

*Pythagoras and the Doctrine of Transmigration*, which was first published in 2008 by Continuum International Publishing, has been re-released in paperback.

## **Pythagoras and the Doctrine of Transmigration - Introduction**

### **The Poetic *Topos* of the Doctrine of Transmigration**

I made up rhymes in dark and scary places,  
And like a lyre I plucked the tired laces  
Of my worn-out shoes, one foot beneath my heart.[\[1\]](#)

(Rimbaud, 'Wandering,' Stanza 4)

Remind yourself that all men assert wisdom is the greatest good,  
but that there are few, who, strenuously endeavor to obtain  
this greatest good.[\[2\]](#)

(attributed to Pythagoras by Stobaeus)

No, not yet, old seer!  
No, from this good green earth my eye shall not  
Depart without a tribute of late gladness.  
And still I wish to dwell upon things past,  
Recall once more the dear friend of my youth  
Remote now in the happy towns of Hellas,  
My brothers too, who cursed me – so it had  
To be. Now leave me. When over there the light  
Of day goes down, you'll see me once again.

(Empedocles, in Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles*)[\[3\]](#)

### **Pythagoras and the Recurrence of the Tragic**

Nietzsche briefly refers to Pythagoras in *The Birth of Tragedy*, as one of the exemplars, prior to Aeschylus (himself attributed by Cicero in *Tusculanae Quaestiones* to be a follower of Pythagoras)[\[iv\]](#) of tragic sixth century Greece.[\[v\]](#) The pregnancy of this reference seems, however, to have been lost on Biebuyck, Praet and Vanden Poel in their important essay, 'Cults and Migrations: Nietzsche's Meditations on Orphism, Pythagoreanism, and the Greek

Mysteries'.<sup>[vi]</sup> For, while it is clear that Nietzsche savagely castigates Pythagoras (and Orphicism) as a precursor to Plato and as a proto-Christian, the Pythagorean doctrine of transmigration could, from the perspective of *The Birth of Tragedy*, be interpreted as a variant of tragic *pessimism*, which abides, at its heart, an affirmation of the eternal recurrence of the All.<sup>[vii]</sup> In this light, the significance of Pythagorean philosophy could be seen under a radically different aspect, the basic features of which have not been questioned since Guthrie's monumental *History of Greek Philosophy* in the 1960's. The work of Guthrie, while he to a significant extent merely repeats the ascetic picture of Pythagoras, served to begin to undermine basic features of the dominant interpretation, such as that of Cornford (and of Nietzsche himself), which had sought to quarantine the mathematical, 'scientific' aspects of Pythagorean philosophy from its dispensable and baroque 'mystical' shell. Radicalizing the work of Guthrie, the present interpretation will seek to re-contextualize the status and place of mathematics and science in Pythagorean philosophy (and philosophy *as such*), as aspects that participate (though do not dominate), alongside art, music and practical techniques of the self, in the articulation and the *sheltering* of an esoteric teaching. In this instance, the teaching is that of the *tragic myth* – just as mathematical limit intimates and reflects the deeper ultimacy of tragic fate, of the mortal singularity and limits of existence.

Others may counter this contention with the claim that Pythagoreanism was in fact a religious philosophy of optimism – or, in other words, that in the face of the devastation of temporal existence, they held that there were grounds for hope for an escape from *suffering* in the manner of Buddhism, Platonism and Christianity. I will oppose this *traditional* account of Pythagoreanism through a return to the researches of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century which served to consolidate the picture of the Pythagoreans as a historically divided phenomenon, of, on the one hand, an older 'mystical' and ascetic wing concerned primarily upon ethical, religious and political questions, and, on the other hand, a younger, *modernist* intellectual wing who were focused upon mathematical and scientific endeavors. It is precisely such an ideological and divisive portrayal of the Pythagorean community which will foreclose on any attempt to disclose a *unified* interpretation of the Pythagoreanism in the tragic 6<sup>th</sup> century. Such a portrayal would furthermore lead to the contention that Pythagorean philosophy was a *Holzweg*, a false path or a dead end, and that, with the suppression of the existence of irrational numbers, this philosophy was merely a step along the path to the 'true' philosophy of Plato and the 'optimistic' theology of Christianity (and to its later secularized versions after the so-called 'Enlightenment'). It would seem that, if we were to accept such an interpretive framework, it would be necessary to hold – rather anachronistically – that the Pythagorean view of the unity of the *Kosmos* was simply not true, that it neither acknowledged, nor reflected the reality of the irrational chaos – negativity – of the sensible world. In this way, it would be necessary to posit the existence of a *radical other*, an *elsewhere* that was characterized by an infinite mirror of all that the sensible world is not – eternity, unity, order and beauty. From this perspective, as the story goes, a purified mathematics would intimate this other world, that of the invisible, and it was number and its study which was to lead the soul toward its eventual *escape* to the other world of a divine which is not identical with the All.

Such a scenario does not however ring true – nor does it even *make sense* – as the latter intellectualist path of liberation from the body, one undertaken through the study of mathematics and philosophy (mathematically conceived) does not accord with what we do know and what we can find out for ourselves (through *praxis*) about the early sixth century Pythagoreans. Indeed, such an interpretation is fatally anachronistic, for, as we will see in the

following pages, it is highly questionable whether we must routinely continue to attribute Platonic ascetic prejudices against the body and the sensible world to the Pythagoreans, not to mention any notion of transmigration that signifies the desire to flee from the embodied world of flux, from the unity of opposites.

At the same time, these differing accounts of the significance of Pythagorean philosophy is mirrored in the controversy over the extant evidence of two types of Pythagorean students. Both sides of this historical dispute agree that there were two types of students, *akousmatikoi* (hearers) and the *mathematikoi* (mathematicians). From one perspective, the former are esoteric students, who are the earliest Pythagoreans, and who gathered together in a community of *praxis*, cultivating an attunement with the *Kosmos*, as the orchestration of an indigenous unity in the world of the body. The latter students, which emerged over time, that of the *mathematikoi*, were students who trained in the general sciences and mathematics until they were permitted to become ‘hearers’. The other perspective, however, which is widely current, and seems to be based upon a selective reading of Iamblichus, contends that the mathematical students were the highest and that the hearers (in the sense of auditors) were only allowed to listen from the *outside the veil* and were thus not trained in the depths of the teaching.<sup>[viii]</sup> Once again, however, this account is anachronistic, not only in light of the late emergence of the mathematical students in formalization of the Pythagorean school, but also in light of the fact that our notion of auditor as a lesser student does not accord with its probable meaning for the Pythagoreans. Indeed, the conflation of auditor and hearer fails to comprehend the philosophical significance and primacy of the notion of *hearing* for a philosophy whose founder not only discovered the musical scale, but which was disseminated exclusively in the oral tradition. The importance of poetry and song (as tokens of remembrance) is, moreover, clearly in accord with our original indication of the tragic, that is of the Apollonian and Dionysian, aspect of the Pythagorean philosophy of transmigration.

This conflict over pre-eminence, mirrored in our own contemporary divisions and conflicts, eventually contributed to the dissolution of the Pythagorean community, which was effectively (though not entirely) destroyed in the Pythagorean riots. It is significant that there has occurred a repetition of a version of this division in our own era, not only in regards to the sectarianism in philosophy, such as those of the analytic/continental, materialist/idealist, realist/anti-realist divides, but also due to the fact that our very understanding of our own past, in this case, that of the nature of the Pythagorean philosophy and community is orchestrated in terms of our own partisanship, by our own wills for pre-eminence. To the mathematician and scientist, it is the *mathematikoi* who were the true Pythagoreans. To the phenomenologist and poststructuralist, it is the *akousmatikoi* who were the truth or higher Pythagoreans. This investiture of the question in terms of power is no idle matter, however, due to the fact that in the twentieth century, in the wake of the so-called ‘analytic revolution’, Pythagoras too was placed under the spotlight of the eliminative strategy and was severed into mysticism and science. In a repetition of the original trauma, the latter aspect of the teaching was salvaged, while the former was placed in the museum of metaphysical ideas, ideas to be spoken with a smile. It is here that the *scientistic* and *logicistic* background of early Analytic philosophy shows itself in its dismissal of, on the one hand, esoteric and practical questions, those of ethics, and, on the other hand, cosmogonical, ontological and existential questions, which it crassly labels as ‘metaphysics’.

It is this eliminative strategy – and its comprehensive rejection by Continental philosophers – which has tragically led to the Analytic-Continental divide, one which weakens philosophy in its depth and scope, especially in the face of a resurgent theology.<sup>[ix]</sup> Such a

mathematical, Platonising strategy is, however, being played out again in the polemical interventions by the ‘last’ and latest French philosophers, Badiou and Meillassoux.<sup>[x]</sup> Each of these has laid down the post-Analytic gauntlet to Continental philosophy advocating the centrality of mathematical universality for the discernment of truth in philosophy.<sup>[xi]</sup> Of course, this is not a recurrence of Pythagoreanism, as they have already dismissed the mystical, idealist character of Pythagorean philosophy in line with the prejudices of a post-Analytic philosophy.<sup>[xii]</sup> This ‘new’ philosophy is, instead, concerned with a quasi-platonistic, *mathematicized* methodology as the only way to discover truth (‘thing without me’) within the labyrinth of utter flux and subjectivism in the sensible or apparent world. In this way, the original tragedy of the Analytic vivisection of Pythagorean philosophy has startlingly recurred, but, in tune with Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*, this time as a *farce* – and with the result that the house of philosophy has become ever more divided against itself. It is questionable whether such a divided house will certainly not have the strength to contend with a resurgence of theology which lies in wait for the house of reason to *collapse*.

The following exploration will resist the drive toward a logical, mathematical or scientific philosophy, through a poetico-phenomenological exploration of the doctrine of transmigration as an intimate philosophical interpretation (hermeneutics) of tragic existence. I will resist, moreover, the uncritical equivocations that either identify the Pythagorean philosophy with that of Plato, or, which trace a genealogy of philosophy which seamlessly divine the development of Platonism out of Pythagoreanism. As will become clear in the following pages, the emphasis that is placed upon the body and *praxis* in the Pythagorean *bios* precludes a strong identification between Pythagorean and Platonic philosophy beyond anything more than a family resemblance. A poetics and *praxis* of transmigration will underscore not only the expressive and mnemopoetic aspect of the doctrine, but will also highlight the emergence of the Pythagorean philosophy contemporaneously with the philosophy of the tragic age. While the tragic destruction of the Pythagorean community erased from our eyes a more thorough account of their way of life, it is in their use of poetics and art that the significance of their teaching, in both its exoteric and esoteric dimensions, remains accessible to us through tokens of remembrance, poetic, artistic and mathematical, each of which is united in their articulation of *philosophia*. It will be in the affirmation of the body and the *Kosmos* that the truly *pagan* dimension of transmigration will emerge which seeks not an eschatological escape from being, but an affirmation of the All in the manner of Empedocles and, jumping to the next mountain with very long legs, the early German Romantics such as Hölderlin and Schelling.

### **Transmigration and the Remembrance of Being**

The mythical narrative of transmigration tells the story of myriad wandering souls, each migrating from body to body along a path of recurrence amid the *becoming* of the All. Yet, for the Pythagoreans, this story does not describe the passive revolution of a circle, but a pathway for an active exploration and return to the All. This endeavor, expressed in the exoteric narrative, is strenuous as it occurs amid a suspension within the double bind of nativity and fatality, again and again to be born and to die, and to be reborn as still another being.<sup>[xiii]</sup> The thread of the narrative, of reminiscence, is, with each demise, always severed amidst the tragic labyrinth of mortal existence. Yet, as the narrative is a rope of many threads, the persistent re-articulation of the narrative instigates a *mnemopoiesis* that transcends one’s individual mortal life amid the broader community of a greater soul.

The Pythagoreans, along with others, cultivated an *ethos* of a divine soul, one thought to be capable of communion with the divine All. For Homer, such a desire would have been *hubris*, even if it was not, in the end, articulated outside of the horizons of his mythological ontology. Pythagoras, against the background of Homer's portrayal of the thirsting soul, maintained the requirement of a body, of a microcosm of the All, for its life and its expansion (but only during life, as the soul had its own integrity beyond each body). Pythagoras articulated a philosophy of return of the soul to its divine source through yet another – though forbidden – possibility in the Homeric constellation. He turned the necessity of body into a virtuous *topos* of return of the singular mortal to the cosmic All. Indeed, despite this 'mingling of essences,' Pythagoras remained true to the Homeric valorization of the life of the body, of this self that is remembered by the passive, imitative soul. Yet, as the shade can return to another body, and as the divine *is* the cosmos, the body becomes the site from which the pursuit of the All commences, finds its way, and it is the variety of bodies which are the successive abodes of an *active, creative* soul amid its transmigration through each of the circuits of the All.

The Pythagorean transgression of Homeric limits casts into relief a different relation of the soul to body, which is, in the narrative of transmigration, only one body amid a succession of others. The body, here, is not an end in itself, but 'plays its part' amidst a narrative that asserts a different destiny for the soul. Nor, is the soul always with body as is the case with the *metaschematism* of Leibniz.<sup>[xiv]</sup> Death is not the envelopment of body, but is the release of the soul into a transitional *topos in-between* embodiments. Even for Homer, the soul or shade dwells in Hades, and thus, survives the death of the body. Pythagoras is simply changing the path and the destination of the soul – it now has a capacity to move along through differing bodies, each being a microcosm of the All. Once the soul has seen the All, has been the All, as the story goes, it will be the All.

Transmigration distributes souls through the stirrings and strivings of beings; this soul migrates across body to body, flows through a labyrinth of instants, to chance upon the thread that keeps the fire of wisdom still burning. Each has been, and remains, to use Reiner Schürmann's phrase, a traveler throughout and toward the All, but an amnesiac traveler, a wanderer who desires to fathom and abide the multi-dimensional depths of oneself and the world. In this sense, truth, as the wisdom of the path, is the same as be-ing, as traveling upon the path, of remembering the truth of Being from out of a fog of oblivion, the intoxication of the waters of Lethe. Remembrance is drinking from the river of Mnemosyne. And yet, it is, strangely, the fog of forgetfulness which clears a space for novel disclosures, embodiments, for an expansion of wisdom arising amidst an attempt to become the All. Since we can conceive of an existence which is cultivated in an oral tradition, in which *truth is the same as being*, we will need to critically engage those bland caricatures of Pythagoras which set his mathematics over against his esoteric narratives of existence and the soul, or of an account which severs his theoretical from his practical philosophy.

Transmigration is a poetic *topos* which opens the space for a complex *indication*<sup>[xv]</sup> of existence amid a *mnemotechnic*<sup>[xvi]</sup> shelter for a philosophical questioner who seeks to be attuned to the All. This *topos* abides a 'mythopoetic symbol' of the event and life of the All.<sup>[xvii]</sup> It is as an artwork, in the sense of Heidegger's essay, 'The Origin of the Work of Art'<sup>[xviii]</sup>, that discloses truth as a *poetics of being*. The narrative houses and communicates a single teaching of *that which is* and *how one is to live*. Within its 'symbolic nexus,' in this way, transmigration abides the fundamental significance and specific regions of Pythagorean thought. It is a *cathexis* which articulates the myriad facets of inquiry, both esoteric,

philosophy and poly-theology (the *tragic myth*), and exoteric, mathematics, cosmology, cosmogony and musical theory. An attentive re-telling of the tale of transmigration, from this perspective, would reveal all that which is tacitly assumed by such a “primitive narrative”: conceptions of body, perspective, *praxis*, and of soul, souls, kinship, number, geometry and music. These many strands come together in the Pythagorean philosophical movement, articulated in its narrative, the unity of which abides an *ethos* of the *bios*, or way of life, which encompasses not only the various facets and aspects, but also the destiny of lived existence. The *bios* is rooted in the cycles of recurrence which is an even more primary ‘unity’. For the Pythagoreans, existence and eschatology are separated only by forgetfulness.[\[xix\]](#)

Each of us belongs to the All, moves with the All; still each is distinct, one from another, fallen away into mere forgetfulness. Within the horizons of the narrative, however, such wisdom may be discoverable within one’s own self and world. Instigated by ‘truth events’, life, then, is a learning, a remembering, but simultaneously, an unlearning of that which has been learned. This unlearning, forgetfulness, is not only a dis-integration produced via the world of actions, slowly gnawing away at the immediacy of Memory, but is an active forgetting of older patterns of thought amid the birth of novel possibilities. With each life, we plunge into the rhythmic flux of the world only in the end to forget this world as it seemed to be when we had originally set out upon our pathway toward the All. A forgetful soul wanders into another body and finds itself in-between other bodies, lives. Forgetfulness, as it allows for an awakening into a new opening, serves in the eschatological attunement of the All, as the silence between two musical notes. This temporary forgetfulness sets free the soul to a different wandering; to become a bird, as Orpheus had wished for himself. Between each incarnation we must drink from the waters of Lethe.

Yet, such forgetfulness is not, for Pythagoras, absolute as he is said to have remembered and recounted his previous lives. It must be granted that forgetfulness does have its uses and status as the criteria for differentiation of one incarnation from another. But, as transmigration is oriented to an immanent understanding of the All, there must be the possibility of a remembrance not only of each previous transmigration, but also of transmigration itself. Indeed, it is this very possibility which grounds the philosophic *a priori* in Pythagorean (and Platonist) philosophy. It must be, in this way, much more than Dacier’s mere ‘cure by lies’ or Cornford’s ‘primitive mysticism’. For the Pythagoreans, it is only through the exploration of the All, and of becoming attuned with the All, that one may attain return to the divine. As each incarnation discloses a facet of the All, and as the goal of the exploration is *true* enlightenment, these myriad instantiations are not to be regarded as undertaken for the sake of *punishment*, as with some strains of Platonism and Hinduism, but perhaps, as with the Buddhists and Taoists, as pathways of or along a way of learning, and of building a shelter for wisdom in the mythical narrative, in this case, that of transmigration.

Such an aspiration of return is ceaselessly disrupted by the death of the body, of bodies. But, as the body is the *topos* of departure for such an aspiration, with each death and rebirth, there lies the possibility that the destination of return may be forgotten, ceaselessly postponed. It takes a work of cultivation to remember one’s own *greater soul*, that synoptic memory of all of one’s incarnations, or, in other words, of one’s pathway from and to the divine. In this context, the wanderer of Rimbaud, finding himself in ‘dark and scary places,’ makes up rhymes, plucking his worn out shoelaces as he would a lyre. He does not remember his aspiration, thrown into a world, happy to merely comfort his fear and mortal singularity with jests and mimicry. He is engulfed in the darkness of night and can only distract himself, lie

to himself about his predicament. He has fallen away into a dream within a dream, into an oblivion darker than the Homeric soul in Hades.

The doctrine of transmigration tells the story of a differing chance, it sets forth a novel possibility, one which suggests that even in this mimicry and distraction, as *poetic rhymes*, lie seeds of remembrance, perhaps of a playing of the lyre 'one foot beneath my heart.' The silent aspiration of a return to the divine remains harbored in the heart which sets above the static din of forgetfulness. This aspiration can be recaptured through a path of remembrance achieved through a movement away from the forgetfulness of the divine. For Pythagoras, this path of remembrance *is* philosophy, a step back away from the overwhelming involvements of the din, and to see that which is and what must be. It is in this context that it is a preparation for death, an event the tragic significance of which is limited within the affirmative horizons of an overriding task of a return to the All. Death discloses the fragility of a mortal self, and it is perhaps the truth event of anxiety before death that we are called to remember our source in the divine and thus seek to cultivate an attunement with the All through a way of life of ever deeper remembrance.

## Method and Scope

Not only must we be aware that Pythagoras wrote nothing, but we must also remember that the Pythagoreans were suppressed, exterminated, and the thought of writing down their teaching came only amid the threatening horizons of this obliteration. Much is lost amidst such urgency, and consequently, we must keep close to their historical *context of emergence* and to that which is left behind by the Pythagoreans themselves, such as the monochord, the doctrine of transmigration, etc. and also to gather testimony from related sources so as to set forth an interpretation with the sufficient depth to do 'justice' to the Pythagorean teaching.[\[xx\]](#)

At the same time, however, we will be forced to rely upon testimony, much of which has been deemed unreliable in a tidal wave of attempts to fill this void of evidence. This question becomes complex in that we are not only seeking an account of a 6th century B.C.E. philosopher, but are at once obliged to consider the historical archive of interpretations and treatments of this subject. We have for instance the *Lives* of Iamblichus, Porphyry, and others, which are of questionable value, but also various 'modern' interpretations, such as Cornford, Guthrie, Dillon, and Wertheim. Yet, although this procedure remains necessary, the procedure of evidential authority remains essentially arbitrary in this case. What is 'evidence' in this case, and how does our perspective on the development of Presocratic philosophy influence our interpretation of 'evidence'? To whom shall we listen? Only those who are primarily scholars of Ancient Greece? What of those who are mathematicians, or musicians, or theologians? What of philosophers who are inspired by Pythagorean teachings? What of a Nietzschean, post-structuralist, or feminist reading of Pythagoras? Where do we, and, where can we draw the line? Are we in a circle? Or, should we, in some kind of Kierkegaardian leap, seek instead to remember the myriad lives of our own soul, as Pythagoras counsels his disciples?

It is clear that since Pythagoras wrote nothing, we must rely to some extent on extant records. We must consider these in order to familiarize ourselves with the various perspectives of the doctrine of transmigration and of Pythagoreanism as such. But, we must also be willing to engage practically and indeed imaginatively with the sources so as to retrieve a phenomenologically adequate reading of the formally indicative senses of the doctrine. We

must attempt to create a *topos* of inclusivity with respect to sources of knowing, which will include references to hermeneutic practises or perspectives not treated or permitted in a Modern interpretation, one which operates amid the framework of a sharp, though duplicitous, distinction between science and religion.[\[xxi\]](#)

In light of this hermeneutical entanglement, I will open up the *topos* for the possible contributors to this project, according to a criteria of whether or not the various sources cast light upon the doctrine of transmigration. Of course, it remains our primary goal to unpack, as it were, the doctrine of transmigration in order to disclose the *unity* of Pythagorean philosophy – and this implies certain preliminary orienting decisions, such as the questioning of the received and echoed positivist reading. Opening up the field to differing voices will lend us some perspective and, in some cases, important ‘evidence’. We will, however, to some extent, with Robert Frost, be ‘playing tennis with the net down,’ or, with Wittgenstein, attempting to understand the *grammar of use* and the *bedrock practices of existence* which are disclosed through the narrative of transmigration. Yet, we will still be playing tennis. In this way, I have included the contributions from the extant fragments of the ‘Pythagoreans,’ such as Ocellus, Sextus Empiricus, Polus, Theages, and Theon of Smyrna, despite questions as to their authenticity and dating. I have also incorporated the insights of Marsilio Ficino, who, after all, was the first translator and interpreter of Plato and Plotinus in the West, after a millennium of eclipse, and has much to contribute, especially with respect to the reconstruction of the Pythagorean *theoria* and *bios*, as suggested in his own practical *ethos*.[\[xxii\]](#)

Such an interpretation which seeks to retrieve the *unity* of Pythagorean thought goes against the grain of a long standing tradition which dismisses the notion of transmigration as a ‘mere figure,’ or, as a ‘cure by lies,’ (Xenophanes, Hierocles, Dacier, Cornford, and in his own way, Riedweg)[\[xxiii\]](#), thus, separating this doctrine from the status of ‘true wisdom,’ or, of genuine ‘science’. Following dutifully in these footsteps, Cornford asserts that the very presence of the doctrine of transmigration in the Pythagorean corpus is a ‘symptom’ of a philosophy caught up in an inexorable web of contradictions, one which seeks to contain within itself utterly incompatible axioms, such as Monism and Dualism, ‘mysticism’ and ‘science’. In this way, Pythagoras became just another victim of the eliminative strategy of the logical positivists, who had pointed out, as they had done to almost every philosopher from Plato to Heidegger, a ‘confusion’ in his thought which was at odds with the ‘Scientific Worldview.’ In the following, I will argue against the interpretation of Pythagoras which projects upon him the segregation of ‘mysticism’ and ‘science.’ Instead, I will lay out an alternative interpretation of Pythagorean philosophy as *magical* in the sense that it exhibits an existential harmonization of *theoria* and *praxis* amidst a sacred pagan ethos[\[xxiv\]](#) or *form of life*. This harmony is most prominent in its interpretation of the body as a microcosm of the All, as the conduit for the life of the All, and a place in which one may seek to cultivate a *bios* of ‘attunement’ amid and as the All. In this way, a philosophical magic,[\[xxv\]](#) occurring amid the horizons of an extended kinship of the All, would be a cultivation of harmony via the memory of the event and the *bios* of return.

Following the lead of Ficino, W.K.C. Guthrie, Dillon, Burkert, I will interpret the notion of the transmigration of souls as a *complex symbola*, requiring for its possibility a notion of extended kinship, ‘extended’ as a transgression of the limiting horizons of Homeric blood-kinship. The *symbola* implies a transmigration of the mortal-immortal divide, as a kinship of the All, and thus, of the disclosure of mortality as an aspect of immortality. For Homer, again, such an aspiration for mortals was *hubris*. Poseidon tells Odysseus that without gods,

man is nothing. With demise, for Homer, the mortal soul descends toward Hades, a cave of deficient similarity, craving blood, breath and body, fated to passively reflect upon a life that had been ‘completed’ in death. Any claim of a return to a divine source is undercut by Homer as mankind is a creation of Prometheus, a Titan, who was censured by Zeus. For Pythagoras, on the contrary, such a return is not a transgression, but a fulfillment of the soul amidst an *ethos* of sacred *praxis* (*bios*) and thought (*theoria*).

I will begin, in Chapter One, *Genealogy of the Doctrine of Transmigration* with a discussion of the selection of source materials that will come into play in the present study. There are many sources, ancient and modern, each of which will be assessed in terms of their capacity to contribute to a plausible interpretation of the *unity* of Pythagorean philosophy and its mythopoetic symbol, the doctrine of transmigration. I will place great emphasis upon the formative work of W.K.C. Guthrie, which, in juxtaposition to the division of mysticism and science asserted by Cornford, sets forth a unified interpretation which is guided by a notion of philosophical magic and an extended kinship of the All, allegorized in the *complex symbola* of the doctrine of transmigration. Such a unified interpretation will allow for a proper appraisal of the role and significance of the doctrine of transmigration. In Chapter Two: *Beyond Mysticism and Science: Symbolism and Philosophical Magic*, expanding on our prior consideration of Guthrie, I will argue that this symbol, if read in light of the Pythagorean oral tradition, serves as a mythopoetic *shelter* for the Pythagorean philosophy as a whole: a doctrine of the soul, of body, music, number, and of a *bios* of *praxis* and attunement. In Chapter Three: *The Emergence of Mystic Cults and the Immortal Soul*, I will explore the mytho-historical context of the emergence of Pythagoreanism and give a description and assessment of what Cornford and Burkert regard as the ‘revolutionary’ character of Pythagorean philosophy. I will tentatively follow this interpretation in terms of its displacement of Homeric blood kinship with extended kinship as friendship, yet, I will trace the significant continuity between Pythagoras and Homer with respect to the body. It will be in this context that we will most distinctly comprehend the radical difference between the *magical* and *mystical* interpretations of early Pythagorean movement. Indeed, the primary role that is played by the body in the narrative of transmigration gives much weight to Guthrie’s *magical* interpretation over against one that would have little use for the body and which regards it as merely a prison house or punishment.

In Chapter Four: *Philolaus and the Question of Pythagorean Harmony*, taking up the insights of the previous chapter, I will explore the character of harmony in early Pythagorean philosophy through a juxtaposition of our Pythagoras with the 5<sup>th</sup> century ‘Pythagorean’ Philolaus who, contrary to the indigenous harmony of contraries (such as the musical opposition), advocated by the 6<sup>th</sup> century Pythagoreans, set forth a position which required an external mediation of ‘warring opposites’ (akin to Anaxagoras’ *Nous*). Such a difference in perspective is significant in light of the fact that Plato is said to have borrowed a book about the Pythagoreans from Philolaus, and in this light, it will be argued that Philolaus, prior to Socrates, is perhaps, in a revision of Nietzsche, the first ‘theoretical man’. In Chapter Five: *The Alleged Critique of Pythagoras by Parmenides*, I will return to Cornford in his contention that the subject of criticism of the Hexameter Poem of Parmenides was the Pythagorean containment within one ‘system’ of the principles of monism and dualism. Again, as in the case of Philolaus, I will argue that the character of Pythagorean thought consists in a harmony of opposites, of contraries amid a unified All, and not contradiction, and would not have, in that way, been subject to the alleged critique of Parmenides. Moreover, taking the criticism of Cornford further, I will comment on *his* Parmenides, in contrast to the one of the Hexameter Poem who hears the goddess tell him

that he should also learn the ways of mortal knowing. In Chapter Six: *Between the Earth and the Sky: On the Pythagorean Divine*, I will set forth a rough sketch of the Pythagorean divine through a consideration of the mythopoetic symbol of Apollo. I will argue that this symbol must be understood in its narrative context which was that of pagan pantheistic polytheism. I will focus upon the ambiguity of Apollo, including questions of his gender, and upon his relationship with his half-brother Dionysus, so as to cast into relief a tragic sense of divinity, related to the question of the mortality of the *Kosmos* and the necessity of its own re-birth ala Empedocles. In Chapter Seven, *The Pythagorean Bios and the Doctrine of Transmigration*, I will make good on my earlier claim that the doctrine of transmigration is a mythopoetic shelter for early Pythagoreanism by outlining the two pathways, or aspects, of the philosophy which are contained in the narrative. On the one hand, in *The Path of the Event*, I will provide a glimpse into what Cornford calls the *theoria* of the Pythagorean philosophy which includes the cosmology, cosmogony, number theory, the theory of body, musical theory, and the theory of the soul. On the other hand, in *The Path of Remembrance, or Return*, I will give a rough sketch of the *bios* in which the Pythagoreans, living communally, attempted to orchestrate an *ethos* or way of life that was attuned to the divine All. Again, the primary significance of this practical form of life underscores the significance of the body and of the magical interpretation of Pythagorean philosophy.

In Chapter Eight: *The Platonic Rupture: Writing and Difference*, I will outline the Platonic interpretation of the doctrine of transmigration so as to more distinctly specify the uniqueness of the Pythagorean teaching. Using the critical insights of Nietzsche in such works as *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and the *Genealogy of Morals*, in light of my own contention of the merely intellectual significance of Philolaus, I will examine the doctrine of transmigration in a variety of Plato's dialogues, emphasizing the persistent devaluation of the body, the attitude that transmigration as a means of punishment, and the debasement of the sensual world as one of suffering. In Chapter Nine, *Plotinus: The Ascent of the Soul toward the One*, as a further specification of the Pythagorean doctrine of transmigration and its relationship to the *bios*, I will explore the doctrine in Plotinus, who unlike Plato, was committed to a practical *ethos* of the body, but still gave allegiance to a pathway of *ascent* to divine. In Chapter Ten: *Plotinus as Neoplatonic Mystic: Letter to Flaccus*, in a continuing exploration of Plotinus, I will set forth a critical reading of his doctrine of *ascent* against the backdrop of his *Letter to Flaccus*, a Roman Senator, in which he laments the *prison house of the body*. It will be in this context that the doctrine of transmigration would be set forth as a philosophy of attunement with the divine All, and not a doctrine of ascent, as this would imply a diminishment of the body. I will close, in *Epilogue: The Fate of the Doctrine of Transmigration*, with a final juxtaposition of the magical and mystical interpretations of Pythagorean philosophy. It must be remembered that, in the 1920's, Cornford's charge of mysticism was enough to discredit the established pictures of Pythagorean philosophy and necessitate a program to isolate a 'scientific' Pythagoreanism. It will be in this light that I will juxtapose what we have learned of the Pythagorean teaching to British Christian mystic, A.E. Waite, who, contemporary with the logical positivists, can be said to serve as an fatal example of the mystic in that era. In distinction from Waite aspiration for *nihilation*, I will emphasize the primary desire of the Pythagoreans for an *attunement*<sup>[xxvi]</sup> of the life of the body with the All, which is a magical and not a mystical desire, one attuned more with the philosophy of Empedocles, with its play of *Love and Strife*, and with the Jena Romantics, such as Hölderlin and Schelling, than with Plato and the Neo-Platonists.

## Notes

[1] Rimbaud, Arthur (1975) *Complete Works*, p. 41. This quotation serves the argumentation of this chapter as it underlines the interpretation of the doctrine of transmigration as a philosophy of remembrance in the Greek context, one in which the 'lyre' would intimate, though in an initially obscure fashion, the lyre of Apollo, the patron god of the Pythagoreans.

[2] Guthrie, K.S. *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*, pp. 272-274. This quotation serves the argumentation of this chapter as it underlines the contention that the doctrine of transmigration necessitates that there be a practical aspect to the Pythagorean philosophy, one grounded in the *bios* in which the protocols of the philosophy were fulfilled.

[3] Holderlin, F. (2004) 'The Death of Empedocles', *Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments*, p. 451. This quotation serves the argumentation of this chapter as it underlines the interpretation that the legacy of Pythagorean philosophy should be traced through Empedocles and Hölderlin and not through Plato and Neoplatonism.

[iv] Buckham, P.W. (1827) *Theatre of the Greeks*, Cambridge: W.P. Grant. Cicero writes: '*Veniat Aeschylus, non poeta solum, sed etiam Pythagoreus; sic enim accepimus*', which is translated as 'Let us see what Aeschylus says, who was not only a poet but a Pythagorean philosopher also, for that is the account which you have received of him ...' (Book II.10.)

[v] *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 78-79. The reference to Pythagoras as a philosopher of tragedy not only will transfigure our conception of his and his follower's patronage of Apollo, but will also cast Nietzsche's 1886 'Attempt at Self-Criticism' into an entirely new light as to its attempt to explore the relationship between art and science in light of the affirmation of a tragic pessimism. For more on Nietzsche and Pythagoras, see James Porter (2005) 'Nietzsche and Tragedy', *A Companion to Tragedy*, edited by Rebecca Bushnell, London: Blackwell.

[vi] Benjamin Biebuyck, et al., 'Cults and Migrations', pp.151-169. While this essay is vastly illuminating with respect to Nietzsche's positions on Pythagoreanism, it does not seek to challenge the basic traditional prejudices surrounding Pythagoras so as to *make sense* of Guthrie's claims, for instance, that the Pythagoreans were a 'magical' as opposed to a 'mystical' community.

[vii] Without undertaking a detailed interpretation of Nietzsche's tragic pessimism in *The Birth of Tragedy*, it is necessary to simply resist our own contemporary connotations for the terms 'pessimism' and 'optimism' in light of the revaluation of values undertaken through the 'slave revolt of the masses', an event which is outlined by Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*.

[viii] There are widespread claims (allegedly based in Porphyry and Iamblichus) that the *mathematikoi* were the true Pythagoreans while the *akousmatikoi* were lesser, mere listeners to the teaching, which was heard from behind a veil. However, this portrayal is challenged, among others such as Kirk and Burkert, by Kahn, Charles (2001) in his *Pythagoras and Pythagoreans: A Brief History*, (Hackett) in which he describes the *akousmatikoi* as esoteric hearers who were permitted to listen to the teaching as a sound or music of truth. The diminishment of the *akousmatikoi* as those who listened to the teaching and whose medium

was ‘tokens of remembrance’ simply misunderstands the evidence and anachronistically misreads the hierarchy of initiation of ancient philosophy.

[ix] I refer in this context not to the ‘creationists’ who seem to be the main target of those like Meillassoux and Dawkins, but to the Radical Orthodoxy which, like Badiou and Meillassoux, contest the Kantian and post-Kantian middle ground with respect to the delicate balance of modernism, but, unlike Meillassoux, are making use of Post-modernism in a strategy to subvert philosophy *as such*. In what appears to be an overt return to the dominance of theology in the Medieval era, this theological sect regards modernist philosophical critiques of theology as superficial and implicated in the metaphysics of subjectivity. For more, see Milbank and Oliver (2009) in the *Radical Orthodox Reader*, London: Routledge. It is troubling that ‘philosophy’, so divided in itself, seems blind to this new threat, a blindness made worse by ‘speculative’ realism.

[x] Badiou (2005) *Being and Event* and Meillassoux (2007) *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, for instance, clearly advocate a return to the pseudo-Platonic idol of infinity and the positivist methodology of mathematics so as to escape from that which they regard as the alleged subjectivistic impasse of the linguistic turn. It would seem that their rather selective interpretation of the history of modern philosophy rests upon a anachronistic and often inaccurate (cf. Meillassoux’s preposterous trope of the ‘unthinkable’ in his interpretation of Kant, for instance) several times writes that interpretation of Kant and the post-Kantian tradition which they have set up as a straw man, much in the manner as did Analytic philosophers decades ago.

[xi] Badiou makes himself very clear on the relationship of art, specifically poetry and philosophy in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics* where he contends, after delineating the three possible relationships of philosophy and poetry (didactic, romantic, and classical) that, at its best, poetry may serve philosophy as a seemingly unconscious producer, now and then, of ‘truths’. That with which he has not come to grasp however is the possibility of a poetics of finitude that would be at once a poetics of truth, assuming, that is, that truth *is not* an infinite multiplicity. Indeed, the latter itself must be regarded as a poetic figure and thus a shelter for a singular and immanent truth. In this way, Badiou becomes just another poet of existence, along with the rest of us.

[xii] Meillassoux (2007) writes on page 12, for instance: ‘In doing so, our physicist is defending a Cartesian thesis about matter, but not, it is important to note, a Pythagorean one: the claim that the being of accretion is inherently mathematical – that the numbers or equations deployed in the ancestral statements exist in themselves.’ This quotation clearly shows that this new variant of French philosophy, in its desire for literal ‘objectivity’, remains deaf to the poetics and *praxis* of the Pythagorean philosophy, and is thus rightly regarded as a form of positivism.

[xiii] It should be stated at the outset that Aristotle will not be a major source in the present study. This is due to several reasons. First, and as we will see in chapters four and eight, his only acknowledged source for Pythagorean philosophy was Plato, who himself received his knowledge second hand from Philolaus. Second, he rejects the possibility of transmigration with the contention that the soul is uniquely suited to the body in which it abides, and that it could not enter into just any other body. Finally, Aristotle, in Book 1, Chapter 3 of his *De Anima*, discusses the significance of the soul in terms of *motion*, a position which occupied much of his time as he sought to sift through the complications of movement. Yet, the

significance of the soul in the present study is that of *attunement*, or of a syndotic *ethos* of unity as the intersection of limit and unlimited in the body. It is in this way that the casual dismissals by Aristotle of basic elements of Pythagoreanism (and of the philosophies of other Presocratics), would not be warranted.

[xiv] For a discussion of this doctrine in the philosophy of Leibniz, see Luchte, J. (2006) 'Mathesis and Analysis: Finitude and the Infinite in the *Monadology* of Leibniz', *Heythrop Journal*, London: Blackwell.

[xv] The use of an *indication* is meant to reflect the kinship of my analysis with that of the phenomenology of formal indication in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, especially as articulated in his early lectures on theology and his use of myth as an indication in *Being and Time*, e.g. the myth of Cura. For an extended discussion of this myth, see Luchte, J. (2008) *Heidegger Early Philosophy: The Phenomenology of Ecstatic Temporality*, London: Continuum.

[xvi] This notion is taken from Albright (1957) *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process* in his description of the oral tradition.

[xvii] Each of these symbols points in at least two directions, to a 'face' and a 'spirit,' the symbol ties them together, as in the Greek 'tally,' in which parties in an exchange were tied together in negotiation. Dillon writes of the function of symbols in the Pythagorean curriculum, an education which enacted a protocol of transference from the exoteric narrative of the story through to the esoteric insight of the thinking sheltered in the narrative or verse. The 'tally' of exoteric and esoteric resembles others we find in Pythagorean symbolism, such as Limit and Unlimited, the body and soul, and the 6th and 12th in the context of musical harmony. These 'opposites' are analogous to the differing parts of the body, which if dead and dissected, could 'render' isolated parts, but, as alive, the multifaceted 'opposites' coalesce as a happening of the All, as the play of the seen and unseen. These 'opposites' are not in conflict, but are 'distantiated' nodal aspects of a multi-dimensional and multi-sensory *Kosmos*, the All in All.

[xviii] Heidegger, M. (2003) 'The Origin of the Work of Art,' *Basic Writings*, translated by D.F. Krell, London: Routledge.

[xix] In this respect, the function of transmigration as symbol is one of a mnemotechnic character, as the Pythagoreans were among those 6th century Greeks who remained in the 'oral' tradition. We can fathom the symbol of transmigration as an 'aid' to memory in the context also of a consideration of the world and body as symbols for the divine, just as the monochord allows the spirit of music to unlock its voice, and herbs and medicines unlock the intimate relations of the body and world. Betwixt this affinity of the All, we are guided by the doctrine of signatures, the *theoria* of the symbolic affinities of plants and the body, such as the mandrake, which Pythagoras called a 'little man'.

[xx] Much significance will be given to the fact that the Pythagoreans were practitioners of the spoken word despite the ubiquitousness of writing in the 6th century. The spoken word is a living excession of an active *ethos* which seeks, individually and associatively, a singular goal, a return to the source, to accomplish meaning amidst a sacred *physis*. This cathexis of interaction allows for an explication of not only the *theoria* of the teaching but also of

synchronous *bios*, which together discharge an orientation characterized by practical and theoretical comportments with a common root in ‘magic.’

[xxi] Margaret Wertheim’s description of a magico-philosophical system in her *Pythagoras’ Trousers* indicates that the insights of Burkert and Guthrie have finally been heard by at least some researchers. Yet, again, it would seem that, in the polemical context of Late modernity and of faltering scientism, such a recognition of magico-philosophical symbolism in Pythagorean philosophy would no longer constitute its refutation.

[xxii] I have also considered the perspectives of Nietzsche, with respect to 1) his notion of the eternal recurrence of the same, 2) his vision of Apollo, the patron divinity of Pythagoras, 3) his Dionysian emphasis upon music and the body, and 4) to his interpretation of asceticism and the Platonic denial of perspective, body, life, and world. This contribution does not eclipse, but, instead allows for a ‘thinking through’ of the doctrine of transmigration with a depth that is appropriate to the matter under discussion. After all, even Cornford read Nietzsche, a classical philologist, and approved of *The Birth of Tragedy*, a text which has much to say about Apollo, the patron of the Pythagoreans and in this connection, his notion of ‘sublimation,’ which is the term which I have used to describe the relationship of the *bios* to *ecstasis*. Yet, the great gulf between Pythagoras and Nietzsche will be respected, for although both of these were exponents of ‘eternal recurrence,’ each lived amidst differing horizons, a differing most readily symbolized in the figure of the ‘death of god.’ But, there remains much to be learned from Nietzsche’s views on Plato and the body which can aid us in a comprehension of the transformation that occurred betwixt Pythagoras and Plato, et al. Moreover, in his invocation of the notion of a philosophical way of life, Nietzsche and his mytho-poetic creature, Zarathustra, have a striking kinship with the personage of Pythagoras which has been handed down to us.

[xxiii] Riedweg, Christoph (2005) *Pythagoras: His Life, Teaching and Influence*. Although Riedwig gives what is to all accounts a balanced and inclusive interpretation of the mythical and historical significance, the doctrine of transmigration is treated in a rather peripheral way and for the most part merely in an ethical and political context (which merely repeats Dacier and Cornford in a different hue). It is the centrality of the doctrine of transmigration, however, and of its hermeneutical decipherment, which distinguishes the present work.

[xxiv] If the reader is uncomfortable with this notion of magic (although the philosophical meaning of this term is quite well known after Guthrie, Burkert, and Wertheim), one could think of it as a ‘thinking practise’ as in Hoff, Hoff, Johannes (2005) ‘Philosophie als performative Praktik. Spuren cusanischen Denkens bei Jacques Derrida und Michel de Certeau,’ *Cusanus-Rezeption in der Philosophie des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Regensburg: Roderer, pp. 93-120 (*Philosophy as Performative Practice. Traces of Nicholas of Cusa in Jacques Derrida and Michel de Certeau*).

[xxv] A kindred interpretation, in this regard, can be found in El-koussa, Karim (2005) *Pythagoras: The Mathemagician*, Cloonfad Press, who gives an interesting history of the period and a characterization of the magical character of Pythagorean philosophy.

[xxvi] Another excellent example is the heretical Christian mystic Marguerite Porete, whose work, *The Mirror of Simple Souls called for the annihilation of the soul in God*.