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Notes

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PYTHAGORAS ON INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES AND THE AUTHORITARIAN PRINCIPLE

In the *Anonymus Byzantinus*, an important but neglected military treatise from the age of Justinian, which has never been published but once¹ but will soon appear in a new critical edition prepared by Dr. T. H. Erck, section 10 of Chapter 3 runs as follows:

Those who have devoted themselves to the sciences and the arts ought to have a natural talent for the object of their study. For it is possible that a man who feels at home in one subject may feel differently in another; and for that reason, as we are told, Pythagoras also first thoroughly examined (*διερευνώμενον*) the natural talents of his pupils, and then assigned (*τάττειν*) them the subjects they were to study (*τὰ μαθήματα*).

This is clearly a paraphrased doctrine, or echo, and not at all an actual fragment, as the use of *διερευνᾶν*, which is not attested before Plato, makes abundantly evident. The *μαθήματα* (subjects of study) and lore about them are notoriously characteristic of the Pythagoreans (cf. the comments of Heraclitus, Frgs. 40 and 129), while derivatives of *τάττειν* (assign) appear in Philolaus and the older Pythagoreans, and the idea of an orderly arrangement which the word implies is most appropriate to the thought of the man who is reputed to have been the first to call the heavens *κόσμος*. Since the passage is not included in either Zeller, or Diels (not even in the admirable fifth edition by Walther Kranz), it might be called in a sense "new," although Diels in the Preface

¹ Cf. H. Köchly und W. Rüstow, *Griechische Kriegsschriftsteller*: Leipzig, Teubner (1855), II, 2.

to his first edition made clear, and in that to the third underscored, the fact that in sections A (*Lehre*) and C (*Anklang*) completeness was not even aimed at, but only *das Westentliche und Alte*, so that this may be a part of the tradition which seemed to Diels not even worth recording.

It has, however, to my mind, not merely points of close contact with other Pythagorean doctrine, as remarked above, but especially with the problem of individual differences, which is still acute enough among geneticists in fascist and communist countries to have broken up a planned World Congress in Moscow only a year ago. Since Pythagoras was the founder of the very theory of aristocracy and a chief mover in the oligarchic reaction against democracy, an emphasis upon the profound and innate, or hereditary, differences of men, even among his own followers, must have been one of the few first principles of his social and philosophical system—ideas given a lapidary expression, in the centuries to come, by Menander (Terence, *Phormio* 790): *vir viro quid praestall*; and Marcus Aurelius (Suidas, s.v. Μάρκος, ed. Adler [1933], III, 329, 15–18): “It is impossible for a person to make of men what he wants them to be, but it is proper, taking them as they are, to use them for any good that can be derived from them for the common weal.”

The closest parallel to our statement is, of course, the notorious preliminary examination of candidates for admission to the brotherhood, particularly as described by Iamblichus, *Vita Pythag.* 71–79 and 94; but more especially the subsequent classification of the members into ἀκουστικοί, μαθηματικοί, φυσικοί, the “esoterics” and the “exoterics,” and all the other somewhat fantastic class designations recorded in later sources, which have been collected and discussed by E. Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen*⁵ I, 315 f.²

Akin to the general theory underlying these discriminations, and an enunciation of the authoritarian principle, which is based upon them, is the well-known doctrine of the early Pythagoreans: “In general they thought men should realize that there is no greater evil than anarchy; for it is not in the nature of man to

² In which connection one might compare the amusing note by R. A. Pack, “Physiognomical entrance-examinations,” *CLASS. JOURN.* XXXV (1935–36), 42 f.

prosper without somebody supervising him” (Aristoxenus, Πυθαγορικὰ ἀποφάσεις, in Stobaeus IV, 1, 40 H., repeated verbatim in Iamblichus, *Vita Pythag.* 175); and the maxims: “They said that rulers should be not merely competent but also benevolent, and that subjects should not merely be obedient, but should also love their rulers” (Iamblichus, 175); as well as: “For neither household nor state would ever be well managed without a real ruler who voluntarily exercises the functions of his position of authority and oversight. For both parties ought to desire the supervision, the ruler as well as the subjects,” etc. (183); and: “It is folly to pay attention to any and everybody’s opinion, and especially that of common people; for a correct understanding and judgment are granted to but few. Now it is clear that this is the case with those who have knowledge; and such persons are few in number” (200); and: “The Pythagoreans in general say that man is never to be allowed to do whatever he wishes, but that there ought always to be some kind of supervision, and a legal and respectable authority, to which every citizen will be subject. For the creature man, if he is allowed to go at loose ends and is not looked after, will swiftly sink into rascality and worthlessness” (203); and finally the elaborate maxims of birth-control and eugenics, as set forth in Iamblichus 209–213, which are consonant with such views, although justifiable, of course, on other grounds as well.

The spiritual affinity between these principles and those of certain modern totalitarian states would seem to be fairly obvious.

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