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GREAT REFORMERS: PYTHAGORAS

PYTHAGORAS is one who earned, among modern critics, the curious distinction of being regarded as both a great philosopher and a "medicine man"—a teacher in the lofty ethical precepts, but also one who engaged in theatrical devices to beguile the common herd into thinking him a God.

This blatant and monotonous inconsistency in recent works concerning Pythagoras makes them, we think, approximately worthless. We had rather take the Egyptian Iamblichus for our authority, and be convicted of believing that Pythagoras conversed with an ox and was addressed, "Hail, Pythagoras!" by a river he was crossing, than to adopt the view that he "put forward marvelous pretensions which he must have been conscious had no real ground, and which, we must suspect, were calculated to attract the veneration of the credulous." Regarding such innuendoes as something less than astute, we have put away our classical dictionaries and will use in sparing and skeptical manner the precise works of reference that would chisel the image of Pythagoras to a wholly credible and respectable proportion.

Not that we purpose to embrace the miraculous. That sort of blind enthusiasm would be directly contrary to the spirit of Pythagoras himself. Rather, the tissue of myth which surrounds this man is irrelevant to a serious inquiry concerning his life and work as a great reformer; we simply refuse to patronize his memory because certain of his biographers, themselves philosophers of some repute, belonged to an age when belief in psychic and spiritual forces was as common, say, as belief in protons, neutrons and electrons is in this.

Unfortunately, another barrier lies between ourselves and the thought of Pythagoras, one

more formidable than a prejudice against magical operations. It is a question whether the present-day reader can hope to understand his theological teachings at all, with the dark stain of the Original Sin upon virtually all the religious ideas of the Modern West. For the Greeks, whatever they believed, knew no such doctrine. They had no dogmatic blueprints of the origin of evil. The infamous doctrine of the native depravity of man was as yet unborn. As a Pythagorean thinker of the eighteenth century, the French Fabre d'Olivet, has said:

It is necessary . . . to give close attention to one thing, which is, that before the establishment of Christianity and the admission of original sin as fundamental dogma of religion, no founder of sect, no celebrated philosopher had positively denied the free will, nor had taught ostensibly that man may be necessarily determined to Evil and Good and predestined from all time to vice or virtue, to wickedness or eternal happiness. It is indeed true that this cruel fatality seemed often to follow from their principles as an inevitable consequence, and that their adversaries reproached them with it, but nearly all rejected it as an insult, or a false interpretation of their system. (*The Golden Verses of Pythagoras*, Putnam, 1917.)

In the Pythagorean view, man's place in nature is between two ruling powers, Necessity and Will. Necessity is the power of circumstance, the decree of *Nemesis* or Destiny, while Will is the moral power within the man himself. Just as Destiny is variable, sometimes good, sometimes evil, so Will may work right or wrong, depending upon the individual choice. But man has freedom to exercise his will wisely, and it may be said that the ethical and psychological system of Pythagoras in its entirety was devoted to the training of the Will and to informing it with moral intelligence.

But by what standard is the nature of moral intelligence to be determined? This, naturally, is

the crucial question, and on this point there seems to be a general agreement of authorities:

His [Pythagoras'] leading thought appears to have been that the state and the individual ought, each in its way, to reflect the image of that order and that harmony by which he believed the universe to be sustained and regulated. He did not frame a constitution or a code of laws; nor does he appear to have assumed any public office. He instituted a society—an order we might now call it—of which he became the leader . . .

This celebrated society, then, was at once a philosophical school, a religious brotherhood, and a political association; and all these characters appear to have been inseparably united in the founder's mind. The ambition of Pythagoras was, assuredly, truly lofty and noble. He aimed at establishing a dominion which he believed to be that of wisdom and virtue, a rational supremacy of minds, enlightened by philosophy and purified by religion, and of characters fitted to maintain an ascendant over other by habits of self-command.

To Pythagoras, it thus becomes evident. Western civilization owes the conception of unified education of the whole man (and woman—for his brotherhood included women); it also owes him the beginnings of the systematic study of geometry, in the formulation of the Pythagorean Theorem, the scientific study of music, the heliocentric theory in astronomy, and, finally, the doctrine—now the credo of modern physics—that all things are formed *according to number*, which introduced the discipline of mathematics, of abstract thought, to cosmological investigation.

We said nothing about the Pythagorean conception of Destiny, the Power, that is, to which every man is subjected from without, and over which he seems to have so little control. This question, obviously, bears on the origin of evil in human ignorance and wrong use of the will. This is to be overcome by personal discipline. And—in the words of the "Golden Verses," written down by a disciple -

As to the evils which Destiny involves,

Judge them what they are: endure them all and strive,

As much as thou art able, to modify the traits:

The Gods, to the most cruel, have not exposed the Sage.

What is this "Destiny"? Have we here only another "Will of God" that Pythagoras hides behind, to avoid by mystification a discussion of the external causes of suffering?

At this point it is necessary to know something of the place of Pythagoras in Grecian history. He was born on the island of Samos, about 580 B.C., the contemporary, therefore, of Gautama Buddha in India, and Lao Tze in China. The story goes that in his youth he traveled to Egypt, where he was instructed by the priests of Thebes. "He thus passed twenty-two years in the sanctuaries of the temples," Iamblichus relates, "studying astronomy and geometry, and being initiated in no casual or superficial manner in all the mysteries of the Gods." Other travels took him to Sidon, to Babylon, and even, some say, to India, and in all these places he pursued his studies with sages and priests. (The wide journeyings of Pythagoras are called "of course, apocryphal" by some authorities, but we are content that he spent these years *somewhere*, and profitably, in view of his later accomplishments.)

According to Iamblichus, he returned to Samos in his fifty-sixth year. His native city, however, had been ravaged by a Persian invasion, and it was at Krotona, a city of Greater Greece on the shore of the "boot" of Italy, that he finally settled. Like so many colonial cities, Krotona represented a more vigorous culture than the older Greek states, and Pythagoras went there, "conceiving that his real fatherland must be the country containing the greatest number of most scholarly men."

There he was welcomed by the citizens and made the teacher of their youth. The Senators of Krotona built him an Institute where, for years, he instructed the young men and women of the city

who could pass the preliminary requirements for entry into the Pythagorean brotherhood. The training, tradition tells us, was rigorous; the results extraordinary. The details of the school's organization are described by Iamblichus and are impressive evidence of Pythagoras' profound knowledge of human nature as well as of practical educational principles. The brotherhood deeply affected the lives of hundreds of persons, and they went forth into the world to take up careers in public life, animated by the highest ideals. It was, as Myers says in his *History of Greece*, "a sort of moral reform league, characterized by certain ascetic tendencies, and which exerted a wide and important influence upon the political affairs and the thought of the times." It was, indeed, their zeal for reform that finally created the enmities which led to an attack on the Pythagoreans in Krotona, and the death of many of their number in a fire set by their political opponents.

The heart of the Pythagorean teaching was the Orphic religion, introduced in Greece centuries earlier as a reform of the Bacchic Mysteries and the amoral traditions deriving from Homer. Pythagoras, it may be said, sought to transform Orphicism into science and philosophy. There is a natural connection between the deep interest of Pythagoras in music and the teachings of Orpheus, the gentle singer. As Radhakrishnan says in *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*,

The Orphic cult transcends the limit of blood groups. It affirms that all men are brothers. The sense of solidarity not only includes all mankind but embraces all living things. All life is one, and God is one. The pictures of Orpheus in which wild and tame animals were represented as lying down in amity side by side all alike, charmed by the notes of his lyre, illustrate the unity of all living creation. The influence of the Orphic cult was on the side of civilization and the art of peace. Orpheus was entirely free from warlike attributes, and his lyre was often used to soften the hearts of men. Orphic religion is different from the anthropomorphic worship of the Greeks. Its adherents are organized in communities based on voluntary admission and initiation.

It is in the living religion—the "way of life"—of the Orphic brotherhood that we find the moral foundation of the Pythagorean philosophy and its explanation of good and evil. It is one great doctrine—that the "germ of divinity," potential godhood, exists in every human being, is in fact the soul—that the Orphics believed, that Pythagoras taught, and after him Plato, and still later, the Neo-Platonists of Alexandria. And by his teaching, the Greek philosophers were able to account for the presence of evil in the world without blaming it on some outside power, whether the Gods or God, or the blind malignity of physical life. In a passage of commentary on the Golden Verses, Fabre d'Olivet explains the doctrine:

Man, . . . according to the idea of Pythagoras had conceived, placed under the dominion of Providence [the moral law] between the past and the future, endowed with a free will by his essence, and being carried along toward virtue or vice with its own movement, Man, I say, should understand the source of the evils that he necessarily experiences; and far from accusing this same Providence which dispenses good and evil to each according to his merit and his anterior actions, can blame only himself if he suffers, through an inevitable consequence of his past mistakes. For Pythagoras admitted many successive existences and maintained that the present, which strikes us, and the future, which menaces us, are only the expression of the past which has been at work in anterior times. He said that the greater part of men lose, in returning to life, the remembrance of these past existences; but that, concerning himself, he had, by a particular favor of the gods, preserved the memory of them. Thus according to his doctrine, this fatal Necessity, of which man unceasingly complains, has been created by himself through the use of his will; he traverses, in proportion as he advances in time, the road that he has already traced for himself; and according as he has modified it by good or evil, as he sows so to speak, his virtues or his vices, he will find it again more smooth or laborious, when the time come to traverse it anew.

These are the dogmas by means of which Pythagoras establishes the necessity of Destiny, without harming the power of the Will, and left to Providence its universal empire, without being obliged either to attribute to it the origin of evil, as those who admitted only one principle of things, or to

give to evil an absolute existence, as those who admitted two principles. In this, he was in accord with the ancient doctrine which was followed by the oracles of the gods. Maximus Tyrius has made a dissertation upon the origin of evil, in which he asserts that the prophetic oracles, having been consulted on this subject, responded by these two lines from Homer:

"We accuse the Gods of our evils, while we ourselves

By our own errors, are responsible for them."

This was the teaching of Pythagoras—a foundation for ethics, a credo for self-reliance and personal moral accountability. It is found throughout the ancient world and emerges, in Christian tradition, among the early Gnostics, for which the latter were attacked with exceptional vigor by the orthodox Fathers of the Church. The Heresiarch Basilides, for example, as quoted by Clement of Alexandria, asserted, "I will affirm anything rather than call Providence evil"—or, as we might put it, rather than impugn the Moral Law. Every suffering, Basilides contended, was the due of the sufferer, from causes sown in this or in some previous life. Clement is at great pains to dispute the gnostic argument, urging that martyrdom for the "love of God" would mean nothing if the martyr's ordeal were only the workings of justice. And on this passage in Clement, the worthy Christian editors of the works of the Fathers remark in a footnote: "It is very doubtful, whether, even in poetry, the Platonic idea of pre-existence should be encouraged by Christians, as e.g., in that sublimest of modern lyrics, Wordsworth's ode on *Immortality and Childhood*."

For some reason unaccountably obscure, Christian apologists invariably reject the Pythagorean doctrine of immortality, regarding it with a kind of horrified aversion, as though the teaching of universal justice were somehow an offense against the dignity of their God. But for the Orphic Greeks, for Pythagoras and Plato, and for their many heretical admirers who, across the centuries of European history, lighten the gloomy

record of bigotry and irrational belief, this reasoned conception of moral justice was a necessary part of religious sanity, and in its support they endured ostracism, persecution, and even, as in the case of Giordano Bruno, a flaming death. For the Pythagorean teachings gained a new life from Bruno, as they did in another way from Copernicus and Galileo. And it seems likely that so reasonable a view of the meaning of life and the truth of immortality can never die out.