

Explaining Pythagorean Abstinence from Beans

DYE, J

In a recent scholium Professors Robert Brumbaugh and Jessica Schwartz argue that the Pythagorean prohibition of beans is best understood as a commonsense injunction aimed at preventing acute hemolytic anemia in individuals with a hereditary deficiency of glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase in their red blood cells. They claim that *only* this hypothesis makes the extension of the prohibition to walking through bean fields "seem reasonable."¹ Since this kind of explanation appeals so strongly to our modern secular understanding which frequently assimilates justifications for behavior to anticipated physiological consequences for the agent, it seems obligatory to observe (1) that this suggestion actually makes Pythagorean behavior more puzzling and most unreasonable, (2) that it ignores relevant ancient evidence, and (3) that a more plausible explanation of the injunction's rationale is available.

Cg
B Ems

The literature Brumbaugh and Schwartz cite provides a fuller picture than they report of the quantitative dimensions of the health risk posed by fava beans. Only 10—20% of those with the genetic defect ever get the disease, and in susceptible populations the annual incidence of favism ranges from less than 1 to around 9 cases per 10,000 persons.² Practically all of these are children under 15 years old, with 85—95% under 6 years old and 63—94% males.³ Mortality is confined to those under 5 years of age (Belsey, 7), although it doubtless was a somewhat more extensive as well as a much less avoidable outcome prior to the development of modern blood transfusion therapy. Except in Egypt, where only preserved beans are consumed, 57—95% of the cases occur at the time of harvest, when fresh beans are eaten (Belsey, 4-5). Very few occur when beans are in bloom, and there is no good evidence that the disease occurs without consuming beans or the milk of a woman who has eaten beans (Belsey, 7-8; Kattamis, 39). Surely we would not regard a risk of this magnitude as sufficient justification for totally abstaining from this tasty and nutritious food, especially in a community whose religious scruples against meat eating may have created a special need for an alternative source of lysine. To enjoin adults from even walking through the fields on the basis of such experience would be ridiculous. Although Brumbaugh and Schwartz claim that "similar prohibitions [to the Pythagorean] against the consumption of fava beans persist today" (422), Belsey specifies that such prohibitions apply, as would be reasonable, only to nursing mothers and young children and focus on raw, fresh beans (10). Thus the Brumbaugh-Schwartz hypothesis not only does not make "this most notorious of Pythagoras' rules" (421) seem reasonable, but actually requires one to assume, quite unwarrantedly, that Pythagoreans were abnormally indiscriminating and illogical compared to ourselves, modern villagers in affected populations, and their non-Pythagorean contemporaries. Unless G6PD deficiency were miraculously exclusive to Pythagoreans, the fact that others thought this injunction bizarre is itself strong evidence that it arises, not from common sense, but from beliefs peculiar to Pythagoreans.⁴

Aristotle does include "because they are destructive" in his list of possible reasons why Pythagoreans abstain from beans,⁵ which could just

possibly refer to their poisonousness for a few children, although it most probably refers to their property of producing flatulence, which can destroy mental peace by keeping one awake with a rumbling stomach.⁶ The most interesting of Aristotle's four other reasons are "because they are like genitals"⁷ and "because they are like the gates of Hades, [the stems] alone [of all plants] being without joints," since these two correlate well with traits connecting beans with human life and generation cited by other ancient writers. A chewed bean placed in the sun smells of human semen or of murderously spilt human blood,⁸ beans and men arose together from within the primeval earth (ibid.), and a bean or bean blossom put into a container and buried is eventually transformed into blood or a human head.⁹ A frequently cited, and undoubtedly the most striking, explanation of the prohibition is that "eating beans is the same as eating the heads of one's parents."¹⁰ As no sound prudential reasoning could lead one to classify bean eating as a species of cannibalism, it is clear that this conclusion must instead rest on peculiar moral and religious scruples, in the manner of other ancient proscriptions of beans.¹¹ What matters is the essence and significance of beans as seen from the Pythagorean *Weltanschauung*, not the accidental effects of beans on a small minority of bean eaters.¹²

One crucial feature determining the location of beans in the Pythagorean scheme of things is their unsegmented hollow stem, conceived, according to Aristotle, as "gates of Hades" through which souls migrate back from the underworld to new life in the sunlight.¹³ Once beans are so classified, the primary concern for believers in reincarnation would not be about what beans might do to us, but rather about what we might do to them, or to the souls of the departed in them. If proscription of beans stems from reverence for life or "philanthropy,"¹⁴ it would be consistent and rational to protect them not only from human consumption but from being trampled; hence the interdiction of walking through the fields. Similarly, it would be logical to prevent domestic animals who share in our mode of life from defiling themselves with a like impiety; hence the story of Pythagoras keeping an ox from eating beans.¹⁵ Because doing evil is more defiling than suffering evil, sound moral reasoning would forbid contact with beans even if prudential common sense required it; hence the legend which has Pythagoras die at the hands of his enemies because he would not flee across a bean field.¹⁶ For a fuller understanding of the conceptual and behavioral structures within which the Pythagorean attitude towards beans is imbedded, the reader is referred to the analyses of Professor Detienne, to whose insights I am much indebted.¹⁷

Copyright © 1999, James Dye

Updated: 10/15/2003 18:06:26

Notes

- ¹ "Pythagoreans and Beans: A Medical Explanation," *CW* 73 (1980), 421-22.
- ² Mark A. Belsey, "The Epidemiology of Favism," *Bull. Wld. Hlth. Org.* 48 (1973), 4.
- ³ Ibid., 5; Christos A. Kattamis, Maria Kyriazakous, & Stavros Chaidas, "Favism: Clinical and Biochemical Data," *J Med. Gen.* 6 (1969), 34-35.
- ⁴ Elinor Lieber's thesis ("The Pythagorean Community as a Sheltered Environment for the Handicapped," in H. Karplus, ed., *Int. Symp. on Society Medicine & Law* [Amsterdam, 1973], 33-41) that the Pythagorean community was exclusively composed of persons allergic to beans is more speculative science fiction than history.
- ⁵ Rose, fr. 195 (D.L. VIII, 34).
- ⁶ This is the judgment of Cicero, who refers to Plato (*Div.* 68), and of an unnamed authority in Diogenes (VIII, 24), who associates this effect with their 'participating most especially *tou psychikou*,' a term which can designate the soul of the dead as well as of the living.
- ⁷ Aulus Gellius (IV.11.10), commenting on Empedocles' fr. 141, claims that those who are *diligentius scitiusque* understand 'beans' to mean 'testicles' and that the prohibition is against venery.
- ⁸ Diogenes Antonius, in Porphyry, *VP* 44 (*gonou*) and Lydus, *Mens.* IV, 42 (*phonou*). *Gonou* is the likely original if, as argued below, beans are the vehicles of rebirth.
- ⁹ Ibid.; Heraclides, fr. 41; Lucian, *Vit. Auct.* 6. For a comprehensive collection of the ancient evidence, including other references along these lines, see Armand Delatte, "Faba Pythagorae cognata," in *Serta Leodiensia* (Paris-Liege, 1930), 33-57.
- ¹⁰ Heraclides Ponticus, in Lydus, *Mens.* IV, 42; Athenaeus, *Deip.* II, 65; Plutarch, *Sympos.* II, 3, 635E. Plutarch believes that 'beans' really means eggs. since eating an egg would be like eating the animal that comes from it. Both he and Gellius (n. 7) refer to the similarity between *kuamos* (bean) and *kuesis* (generation), preserving, most significantly for seeing what the ancients would accept as a good reason in this arena, the connection with soul, even while breaking it with actual beans.
- ¹¹ Herodotus (II, 37) reports that Egyptian priests consider beans to be unclean. They were also taboo for Orphics and the initiates at Eleusis; see Pausanias I, 37, 4 and Porphyry, *Abst.* IV, 16. Porphyry makes clear that they were not to be touched and includes them in a list along with apples, pomegranates, dead bodies, and recently delivered women. Surely this list shows that the concern is with religious, not physiological, danger.
- ¹² Of course those effects might have served as partial confirmation of their beliefs. Walter Burkert suggests that the allergic reaction may have reinforced the recognition that beans are of all vegetables most meat-like and vital (*Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, trans. E. L. Minar, Jr., rev. Burkert [Cambridge, 1972], 184).
- ¹³ Also see Eustathius, *In Hom. Il.* XIII, 589. An echo of this belief may have persisted until modern times. In the 17th Century, Father François Richard reported that five or six *vrykolakes* (vampires, who are of course anthropophagous) were seen in a field eating beans (*Relation de ce qui s'est passé*

de plus remarquable à Saint-Erini Isle de l'Archipel, depuis l'établissement des Pères de la compagnie de Jésus en icelle [Paris, 1657], cited in J. C. Lawson, *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion* [N. Y., 1964], 368); Lawson also reports that in Rhodes an ostrakon marked with a pentacle, sacred emblem of the Pythagoreans, is placed on the lips of a corpse to prevent its becoming a *vrykolakas*.

¹⁴ Porphyry, *Abst.* III, 20, referring to treatment of animals. Our kinship with all life underlies this manner of speaking.

¹⁵ Porphyry, *VP* 4; Iamblichus, *VP* 61.

¹⁶ D. L. VIII, 39—40.

¹⁷ Marcel Detienne, *Les Jardins d'Adonis: La mythologie des aromates en Grèce* (Paris, 1972), 76-113 [*The Gardens of Adonis: Spices in Greek Mythology*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Sussex, 1977)]; and *Dionysos mis à mort* (Paris, 1977), ch. 3 [*Dionysos Slain*, trans. Mireille Mueller & Leonard Muellner (Baltimore, 1979)].

Updated: 10/15/2003 18:06:25