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PYTHAGORAS

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philosophy of
religion

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SOURCE PROBLEMS: THE 'PYTHAGOREAN QUESTION'

The factual and textual ground on which this spectacular and monumental edifice built by tradition stands is, by contrast, extremely insecure for the modern scholar. First, there are no fragments of Pythagoras' writings. Very much like Socrates, Buddha and Jesus, the Samian sage was – principally, if not exclusively – a master of orality who left no written texts behind him: neither poems nor treatises in prose (see Riedweg [1997] for the possibility that Pythagoras committed something to writing). Secondly, even if he had written something, the mystery-inspired secrecy practised in the circle of followers gravitating around him (Brisson 1987; Bremmer 1995: 63–70; Petit 1997; *contra* Zhmud 1997: 85–91) had as a consequence that, apparently, no writings were in public circulation outside the sect-like early Pythagorean communities before Philolaus of Croton (c.470–after 399 BCE). Thirdly, no direct disciple of Pythagoras is known to have recorded the master's voice or written his biography, as for example Xenophon and Plato did for Socrates and Porphyry for Plotinus. So, quite disappointingly – and in the absence of any other direct literary, epigraphic or archaeological evidence – we are definitively deprived of first-hand access to the historical Pythagoras and his teachings. Only a few dozen of his supposed oral sayings (*akousmata*) and some

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sparse indirect testimonies of the late sixth and early fifth centuries that seem reliable have survived, all transmitted by later sources, and most of those testimonies are usually polemical or at least ambiguous (Burkert 1972: 166–92, esp. 170–73; Riedweg 2005: 48–58, 63–77; Macris 2009). All of these points convergingly show the degree to which our information about Pythagoras and early Pythagoreanism relies, and in fact depends, on oral tradition.

This tradition also has a legendary side, whose aim was to celebrate the much respected master of old by relating and propagating miracle stories illustrating his alleged extraordinary gifts and super-human status (Macris 2003). Pythagoras' legend grew considerably as time passed, so the overwhelming majority of the biographical data concerning him are preserved in an undifferentiated, cumulative way by quite late and often biased sources. More precisely, of the three main surviving biographies of Pythagoras – the ones by Diogenes Laertius, Porphyry and Iamblichus, all dating from the third and early fourth centuries CE – the last two are written by sympathizing Neoplatonists, while the last one, in addition, takes the shape of a 'hagiographical' discourse.¹

Moreover, if we are to believe Iamblichus (1991: §§158, 198; but see Zhmud [1997: 91–2]), in the continuous flow of the Pythagorean tradition, the doctrines going back to the founder are even more difficult to isolate because the aura of his authority seems to have prompted (many of) his disciples as well as later Pythagoreans to attribute the paternity of their novel ideas to him, in order to honour him but also, we might assume, in order to give their own ideas a more respectable pedigree.

On the philosophical level, we must contend with the absence of preserved primary, authentic sources emerging directly from Pythagorean circles earlier than Philolaus. In addition, from Plato we have only few references and cryptic allusions regarding the Pythagorean tradition that he had known personally both in Athens and during his journeys in Magna Graecia. Similarly, there is a reticence in Aristotle, in his surviving corpus, to attribute specifically to Pythagoras or to any of the latter's disciples or epigones the doctrines he discusses in various places anonymously under the collective and vaguely generic label 'Pythagorean' (a label that he sometimes also uses for designating the views of his Pythagoreanizing comrades in the Academy; see McKirahan forthcoming). As a result, we shall never know with certainty which Pythagorean tenets go back to Pythagoras himself,² nor the extent to which Plato was influenced by them and has creatively reshaped them, either in his written dialogues or in his unwritten doctrines (*agrapha dogmata*) (Boyancé 1966b; Meinwald 2002; Périllie 2008).

The situation is further complicated by the fact that in the enthusiastically Pythagoreanizing milieu of Plato's successors in the early Academy, thinkers

1. For annotated translations, see Diogenes Laertius (1972); Porphyry (1965, 2001); Iamblichus (1991).

2. For a serious and optimistic attempt in this direction, see Kahn (2001: 49–62).

such as Speusippus and Xenocrates attempted a profound fusion of Platonic and Pythagorean ideas that obfuscates any clear distinction between the two (cf. Dillon 2003), a fusion that was destined to become canonical from Imperial times onwards. So the pendulum of modern scholarship is condemned to move eternally back and forth between (i) a more or less slavish acceptance of the numerous doctrines traced back to Pythagoras (to the detriment of other philosophers, such as other Presocratics or Plato) by a doxographic tradition ultimately influenced by the early Academy and Aristotle's pupil Theophrastus, and (ii) a completely distrustful reaction to this kind of information: a hyper-critical attitude that goes hand in hand with a tendency to minimize Plato's debt to the Pythagoreans of his time and, symmetrically, to (over)emphasize his originality as a thinker.³

In the domain of religion, the originality of Pythagoras' and the Pythagoreans' contribution depends on the acceptance (or not) of the priority of the Orphic literature, and on his/their debt to it. But in the present state of our knowledge, the establishment of a precise or even approximate relative chronology of the Orphic and Pythagorean movements seems a desperate undertaking: within the existing literary corpus (and supposed continuum) of the Orphic tradition we cannot easily distinguish between early and late Orphic poems, whereas, given the essentially oral character of the early Pythagorean tradition, the latter's eventual influence on the *Orphica* remains difficult to detect and almost impossible to prove.

Given the complicated situation described above, ancient Pythagoreanism seems to be 'sandwiched' between the supposed Orphic origins and background of its religious tenets on the one side, and the artful and insightful literary and philosophical elaboration of its doctrines in written form by Plato on the other side. It is perhaps not a coincidence that, despite some essential disparities, in both cases the Pythagorean oral tradition had to compete with extraordinarily prolific literary *corpora*: the Orphics' famous 'hubhub of books,' or Plato's dialogues. So the archaic preference of Pythagoras and his disciples for orality seems to have been defeated by the growing literacy of the classical period.

All these difficulties amount to the notoriously controversial 'Pythagorean question', which is no less complex than the 'Homeric' one. Taking into account the particularities of the sources that inform us about the Pythagorean tradition, in my account of Pythagoras' contribution to Western philosophy of religion I shall employ three methods: (i) identifying the elements of the tradition that could most reliably be considered to be part of the master's original religious insights; (ii) examining the relevant doctrines attributed to the early Pythagoreans as a group,

3. For a balanced account of this delicate and complex question, see Burkert's magisterial *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism* (1972), as well as the more recent monographs of Huffman (1993, 2005). Huffman (1999) and Kahn (2001) are excellent introductory syntheses of the matter. The sharply opposed but well-founded and skilfully argued views of Kingsley (1995) and Zhmud (1997) show how fragile the otherwise admirable interpretative equilibrium obtained by Burkert can be.

as well as the fragments of, and testimonies about, individual sixth- and fifth-century Pythagoreans such as Philolaus (or even Empedocles); and (iii) reviewing Pythagorean ideas probably echoed in Plato. By this multiple approach I hope to obtain a more complete and comprehensive picture of the diversity of views that were in circulation, already at an early stage, in circles whose point of reference and source of inspiration was Pythagoras himself.

PRELIMINARY HISTORICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND SOME QUALIFICATIONS

Pythagoras' religious insights are well known. They are mainly two: the theory of the immortality and transmigration of the soul, and the conception of the world as a harmonious order (*kosmos*) structured according to numerical proportions. As Walter Burkert (1972) has shown, they do not suffice to make of him a philosopher *stricto sensu*. Our understanding of him would be more accurate if we think of him rather as a wise man or sage, a 'charismatic master of wisdom'⁴ perceived by his contemporaries as possessing and revealing to humanity divine truths, and consequently endowed with a dogmatic authority (Macris 2009). So in Pythagoras' case we are still situated in the 'pre-history', or perhaps 'proto-history', of the philosophy of religion.

Consequently, among the remains that most authentically reflect Pythagoras' thought we shall look in vain for the dialectical approaches and the detailed, systematic argumentations we would have expected, and to which we are nowadays accustomed. These are characteristic of the later generations of Pythagoreans, and especially of those among them who were called *mathematikoi*, namely 'the learned ones', or 'the ones engaged in (the mathematical) sciences (of the *quadriuium*)', as opposed to the more traditionalist and ritualistic branch of the sect, the *akousmatikoi*, who stick to Pythagoras' oral sayings, the *akousmata*.⁵ Pythagoras' own aphoristic formulations were taken as oracular pronouncements, authoritatively ordained, (quasi-) divine prescriptions. His followers used to refer to them by the phrase, "He has said so" (*autos epha, ipse dixit*) – and there ended the discussion.

However, somehow unexpectedly in our eyes, Pythagoras' authoritative teachings do not seem to have functioned as fixed, immovable dogmas for a long time. Orality, after all, gave fluidity and plasticity to the early Pythagorean tradition. Within the latter (even putting aside the '*akusmatici* versus *mathematici*' divide, which may be dated to the middle of the fifth century), we can hear a plurality of voices, often reported collectively and anonymously (e.g. in Aristotle's accounts of the opinions of

4. See Macris (2003) (with extensive bibliography), where I argue for the use of this designation, instead of the more widespread category of 'shaman'.

5. For the two branches that are attested among the early Pythagoreans, see Burkert (1972: 192–208).

different Pythagorean groups), but also, in some cases, explicitly attributed to individual thinkers (especially after Philolaus' publication of his book *On Nature* under his own name). Predictably enough, up to the time of Plato this plurality and variety became even more pronounced, owing to the internal 'dynamics of evolution' of the living tradition, as well as to external influences or syncretistic phenomena, but especially thanks to the Pythagoreans' ability to interact in a creative way with the trends of their times: by updating their vocabulary and methodological approaches, by adapting their discourse to the new intellectual needs and philosophical questions, and by engaging in a fertile dialogue with other schools of thought or religious movements of the rapidly changing Greek world of the fifth century BCE.

This complex situation makes it even more difficult for us to reconstruct properly the unwritten, orally transmitted doctrines of Pythagoras himself out of their kaleidoscopic reflections in later, undoubtedly more sophisticated developments. However, given the archaic context out of which Pythagoras emerges, it could be interesting for our purposes not to restrict ourselves solely to the argumentatively mute insights of the master himself but to also take into consideration the arguments elaborated later by other representatives of the Pythagorean movement, in their effort to explain, clarify, consolidate and/or (eventually) defend more effectively the doctrines of their own tradition against the attacks of later critics. What is important, I would suggest, is to reconstruct the *general train of thought* followed diachronically by the (anonymous and eponymous) early Pythagorean thinkers in the *longue durée*, especially in so far as they were in continuity and in consonance with their master's voice, and to identify the *main lines of argumentation* adopted by them on some fundamental issues in the philosophy of religion.

Taking into consideration the aforementioned necessary qualifications, as well as the historical and cultural context out of which Pythagoras and the tradition deriving from his teachings emerge, the general thesis of this chapter will be that there is a proper contribution that Pythagoras and the early Pythagorean thinkers made to the history of the philosophy of religion, and that this contribution is not only important, original and multifarious, but also influential and long lasting.

THE PYTHAGOREAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION: AN OUTLINE

As has been amply demonstrated by Pierre Hadot in *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (2002) and previously in his *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995), ancient philosophy consisted not only of thinking supported by reasoned argument and productive of more or less coherent worldviews and doctrines, but also in a way of life that had to be lived according to the principles deriving from these views, and which was an exercise in self-discipline and a process of self-transformation. The perfect marriage of the theoretical and the practical aspect of philosophy is achieved for the first time, and in a remarkable way, in the ancient Pythagorean tradition.

Accordingly, in our overview of the Pythagorean contribution to the philosophy of religion it is apt to distinguish between 'theology' and 'bios'. In the domain of theology, understood in the ancient sense of *theo-logia*, we shall look for reflection and discourse (*logos*) on gods and the divine: their essence, and their relation to the cosmos in general and to man in particular. In the domain of bios, or of what we could more precisely call religious 'praxeology', we shall look for reflection and discourse on humanity's attitude towards the divine. Two kinds of practical concerns are involved here: *ritualism* and *morality*.

The ancients conveniently distinguished three types of theology: mythical, physical and civic.⁶ The first, illustrated by the poets (and mythographers), spoke of the gods in terms of mythical tales and narratives about their life and activities. The second, practised by the philosophers, attempted to give a reasonable account of the gods' identity, origin and nature (*physis*), and of our capacity to apprehend these cognitively. The third is confined to priestly knowledge or the citizens' understanding of the practices (rituals, sacrifices, initiations, etc.) surrounding the worship of the gods in the context of civic religion. Useful though it may be, this distinction is somewhat artificial. The three types of theology it identifies are to a great extent complementary and interdependent, and this is even more the case with the quite undifferentiated fusion of poetry, philosophy and religion that is characteristic of the archaic period (but also of a figure like Empedocles, some decades later). But still, in our investigation of the early Pythagorean contribution to the philosophy of religion, the above-mentioned distinction could serve as a reminder that we should examine not only the Pythagoreans' opinions on the gods of the Greek pantheon, their speculations about the relationship between numbers and gods and their natural theology, but also their use and reinterpretation of myth – be it Homeric, Hesiodic, Orphic or Eleusinian – and their reformative attitude towards the cult and rituals of the Greek *polis*.

In a stimulating essay, Glenn Most (2003: 307–10) has recently suggested that in the ancient Greek world the role of philosophy in its relationship with religion was to reinforce religiosity either by supplementing religion in the domains of cosmology, eschatology and morality, or by undertaking 'to correct and improve it, by systematizing its intuitions, by reinforcing its justifications, by generalizing its applicabilities' (*ibid.*: 310). This applies perfectly to ancient Pythagoreanism, which produced physical–animistic as well as number-oriented cosmogonies and cosmologies, eschatological doctrines centred on the soul's immortality, metempsychosis and astral afterlife and, last but not least, a rationally structured and coherent model of reformed piety, a bios combining ritualistic and moral prescriptions and aiming at purification and, through it, at eternal blessings beyond the grave. To Most's scheme we could add another important domain, that of (reli-

6. See Aëtius, *On the Opinions of the Philosophers* = Ps.-Plutarch 1.6.9 (in Diels 1965: 295); Varro, *Antiquities of Human and Divine Things* (in Varro 1976), frs 7–9.

gious) 'anthropo-logy', understood as reflection and discourse about man's place in the cosmos, his mortality and the degree of his affinity (*syngeneia*) to the divine. This domain deserves special attention, given the Pythagoreans' (alleged?) propensity to speak about 'divine men' and *daimones*, their invitation to 'follow god' and to be assimilated to the divine in this life, and their theories about post-mortem divinization.

For each of the fields mentioned in this brief overview a detailed analysis of the evidence is needed, and such an approach would have certainly brought us beyond the limits prescribed for this modest chapter. Given the repeated and exhaustive treatment in modern scholarship of the Pythagorean way of life and of the theory of immortality and transmigration of the soul, the following pages will focus on the Pythagorean contribution to the domain of theology, taken in the broadest possible sense.

EARLY PYTHAGOREAN VIEWS ON GODS AND THE DIVINE

Let us start with the gods. In a typically Greek way, Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans must have taken the traditional gods of the Homeric–Hesiodic pantheon as their starting-point for discussion on the matter, without developing any criticism of a Xenophanian type. Early Pythagoreanism, which used Homer and Hesiod as sources for both moral exemplars and magical incantations for cathartic-healing purposes, is often associated with an allegorical understanding of Homer (attested for the first time by Theagenes of Rhegium, in southern Italy, toward the end of the sixth century BCE). But we do not have any traces of speculation about the gods specifically, neither in physical nor in moral allegories, and it is far from certain that the mystical allegorization of Homer that later Platonists so often attribute retrospectively to the early Pythagorean tradition has in fact archaic roots (Lamberton 1986: 31–43).

If we turn to the Hesiodic poems things seem quite different. In a series of identifications handed down by Aristotle and considered as deriving from authentic Pythagorean *akousmata* originally formulated in a question-and-answer form, the sea is called 'the tears of Kronos', the Great and Little Bear (i.e. the constellations Ursa Major and Ursa Minor) 'the hands of [the goddess] Rhea', the Pleiades 'the lyre of the Muses', and the planets 'Persephone's dogs' (fr. 196 Rose, in Aristotle 1984: vol. 2 [= Porphyry 1965: 120]). The list could be extended in order to include the explanation of thunderbolts as Zeus' threat to the inhabitants of Tartarus, in order to frighten them, of Iris (i.e. the rainbow) as the gleam of the sun, of earthquakes as the result of a concourse of the dead in the underworld, of the echo as the voice of mightier beings (*kreitttones*), of the fourfold *tetractys* as 'the harmony in which the Sirens sing' and so on (cf. 58 C 1–2 DK [= Diels & Kranz 1951–2]). Here we find an original and intriguing use of mythical elements familiar from traditional Greek mythology, especially from

Hesiod, for the allegorical-symbolical designation of astronomical realities and natural phenomena that order the world. On the mythical level we can glimpse intimations of the Hesiodic myth according to which Kronos and Rhea were the ruling couple of the ancestors of the gods preceding Zeus and Hera (Riedweg 2005: 75). In this context we can suppose that Kronos weeps because he has been dispossessed of power by Zeus, that Rhea's hands refer to the means by which she protected Zeus from being swallowed up by Kronos by taking him far away from his father and hiding him in a cave on Crete, and that Zeus' thunderbolts are destined to threaten Kronos, who, once overthrown by his son, has become an inhabitant of the Tartarus together with his siblings, the Titans. And we may recall that Iris, one of Zeus' favorite messengers, is mentioned by Hesiod primarily in connection with the description of Tartarus and its inhabitants (*ibid.*: 75–6). On the level of natural philosophy, on the other side, we are in the presence of a quite coherent picture of the physical world, including some recasting of the nomenclature of the constellations. Riedweg proposed to see here a Pythagorean doctrine of nature developed out of the allegorical, naturalistic explanation of Orphic poems, on the basis of the fact that the Kronos–Rhea myth was also adopted in Orphic theogonies. But it is safer to say that this systematic rationalizing interpretation of myth arose out of the exegesis of the *Theogony* by Hesiod (whose *Works and Days* also contains many parallels with the more ritualistic Pythagorean *akousmata*). In the resulting rather bizarre synthesis, “mythical personages and events are construed as features of the natural world about us, yet of a world conceived not really as nature but as a theatre populated by unseen spiritual beings engaged in a drama of life and death”, and the whole is clearly “worked out largely in the service of a distinctive eschatology” (Kirk *et al.* 1983: 236).

Despite the obvious prominence of the Hesiodic background in the identifications examined above, it is true that already during the sixth century BCE the Homeric–Hesiodic monopoly in the domain of *theologia* had been abolished. At that time, new and quite different theogonies in verse began to circulate in southern Italy under the name of the mythical poet Orpheus (and the closely associated Mousaeus and Linus), supplemented by cosmogonical, anthropogonical and eschatological myths. If we accept as historically accurate the evidence provided by Ion of Chios (36 B 2 DK) and by a certain Epigenes, we are faced with the fact that some early Pythagoreans such as Bro(n)tinus and Zopyros, and even Pythagoras himself, contributed actively to the production of this religious literature, whose aim was to compete with Hesiod's *Theogony* and to propose alternative versions of the latter's narratives (West 1983: 7–15; Kingsley 1995: 133–48, 159ff.). It is in these texts that we could have possibly detected traces of a Pythagorean, or more precisely Orphic–Pythagorean, theogony and theology, but these texts are now lost, and what remains are only their titles.

Two of the titles attested for the early Pythagorean *Orphica* (*Mixing Bowl, Net*) show their authors' mythological conception of the process of cosmogony, which is likened to the mixture of material elements in a mixing bowl or to the knitting

of a net, both of cosmic dimensions, whereas the third, *Robe* (i.e. Persephone's robe), symbolizes the surface of the earth and its seasonal recovery by means of crops, flowers and other vegetation. A fourth title, *Sacred Discourse* (*Hieros Logos*), “should be a narrative about the gods, or at least a theological exposition of some kind, giving a basis for religious observances” (West 1983: 13). Given the Orphic and poetic character of this work, a *theologia* of a mythical rather than a physical type should be supposed here, leading up to a corresponding cultic *theopraxis* within the limits of the civic religion, but the fifth (unfortunately too general) title, *Physics* (*Physika*), leaves open the possibility that there also existed a more philosophical account of the nature (*physis*) of both the gods and the cosmos, perhaps comparable to Presocratic natural theology.

What emerges with absolute certainty about the Pythagorean tradition of theology is that the deity most honoured within it, already from its founder's own time, is Apollo the purifier (*kathartēs*), in his aspects of prophet of Delphi (Pythian), healer (especially by means of music, Paian), begueter (*genētōr*, in Delos, receiving only vegetal offerings) and Hyperborean (coming from the uppermost north). Pythagoras himself was unequivocally assimilated to him in an oral saying, and perhaps also, more enigmatically, in the reported story that made him a reincarnation of Euphorbus, a hero of the *Iliad* with Apollonian features. Apollo was also revered in his quality of *Mousagetēs*, that is, patron of the Muses, and the latter, as daughters of Mnemosyne, had a place of honour within the early Pythagorean pantheon; they were not only accorded importance in memory training and recollection (initially in order to preserve the memory of one's previous incarnations) but were also believed to preside over the arts and sciences, especially astronomy and music (Boyancé 1972). It has been argued by Boyancé (1966a) that Apollo's identification with Helios, the sun, which is attested from the fifth century BCE and is echoed by Oenopides of Chios, is due to the Pythagoreans.⁷ If this proved to be true, it could be one more important testimony for the practice of natural allegory among them (perhaps strengthened by etymological speculations of a Cratylus type), comparable to the one found some time later in the commentary of an Orphic poem composed by the unknown author of the Derveni papyrus (Betegh 2004).

The ‘Orphic connection’, as well as the religious trends in Magna Graecia in general, can explain the central place occupied by Demeter and Persephone in the Pythagorean pantheon. We have already met Persephone in one of the ‘astronomical’ oral sayings and, in an allusive way, in the title of one of the Orphic texts composed by the Pythagoreans. But there is more. In fact, some elements, such as Pythagoras' legendary or ritually enacted descent (*katabasis*) into Hades and his return to earth bringing commands “of the mother”, or the transformation

7. This is accepted by Seaford (2005: 605–6), who refers also to Schefer's recent studies (see Schefer 1996), where it is argued that Plato was profoundly influenced by the Apollonian mysticism of the Pythagoreans.

of his house into a temple of Demeter (*telestérion*) after his death, can be interpreted as signs that he presented himself as a kind of hierophant in the chthonic mysteries of Demeter (assimilated to the Great Mother) (Burkert 1972: 155–9). It was only natural that from the fifth century BCE onwards the close connection of Pythagoras to “the goddesses” came to be more specifically associated with the Eleusinian mysteries, owing to the growing popularity of these local, properly Athenian mysteries of Demeter and Persephone on a Panhellenic level. But the connection with the chthonic mysteries in general was there from the beginning.

Aristoxenus’ reports about the Pythagoreans of the fourth century BCE (Wehrli 1945: frs 33–4), as well as the opening lines of the Pythagorean *Golden Verses*, a late document of disputed dating, show that the Pythagoreans were interested, perhaps already from Pythagoras’ time, not only in gods but also in all kinds of divine beings (*krittones*), especially *daimones*, heroes and the (divinized) souls of the dead, which are set in a hierarchical order. This distinction of separate ‘classes’ of the divine had obvious consequences for the establishment of a ‘protocol of worship’ within the context of a civic theology. On a more philosophical level the Pythagoreans seem to have done more than just uncritically accept, systematize and order pre-existing traditional categories and hierarchies of the so-called popular religion of their times. We can suppose that some theological reflection on the various *genera* of the divine (the *krittones*) as well as some ethical reflection on the attribution of honours are implied in the background, and what emerges as the organizing principle of the resulting hierarchies is the principle of *presbyteron kriterion* or *seniores priores*, namely, the idea that what precedes in time (and what is older) is more honourable than what follows (Thom 1995: 104–6). Given their claimed special knowledge of *daimones* (and, eventually, their original contribution to the discussion about them as a special divine class⁸), their emphasis on heroes and the attention they paid to the world of the deceased (whose souls were omnipresent and visible even in sunbeams), the Pythagoreans probably influenced Socrates in his conception of the personal *daimonion* and certainly paved the way for later developments in Plato (especially in the *Symposium*) and the ancient Academy (especially Xenocrates) concerning the importance of the divine classes that occupy a position between gods and human beings, so that they can function as intermediaries (*metaxy*) between the two.

We cannot tell with certainty if the Pythagoreans believed that the founder of their sect had himself been a *daimôn*, but the testimony of Aristotle’s “writings on the Pythagorean philosophy” (Iamblichus 1991: §31) orients us toward this direction when Aristotle states that the Pythagoreans kept among their greatest secrets (*pany aporrheta*) a division according to which there are three kinds of rational, living beings: “one kind is divine, another human, and another such as Pythagoras” (*ibid.*). However interpreted, this statement (in contrast with the *akousma* identi-

8. See Detienne (1963); Burkert (1964; 1972: 73ff., 171 n.34, 185ff.); Brenk (1986: 2094–8).

fying Pythagoras with the Hyperborean Apollo) sees Pythagoras as a super-human being, in the literal sense of the word, and if we are not supposed to recognize in him a *daimôn*, then we have to see him at least as a divine man (*theios anēr*).

To return to demonology proper, early Pythagoreans seem to have believed that the *daimones* inhabit the moon, that the air is full of them (as well as of souls of heroes), that they send dreams, signs and diseases to human beings and beasts, and that their number within a certain region remains constant (Brenk 1986: 2095). Current research on Empedocles, whose close relationship with Pythagoreanism is known at least as well as the original and idiosyncratic philosophical system he developed out of Pythagorean premises, is still attempting to elucidate the exact meaning of his own *daimones* and their place and function in the natural and civic theology developed in his two separate but inter-related poems, *On Nature* and *Purifications*. Future Empedoclean studies could shed much light on the evolution of early Pythagorean views on *daimones* (and heroes). Meanwhile, what is certain is that these views are clearly connected to the “general superstitious aura surrounding the dead” (*ibid.*: 2098) in the death-oriented Pythagorean *Weltanschauung*, and at the same time that “somewhere within the development of Pythagoreanism a sublimation took place in which the folk beliefs received philosophical elevation” (*ibid.*: 2096). We could isolate two main directions in this development. The first one arises from the Hesiodic myth about the Isles of the Blest and from the notion that “the men of the Golden Age, when their race died out, were transformed by the will of Zeus into *daimones*, guardians over mortals” (Burkert 1985: 180). This first direction is connected to the transposition of the Isles of the Blest from the mythical edge of the Ocean to the sun and moon, within the physical universe (a transposition implying astral immortality in the afterlife), as well as to speculations according to which great and powerful figures can be honoured after death as *daimones*. The second direction, explicitly formulated in Plato but stemming from earlier traditions clearly indebted to the Pythagoreans, concerns the conception of the *daimôn* as a special being who has obtained the person at his birth by lot, and who watches over each individual (*ibid.*: 181). Heraclitus’ paradoxical saying that “character is for man his *daimôn*” (22 B 119 DK) is already directed against such a view, and it would not come as a surprise if the target of his criticism here is Pythagoras, who in another fragment of the Ephesian is accused for the supposed emptiness of his “much learning and artful knavery” (B 129).

In what we may call a Pythagorean ‘theology of the intermediaries’ (between god and man), or the dynamics of man’s immortalization, the heroes also occupy a place of honour. Having died (as the existence of their graves bore witness) they could not have been gods, but because of their origin (i.e. as the product of the union between a god or goddess and a human being) or extraordinary abilities they were clearly more than human. They are soon recognized as semi-divine beings and are connected with the gods; together they constituted the sphere of the sacred. Heroes formed a link in the chain between the immortal gods and

mortal men trying to regain their immortality, since heroes occupied a privileged position in the world of the dead (Thom 1995: 110–12). So their souls should not be disturbed, and this belief explains the religious silence, *hēsychia* or *euphēmia*, in which the Pythagoreans went past the funeral monuments (*hērōia*) built for the heroes. More importantly, Heracles and the Dioskouroi, heroes whose presence in southern Italy was preponderant anyway, easily became Pythagorean heroes. Heracles has broken the terrors of death and thanks to his ascension to heaven and his apotheosis through immolation was considered the paradigm *par excellence* for the crossing of boundaries between the human and the divine spheres. At the same time, because of his fundamental choice of the way of virtue instead of that of vice, according to an old legend, he was also invested with moral values, incarnating the paragon of virtue and labour (*ponos*). Combining the two, he became “a model for the common man who may hope that after a life of drudgery, and through that very life, he too may enter into the company of the gods” (Burkert 1985: 211). As for the Dioskouroi, literally ‘the youths of Zeus’, they were above all “rescuers from personal distress, especially from danger at sea”, and more generally saviours, *sōtēres*, and they “were seen as guiding lights for those hoping to break out of the mortal sphere into the realm of gods” (*ibid.*: 213). A late testimony recorded by Iamblichus (1991: §155) possibly echoes the early Pythagorean propensity for natural allegory we met earlier in connection with the gods when it sees in Heracles the power of nature and in the Dioskouroi the harmony of all things, and this seems to extend the applicability of the naturalizing principle to more than one class of *kreittones*.

It is not easy to decipher the philosophical meaning lying behind another theologizing tendency of the early Pythagoreans, namely, number theology, according to which attributes of numbers correspond to attributes of gods and vice versa. The ground is particularly slippery here because an age-old tradition starting with Speusippus and the early Academy and going down to Iamblichus, Proclus and even Psellus, regularly but mistakenly attributes ‘arithmetical *theologoumena*’ to early Pythagoreans, especially to (Pseudo-)Philolaus. The attribution concerns both equations of numbers with gods and speculations supporting them.⁹ However, Aristotle’s testimony (fr. 203 Rose, in Aristotle 1984: vol. 2, 2443–4) supports the view that this trend has its roots in ancient Pythagoreanism in light of the statement, attributed by Aristotle to the Pythagoreans, that the number seven is to be equated with the virgin goddess Athena on the ground that it is, like her, ‘motherless’ (in the sense that it cannot be generated by other numbers). The pre-Platonic character of the testimonies concerning the other numbers of the ‘decad’ is more uncertain and therefore debatable, but it is difficult to accept that

9. In this Academic and late Platonic tradition we also find geometrical *theologoumena*, that is, associations between gods and geometrical figures, and especially the idea of dedicating angles of triangles, squares and so on to various gods, not only in a speculative way but also in worship; see Huffman (1993: 381–91); Steel (2007).

this kind of theologizing speculation was not extended and generalized in order to embrace all of the first ten numbers. In their Academic, reworked form, the remaining equations resemble the following ones: the number one is mystically called Apollo, because he is apart from the many (*apō tôn pollōn*), that is alone; the number two is equated to the consort of Kronos, that is, the goddess Rhea, because of the association of the dyad-mother of the flowing being (*rheustē ousia*) to time (*chronos*) as the cause of destruction; and so on (Philolaus fr. 20–20a, in DK; cf. Huffman 1993: 334–9, 350–52).

Number theology brings us most naturally to another important and influential aspect of ancient Pythagorean thought, namely its scientific-mathematical conceptions and theologico-metaphysical speculations, perhaps mystical in nature, that go beyond the pantheon of civic religion or the gods of the mystery cults, and find in numbers the divine *archē* of the world or the first principle(s) of things (cf. Drozdek 2007: 53–70). In a famous passage from the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle states that the Pythagoreans identified the principles of mathematics (that is, number and its principles odd and even, limit and unlimited) with the principles of all things, and that:

since ... all other things in the whole of nature seemed to be modelled after numbers, and numbers seemed to be the first things in the whole of nature, they supposed the elements of numbers to be the elements of all things, and the whole heaven to be an attunement (*harmonia*) and a number.

(*Metaphysics* A.5, 985b23ff. = 58 B 4 DK; trans. in Kirk *et al.* 1983: 329)

“The point of the doctrine as a whole is surely to teach that the cosmos – and everything that happens in it – exhibits a wholly intelligible order” (Kirk *et al.* 1983: 332), and that it is fitted harmoniously thanks to the musical ratios. This aspect of Pythagoreanism is well known, and it would be beyond the scope of this brief overview to present it in detail here. What we can do instead is to underline its antiquity and to focus on its importance for the philosophy of religion.

In what seems to be an ancient and authentic oath going back to the first generations of Pythagoreans, Pythagoras is revered as the revealer of “the *tetraktys* [= ‘fourthness’] which contains the fount (*paga*) and root (*rhizoma*) of eternal/ever-flowing/ever-growing nature (*aenaiou physeos*)” (B 15 DK = Aëtius, *Opinions* 1.3.8). So, everything in nature is supposed to flow or grow out of this mysterious *tetraktys*, which is the true source of all things, but its precise content is not revealed to the uninitiated. In an oral teaching attributed to the master himself, *tetraktys* is even said to be identical to the Delphic Oracle: the wisdom contained in it is as profound as the Pythian Apollo’s, but its meaning is not at all obvious and needs interpretation in the same way as Apollo’s oracles do. However, an intimation of its meaning is given: the *tetraktys* is equated to “the harmony in which the Sirens are” (Iamblichus 1991: §82).

With the help of other parallel texts we can safely conclude that the *tetraktys* encapsulates number as the basic principle of the universe. The reasoning runs as follows. The *tetraktys* (literally meaning 'group of four different things') contains in it the first four natural numbers: 1, 2, 3 and 4. What is amazing about them is, first, that their sum is 10, the complete and perfect number, the basis for counting in the decimal system of the Greeks, and the receiver (*dechad*) of the unlimited according to Philolaus (fr. 20b, in Huffman 1993: 352). All other numbers can be generated out of the numbers 1–9 contained in the decad. So all the possible numbers (with the exception of the irrational ones, of course, which were not yet discovered at the time of Pythagoras) are potentially contained in the "pregnant" decad-*tetraktys*. Out of these numbers are harmonized all the ratios, proportions or numerical formulas (*logoi*) that lie behind the ordered constitution of every single thing in the natural world, some of which are called by Philolaus "stronger (*kraittonous*) than we are" (fr. 16, in Huffman 1993: 333), either because "we are not able to grasp all the ways in which they govern our world" or because "they control the world independent of our wishes" (Huffman 1993: 334). In either case some kind of invisible, divine power of the *logoi* is meant, especially if we take into consideration that the adjective *kraittonous* in the plural was used to designate the 'mightier', superior beings.

The second aspect of the marvellous nature of the first four numbers is that the principal harmonic intervals or concords known to ancient Greek musicians and musicologists can be represented as ratios of them (fourth – 4:3; fifth – 3:2; octave – 2:1; later also the double octave – 4:1). These harmonic ratios are also considered responsible for the cosmic 'attunement', as we can glimpse from the reference to the Sirens, whose song Plato identifies in the *Republic* (616b–617e) with the "music of the spheres" in which the heavenly bodies move.¹⁰ So by the very fact that it encompasses the basic harmonic ratios the *tetraktys* can reasonably be said to contain the clue to the invisible mysteries of the universe, and at the same time a mystic promise that the latter exhibits a harmonious order and rationality.¹¹ These 'proto-structuralist' considerations make extremely plausible the often doubted doxographic attribution of the paternity of the term *kosmos* (in the sense of 'world-order') to Pythagoras (Zhmud 1997: 292–5). At the same time they show how close we are to the formulation of the classical teleological argument from design, which is one of the most important theistic proofs in the history of the Western philosophy of religion. In our sources for early Pythagoreanism the perfection of the world is not explicitly connected to its divine origin or causation, let alone to its creation by a divine Demiurge, and this is in tune with the general tendency of Presocratic thinkers to limit themselves to an *assumption* that the world is governed by a divine power (Sedley 2007: 2). But

10. This is explicitly stated later by Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 7.94–5.

11. For my discussion on the *tetraktys* I have drawn freely from Kirk *et al.* (1983: 232–4) and Thom (1995: 174–7).

it cannot be ruled out that some steps towards a first conception of the idea of a creator-god working with numerical ratios and applying the principle of harmony were already made by the Pythagoreans, if we take into consideration that the eponymous speaker of Plato's *Timaeus*, who is clearly the proponent of cosmic teleology, is probably – whether real or fictional – a Sicilian Pythagorean (*ibid.*: 94 n.4).

It is also number that will later constitute one of the two basic and pervasive principles that not only underlie the constitution of everything in the world, but also serve as a link between the human and the divine spheres, because they are shared by both, the other such principle being breath or soul. According to later Pythagorean texts reproduced by Iamblichus (1991: §146), it is the "eternal essence" of number that forms the basis not only of the material world, but of the divine sphere as well (gods and *daimones*), a notion that is absent from our evidence concerning early Pythagoreanism, unless we consider that it is somehow implied in the number theology discussed above. Sextus Empiricus, by contrast, speaks of breath or soul as the principle of the kinship of all living beings, from animals to gods:

Now [the followers of] Pythagoras and Empedocles, and the rest of the Italian company declare that there is a certain community (*koinōnía*) [uniting us] not only with each other and with the gods but even with the irrational animals. There is in fact one breath (*pneuma*) pervading, like a soul (*psychēs tropon*), the whole universe, [the same breath] which also makes us one (*henoun*) with them.

(*Against the Mathematicians* 9.127)

This seems to combine in a quite convincing way three closely interrelated early Pythagorean doctrines: (i) the immortality of the soul, which brings mortal man close to the immortal gods; (ii) the kinship between human beings and animals, on the principle that they are both animate beings (*empsycha*) possessing a soul and breathing; and (iii) the rather materialistic–animistic cosmogonic doctrine attested by Aristotle (*Physics* V.6, 213b22, and fr. 201 Rose [= 58 B 30 DK]), and shared also with the Orphics, according to which the world as a whole is a living, breathing being receiving, or rather 'drawing', its respiration, like the human embryo, from the unlimited outside it. To be sure, no god and nothing divine is mentioned in Aristotle's testimony, but soul, associated with breath, is a divine principle and, interestingly enough, breath and number are inter-related there: by breathing in (time and) the air or the void that separates and distinguishes the natures of things, the undivided universe – the One – becomes divided (and temporal), and it is this very distinction that is also the origin of numbers.

Out of these elements W. K. C. Guthrie tentatively reconstructed the rationale for the Pythagorean belief in the immortality of the soul in the following way:

[I]f the world was a living, eternal and divine creature, and lived by breathing in air or breath from the infinite around it; and if man too got his life by breathing (which was evidence that the human soul itself was air): then the natural kinship between man and the universe, microcosm and macrocosm, must be close. The universe was one, eternal and divine. Men were many and divided, and they were mortal. But the essential part of man, his soul, was not mortal, and it owed its immortality to this circumstance, that it was neither more nor less than a small fragment or spark of the divine and universal soul, cut off and imprisoned in a perishable body. (1962: 201)

Another way to apprehend the relationship between man, god and the cosmos is found in a famous passage of Plato's *Gorgias*, which contains also an interesting hint at the notion of cosmic justice (Koulountas 2009: 146–66) and where the reference to the Pythagoreans is unmistakable:

And wise men (*hoi sophoi*) tell us, Callicles, that heaven and earth and gods and men are held together by communion (*koinōnia*) and friendship (*philia*), by orderliness (*kosmiotēs*), temperance (*sōphrosyne*), and justice; and that is the reason, my friend, why they call the whole of this world by the name of order (*kosmos*), not of disorder or dissolution. Now you, as it seems to me, do not give proper attention to this, for all your cleverness, but have failed to observe the great power of geometrical equality amongst both gods and men.

(*Gorgias* 507e–508a, in Plato 1925: 469–71)

However conceived of or argued, the relationship between god and man presupposes a likeness in being, and for the Pythagoreans this *syggenēia* resides in the existence of a divine parcel in man's body, namely, his soul. The attribution of a double nature to man, one bodily and mortal and the other spiritual and immortal, and its corollary, the radical body–soul dualism that goes hand-in-hand with the depreciation of the body and the symmetrical upgrading of the soul, is something completely new, which represents a radical reversal of the traditional Homeric conceptions. In the Homeric poems it is the body that represents the real self of the person, and it is celebrated as the seat of life: when it perishes at death the soul that goes down beneath the earth to the realm of Hades is little more than a bloodless shadowy image that resembles its bodily form but has no strength or real life. With Pythagoras' (and the Orphics') emphasis on the divine origin of man's soul and its immortality and survival after death we can truly speak of a religious revolution, of a 'shift of paradigm'. Further, this 'good news' or 'gospel' of salvation, which rendered the prospect of dying quite appealing by promising a happy afterlife into eternity for the souls of the good and righteous men and women, was accompanied by belief in the transmigration of the soul,

reincarnation or metempsychosis, and *palingenēsia* through successive rebirths, a belief that was unheard of in the Greek world before Pythagoras' time (cf. Vernant 1991). But this is another (fascinating) story.

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On the IMMORTAL SOUL see also Ch. 4; Vol. 2, Chs 12, 16; Vol. 3, Chs 10, 19. On MYTH see also Vol. 4, Chs 5, 15. On VICE see also Ch. 7. On VIRTUE see also Chs 11, 14, 15; Vol. 3, Chs 20, 21.

THE HISTORY OF
WESTERN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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Edited by Graham Oppy and Nick Trakakis



VOLUME 1

ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* (1946; hereafter *History*) provides a model for some of the significant features of the present work. Like Russell's more general history, our history of Western philosophy of religion consists principally of chapters devoted to the works of individual thinkers, selected because of their "considerable importance". Of course, we do not claim to have provided coverage of all of those who have made important contributions to Western philosophy of religion. However, we think that anyone who has made a significant contribution to Western philosophy of religion has either seriously engaged with the works of philosophers who are featured in this work, or has produced work that has been a focus of serious engagement for philosophers who are featured in this work.

Like Russell, we have aimed for contributions that show how the philosophy of religion developed by a given thinker is related to that thinker's life, and that trace out connections between the views developed by a given philosopher and the views of their predecessors, contemporaries and successors. While our primary aim is to provide an account of the ideas, concepts, claims and arguments developed by each of the philosophers under consideration, we think – with Russell – that this aim is unlikely to be achieved in a work in which "each philosopher appears as in a vacuum".

Again like Russell, we have only selected philosophers or religious writers who belong to, or have exerted a significant impact on, the intellectual tradition of the West (i.e. western Europe and the Anglo-American world). We realize that this selection criterion alone excludes from our work a number of important thinkers and religious groups or traditions, such as: Asian philosophers of religion, particularly those representing such religions as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism; African philosophers of religion; and individuals, texts and traditions emanating from indigenous religions, such as those found in the native populations of Australia and the Pacific Islands. Clearly, the non-Western world has produced thinkers who have made important, and often overlooked, contributions