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'Εστρίς ἐκατέρωθι in Pindar's second Olympian and
Pythagoras' Theory of Metempsychosis

KURT VON FRITZ

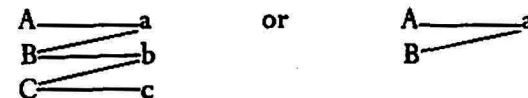
IN his excellent dissertation "A Study of the Doctrine of Metempsychosis in Greece from Pythagoras to Plato", Princeton, 1948, Professor H. S. Long discusses, among other things, the famous passage in Pindar's second Olympian in which the poet appears to make use of the doctrine of reincarnation. In vv 56 sq of this poem Pindar speaks of the punishment of the wicked and the rewards of the good and just in another world. Then he continues: ὅσοι δ' ἐτόλμησαν ἐστρίς ἐκατέρωθι μείναντες ἀπὸ πάμπαν ἀδίκων ἔχειν ψυχάν, ἔτειλαν Διὸς ὁδὸν παρὰ Κρόνου τύρσιν· ἔνθα μακάρων νᾶσον ὠκεανίδες αὔραι περιπνέουσιν, κτλ.

Long rightly interprets this passage in the light of Pindar, frgt. 137 Turyn (127 Bowra), which runs as follows:

Οἷσι κε Φερσεφόνα ποινὰν παλαιοῦ πένθεος
δέξεται, ἐς τὸν ὕπερθεν ἄλιον κείνων ἐνάτω ἔτει·
ἀνδιδότ' ψυχὰς πάλιν, ἐκ τᾶν βασιλῆες ἀγαυοί
καὶ σθένει κραιπνοὶ σοφίᾳ τε μέγιστοι
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ἦρος ἀγνοὶ πρὸς ἀνθρώπων καλεῦνται.

Obviously those who in the second Olympian are said to go the road of Zeus to the fortress of Kronos on the islands of the blessed are identical with those who, according to the fragment, will in the future be called blessed heroes (or spirits). Thus ἐκατέρωθι clearly means: in this world and the other.

The problem however, which Long (pp. 35 sq.) discusses is, whether ἐστρίς ἐκατέρωθι means three times in this world and three times in the other or twice in this world and once in the other – or, as he tries to illustrate it:



Adopting an argument used by Mommsen, Long (pp. 35 and 42) decides in favor of the second alternative. "For", he says, "wherever the belief in immortality occurs in Greek religion it is from *this* world that the soul passes to its final dwelling place." The first alternative,

58 FRITZ K. VON, 'Εστρίς ἐκατέρωθι in Pindar's second Olympian [et la réincarnation chez Empédocle] ; cf. Pindarus.

FRITZ K. VON, 'Εστρίς ἐκατέρωθι in Pindar's second Olympian and Pythagoras' theory of metempsychosis : Phronesis II 1957 85-89. | La 11^e Olympique incite à penser que la théorie de la réincarnation était, sous une forme très proche de celle qui apparaît chez Empédocle et chez Platon, déjà répandue en Grande Grèce avant Empédocle.

Phronesis

IV36

Ἑστρὶς ἐκατέρωθι in Pindar's second *Olympian* and
Pythagoras' Theory of Metempsychosis

KURT VON FRITZ

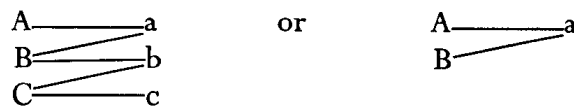
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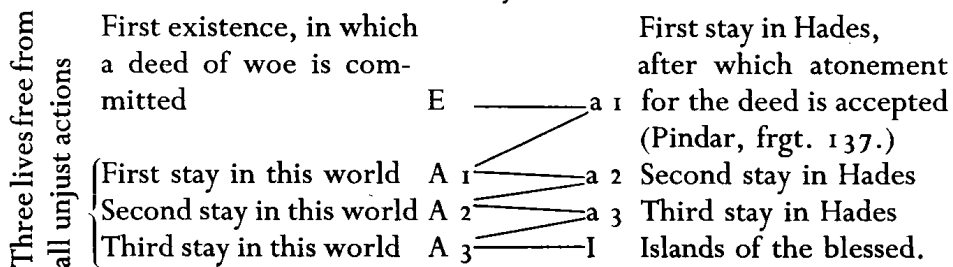
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so Long believes, would imply that the soul passes from its last stay in Hades directly to the islands of the blessed.

There are, however, it seems to me, three very strong objections to this interpretation. First of all ἐστρίς ἑκατέρωθι μέιναντες can hardly mean that they stayed twice on one side and once on the other, but only that they stayed three times on both. Secondly, considering the great role that the number three plays in all superstitions and religious beliefs, it is very well understandable that a soul should have to prove its worth three times before being admitted to a life of eternal bliss. But why twice in this world and once in the other? Why not the other way around? The very fact that there is such an alternative destroys the whole force of the number three. Third – and this is the most weighty objection – there is no indication anywhere else of the belief that a soul could earn merits in Hades. It may be purified there by punishments. But in this process it remains passive. After the completion of this punishment – as Pindar, frgt. 137 also clearly indicates – it has to prove its worthiness in this world, in which alone it can act. This is also the reason why – as both Mommsen and Long have correctly pointed out – there is no transition from Hades to the islands of the blessed, but only from this world. But if this is so a stay in Hades can not be one of the three times in which a soul has to stay away from all evil if it is to be admitted to the happy realm of Kronos.

Nor is Mommsen's and Long's objection to the first alternative valid. For, as frgt. 137 clearly shows, the process does not begin in this world, but with a purification in Hades – after a deed of woe has been committed in a place not specified. It is also clear that this undefined existence, in which the deed was committed, whatever its nature may be, does not belong to the three existences in which the soul stays away from all evil. Thus between the existence in which the deed was committed and the soul's admission to its final dwelling place there are clearly three stays in Hades and three existences in this world. But the transition to the islands of the blessed takes place from this world, as it should be.

In other words, the scheme is really as follows:



This interpretation, apart from agreeing much better with Pindar, frgt. 137 and with the religious notions prevailing at his time, has the great additional advantage that it establishes a closer relation between the two Pindar passages on the one side and a passage in Plato's *Phaedrus* and several passages in the fragments of Empedocles' poems on the other than the interpretation accepted by Long would reveal.

In Plato's *Phaedrus* (245 C ff.) it is said that the souls by nature have wings. With these wings they try to and actually do reach the *ὑπερουράνιος τόπος* so that they are able to contemplate τὰ ἔξω τοῦ οὐρανοῦ. The strongest and most divine souls succeed in staying there. But other souls, through the strength of their passions (which, in the well known simile are likened to unruly horses) and the weakness of their ruling intellect (the charioteer), are thrown off their course, hurt themselves, and finally lose their wings. If this happens they become incorporated successively in various mortal bodies. After each incorporation they die and have to spend some time in Hades, where they have to stand trial for their actions and may be punished for their sins. Then they are reborn into another body. Most souls have to go through this process for ten thousand years until their wings have grown sufficiently for them to return to the *ὑπερουράνιος τόπος*. Only those who become true philosophers may return after a period of only three thousand years, if they have lived a truly philosophical life, i.e. a life of perfect justice, three times in succession (*ἐὰν ἔλωνται τρίς ἐφεξῆς τὸν βίον τοῦτον*, *Phaedrus* 249 A).

Here then the same condition of three lives of true philosophy or perfect justice recurs. This can hardly be due to chance but points to an earlier belief as a common source. At the same time there are certain differences. The most striking is that in Plato it ends with the return to the *ὑπερουράνιος τόπος*, in Pindar with the islands of the blessed. This is easily explained, since Plato's version is obviously an adaptation to his own philosophy concerning the cosmos and its relation to the realm of ideas, while Pindar's is an adaptation of the same doctrine to popular beliefs.

For this reason it is difficult, if at all possible, to determine what kind of existence Pindar had in mind, when in frgt. 137 he spoke of a *παλαιὸν πένθος* for which Persephone has to accept atonement before the soul is allowed to return to the upper world to become incorporated in a king or a wise man. In Plato's dialogue it is quite logical that the soul, after having gone through many existences and in the intervals between them having stood trial in Hades, may return to the place from which

it has come in the beginning. The same idea can be found in the fragments of Empedocles' poems, when, for instance in 31 B 115, 12 ff. (Diels) the poet says of himself that he is a φυγάς θεόθεν καὶ ἀλήτης, νείκεϊ μαινομένῳ πίσυνος and when earlier in the same fragment it is said that, if anyone of the demons commits a murder or another crime, he must wander for thirty thousand seasons far from the blessed, while in 31 B 149 it is said that at the end of their wanderings the souls become sooth-sayers, poets, and princes and then from there "shoot up afresh" as gods. In both cases the souls ultimately return to the place from which they have started and from which they have been driven in consequence of a failure or a guilt.

This notion of a guilt as the cause of the wanderings of the soul occurs also in Pindar's fragment 137. The logical consequence of the notion, if applied to the second Olympian ode, would then be that those who three times have lived a life free from injustice - and presumably among them Theron of Akragas to whom the ode is addressed - will not only, at the end of this succession of lives, go to the islands of the blessed and to the castle of Kronos, but that they also originally have come from there. But the notion of the islands of the blessed, as we know it from other sources, is not usually connected with the idea of reincarnation and of a cycle of rebirths as punishment for those who have done some wrong in another world. It is rather conceived as an afterlife for those who are favored by the gods, that has nothing to do with the assumption of a life that may have preceded life in this world. We do not either hear anywhere else of inhabitants of the islands of the blessed committing crimes and for that reason being exiled from that realm of bliss. Pindar himself, in fact, in an earlier part of the second Olympian ode says that sins committed ἐν τῷδε Διὸς ἀρχῇ (which cannot but mean: in this world, in which we are living) will be punished in the nether world (κατὰ γῆς), while the good will be rewarded. He does not speak of sins committed in the realm of Kronos, much less does he apply such a notion to Theron of Akragas, to whom the ode is addressed.

All this shows that U.v. Wilamowitz¹, E. Rohde² and others were right when they pointed out that Pindar in these poems has no consistent notion of life in another world but that he freely combines notions that he has derived from different sources (an observation which is also

¹ U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Pindaros*, Berlin, 1922, p. 248 ff.

² Erwin Rohde, *Psyche*, II, 209 ff.

accepted and confirmed by Long).¹ But it is all the more significant that those parts of the second Olympian and of frgt. 137 that bring in the doctrine of reincarnation, if correctly interpreted, turn out to be so very close both to a passage in Plato's *Phaedrus* and to fragments of Empedocles' poem as to make it certain that there must be a common source.

The second Olympian ode belongs in the year 476 B.C. It is addressed to Theron of Akragas, a city, which is also the hometown of Empedocles. But in 476, even if one assumes a very early date for the birth of Empedocles, who, according to Aristotle, was younger than Anaxagoras, the poet-philosopher can hardly have been much more than 20 years old. It is not likely that Pindar would have used the brandnew idea of a very young man in the way in which he uses the doctrine of reincarnation in the ode addressed to Theron. The conclusion to be drawn therefore is, that the theory of reincarnation in a form very similar to that in which it appears both in Empedocles and in Plato was well known in Akragas, and in all likelihood also in the rest of Greek Sicily, before Empedocles. For the fuller implications of this conclusion I may perhaps refer to my article on Pythagoras, which it to be published soon in the *Pauly-Wissowa*. In this paper it was merely my aim to demonstrate the closeness of the relation between the doctrine used by Pindar on the one hand, and Empedocles and Plato on the other.

¹ H. S. Long, *op. coll.* p. 36, who rightly points out that it is a mistake to attempt to reconstruct a consistent view of Pindar's concerning life after death or before birth.

I may perhaps use this occasion to state that it seems to me a similar mistake to insist that the meaning of a Greek technical term of even as comparatively early an epoch as the late fifth or early fourth century must necessarily correspond exactly to the very early rules of Greek word formation. There are quite a few newly coined philosophical terms of that period to show that this was not the case, and a case in point is exactly the word *metempsychosis*, which the Greeks used for reincarnation. As has often be observed, according to the early rules of Greek word formation, this word, it is true, should mean that the same body is successively inhabited by different souls; and the doctrine of transmigration of souls from one body to another should more correctly be designated by a word like *metensomatisis*. But there is the overwhelming evidence that there existed among some Greeks of Italy and Sicily in the early fifth century and later a belief in transmigration of souls from body to body and that this doctrine or creed was later designated by the word *metempsychosis*. It may be regrettable that the ancient Greeks who coined the word had no longer the fine feeling for the rules of word formation in their own language that is characteristic of Homer. But the same phenomenon can be observed in all ages in which there is an increase in purely abstract thinking. It is senseless to insist, as often has been done, that the doctrine must have been different from what it obviously was because the word chosen to designate it was not quite well chosen from the point of view of the best linguistic usage.