*<sup>27</sup>, whilst Homer's, Hesiod's, Xenophanes's, and Antiphon's were not. I mentioned at the beginning that according to 'Homeric paradigm' the epistemic gap humans-gods pertain those things which exceeds (spatial-temporally speaking) humans' cognitive abilities. In those cases, where *truths of facts* are

---

<sup>26</sup> In more detail: 'The holistic coherentist suggests that justification for a belief is generated by the overall coherence of the system of beliefs within which it is situated and the degree to which the belief fits into (or coheres with) that system. After enough time in the world, we will form an overall picture of ourselves and our environment (a system of beliefs). If this system has a high degree of coherence, then particular beliefs within the system earn their justification by adding to the overall coherence of the system' (Smith 2019: 169).

<sup>27</sup> I take this to be fully consistent with Benzi *et al.* talking about 'logical argumentation'.



involved, it is much harder to imagine that the hearer really can be in the appropriate position to determine *on their own* the truth-value of the testimony<sup>28</sup>.

---

<sup>28</sup> Besides, such a distinction between ‘truths of facts’ and ‘truth of reasons’ should also explain the difference between Antiphon’s holistic coherentism and Parmenides’s. Although both seem to advance an epistemology of testimony that calls for a scrutiny of the information by the hearer, Antiphon’s account presumes five elements: 1) the speaker 2) the hearer 3) the information 4) the authority supporting the speaker (testimonial evidence) 5) non-testimonial evidence supporting the authority, whereas Parmenides’s simply requires 1) the speaker 2) the hearer 3) the information. Instead, the difference between Homer and Hesiod and Antiphon rests upon the religious element and, above all, the ‘infallibilism’ of the formers in contrast to the ‘fallibilism’ of the latter.

## SYNTHESIS

### References

- Aronadio, F., (2005) 'Il campo semantico di "noein" fra epos e filosofia: il caso emblematico di Senofane', in Canone, E. (a cura di), *Per una storia del concetto di mente*, Firenze, Olschki, 1-25
- Aronadio, F., (2016) 'La componente volizionale del noos divino e umano in Senofane', *Methodos*, 16, 2-16
- Benzi, N., (2018) 'The Redefinition of Poetic Authority in Early Greek Philosophical Poetry', *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne*, 44, 2, 15-41
- Bryan, J., (2012) *Likeness and Likelihood in the Presocratics and Plato*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- Cerri, G., (1995) 'Cosmologia dell'Ade in Omero, Esiodo e Parmenide', in Catilena, R. (a cura di), *Caronte: un obolo per l'aldilà. La parola del passato Vol. L*, Napoli, Macchiaroli Editore, 182-185, 437-467
- Coxon, A. H., (2009) *The Fragments of Parmenides. A Critical Text with Introduction and Translation, the Ancient Testimonia and a Commentary*, Las Vegas/Zürich/Athens, Parmenides Publishing
- Detienne, M., (1977) *I maestri di verità nella Grecia arcaica*, Roma/Bari, Laterza
- Di Iulio, E., (1977) 'Mythos e Logos: percorsi della "autorità poetico-epistemica" nella Grecia pre-platonica', *RIFL*, 16, 2, 92-106
- Esiodo, *Theogonia*, traduzione a cura di G. Arrighetti, Milano, BUR, 2021 [ventinovesima edizione]
- Fricker, E., (1977) 'Testimony and epistemic authority', in Lackey, J./Sosa, E. (eds.), *The epistemology of testimony*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 225-250
- Gagarin, M., (1997) *Antiphon, the speeches (edition and commentary)*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- Gagarin, M., (2002) *Antiphon the Athenian: Oratory, Law and Justice in the Age of the Sophists*, Austin, University of Texas Press
- Gagarin, M./MacDowell, D. M., (1998) *Antiphon and Andocides. The Oratory of Classical Greece, Volume 1*, Austin, University of Texas Press
- Hardwig, J., (1985) 'Epistemic Dependence', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 82, 7, 335-249
- Havelock, E. A., (1958) 'Parmenides and Odysseus', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 63, 133-143
- Hesiod, *Theogony. Works and Days. Testimonia*, edition and translation by G. W. Most, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2006

- Hoffman, D. C., (2008) 'Concerning Eikos: Social Expectation and Verisimilitude in Early Attic Rhetoric', *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, 26, 1, 1-29
- Homer, *Iliad*, translation by A. T. Murray, revised by W. F. Wyatt, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1924
- Ioli, R., (2003) 'Senofane B 34 DK e il conoscere', *Giornale Italiano di Filologia*, 15, 199-219
- Ioli, R., (2018) *Il Felice inganno. Poesia, finzione e verità nel mondo antico*, Milano, Collana Filosofie Mimesis
- Keren, A., (2007) 'Epistemic authority, testimony and the transmission of knowledge', *Episteme*, 368-381
- Lackey, J., (2018) 'Experts and Peer Disagreement', in Benton, M. A./Hawthorne J./Rabinowitz, D. (eds.), *Knowledge, Belief, and God: New Insights in Religious Epistemology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 228-245
- Leonard, N., (2021) 'Epistemological Problems of Testimony', in Zalta, E. N. (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/testimony-episprob/>
- Leshner, J. H., (1978) 'Xenophanes' scepticism', *Phronesis*, 23, 1, 1-21
- Leshner, J. H., (1981) 'Perceiving and Knowing in the 'Iliad' and 'Odyssey'', *Phronesis*, 26, 1, 2-24
- Leshner, J. H., (1991) 'Xenophanes on inquiry and discovery: An alternative to the "hymn to progress" reading of fr. 18', *Ancient Philosophy*, 11, 2, 229-248
- Leshner, J. H., (2008) 'The Humanizing of Knowledge in Presocratic Thought', in Curd, P./Graham, D. W. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press
- Leshner, J. H., (2009) 'Archaic knowledge', in Wians, W. R. (ed.), *Logos and Muthos: Philosophical Essays in Greek Literature*, New York, State University of New York Press, 13-28
- Long, A. A., (1996) 'Parmenides on Thinking Being', *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium of Ancient Philosophy*, 12, 1, 125-151
- Most, G., (1999), 'The poetics of early Greek philosophy', Long, A. A. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 332-362
- Mourelatos, A.P.D., (2008) *The Route of Parmenides. Revised and Expanded Edition*, Las Vegas/Zürich/Athens, Parmenides Publishing
- Sassi, M. M., (2011) 'Senofane fra i Sofisti. Dai limiti della conoscenza (21 B 34 DK) al paradosso eristico (Plat., Men., 80d5-e5)', *Methexis*, 24, 7-20

## SYNTHESIS

- Sassi, M. M., (2013) 'La logique de l'eoikos et ses transformations: Xénophane, Parménide, Platon', *Philosophie antique*, 13, 13-35
- Sassi, M. M., (2018) *The Beginnings of Philosophy in Greece*, translated by Michele Asuni, Princeton/Oxford, Princeton University Press
- Serra, M., (2012) 'Narrare e argomentare: percorsi della verità nella Grecia antica', *Testi e linguaggi*, 6, 253-268
- Smith, N. D., 'How Testimony Can Be a Source of Knowledge?', *Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts*, 6, 2, 157-172
- Snell, B., (2002) *La cultura greca e le origini del pensiero europeo*, Torino, Einaudi [tredicesima ristampa]
- Tor, S., (2017) *Mortal and Divine in Early Greek Epistemology. A study of Hesiod, Xenophanes, and Parmenides*, Cambridge University Press
- Tulli, M., (2000) 'Esiodo nella memoria di Parmenide', Arrighetti G./Tulli M. (a cura di), *Letteratura e riflessione sulla letteratura nella cultura classica*, Giardini, 65-81
- Zagzebski, L., (2012) *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief*, Oxford, Oxford University Press
- Zellner, H. M., (1994) 'Scepticism in Homer?', *The Classical Quarterly*, 44, 2, 308-315