

7424
LANG, F.
2006

Littera Baltica 2006

Turku, Finland, June 9th to 11th 2006

Participants | Program | Qvidja-Flyer | Articles | Gallery

Articles

Fredrik Lång: □ "A Place in Time"

Last year I published a novel on the historical person Pythagoras of Sainos. Like all the other schoolchildren of my time, my first acquaintance with Pythagoras was made during the geometry lessons in secondary school. At that time we still used the *Elementa* by Euclid as a source book of exact and deductive geometrical thinking. One of the last theorems in the textbook was that of Pythagoras'. I often used to turn the pages over to the end of the book to look at this odd looking triangle with its additions that made it look like a house or a construction of some sort. It was with wonder and fear I looked at the figure, reflecting over what strange and difficult things one had to know to be able to live in this world.

The understanding of the theorem of Pythagoras was, according to our teaching program, the ultimate proof of one's capacity for logical thinking.

I passed this examination too, but it was not Pythagoras that made me start studying mathematics and physics at the university a few years later. It was rather a preposterous curiosity of how everything functioned and was kept together in that great chain of being that we call the universe. For some reason I thought that science (natural science) could provide me with the answer to my questions. According to Newtonian physics, space and time provide the necessary conditions for the existence of things and beings. And although space and time reciprocally exclude each other, they simultaneously have to coincide in order to define a proceeding of any kind.

On the other hand, during the same time as Newton was writing the principles of physics, a. Frenchman, Descartes, established the duality between the mind and the body. As a consequence, body and mind seems to be able to dwell in different locations at the same time and at the same locations at different times. The body in a bodily place, and the mind in a mindly place. And because this is what mostly happens, also here and now, Newtonian physics or science in general does not seem to be very apt for understanding existentials. May be this was the reason why 130 years ago, just a few blocks from here, decided to give up my studies in physics and instead turn to philosophy and art. However, I was so close to a master degree in science that I wrote my masters thesis in mathematics. This thesis was a little bit unorthodox, because it dealt with the history of mathematics and not with pure mathematics. And above all, it was an attempt to understand the philosophy of Pythagoras.

Since then I have been living with the Samoan philosopher, in my thoughts and also

in some of my books. Although I was not able to visit Greece until 1994 - and as you know, reality is the worst enemy to fantasy - I was sometimes so electrified, so excited by the ancient Greeks, that I felt that although I stood with my feet in Finland, my head was definitively in the antique Hellas. So, finally, I decided to make an end to this state of mind (and feet) by writing this novel, *Mitt liv som Pythagoras - My life as Pythagoras*.

As you all know, Pythagoras is not famous only because of his right-angled triangle, but also because he introduced a very simple and very radical hypothesis in the history of thought of how the essence of the world is related to thinking, by saying that "everything is number" or that "everything can be denominated into numbers". This is indeed a very simplistic and in a way a very brutal hypothesis, compared for example to the elaborate theogony of Hesiod, or to the sophisticated explanations of the reasons and causes to events in man or nature that the mythology could provide.

Reality consists of numbers. That could be said to be the major hypothesis of early Pythagorean thinking. But this hypothesis did not stand the scrutiny of later intellects. Only some 30 years after the death of the Master, the most dramatic moment in the development of Pythagoreanism took place. One of his pupils, Hippasos by name, managed to prove that the diagonal in such a simple geometrical figure as the square has no common denominator with the side of the square, that is, it has no number. This was a great chock to the Pythagorean Order. According to one legend Hippasos was killed after that in order to keep the discovery secret. (Probably, though, he was not killed - the Pythagoreans did not even kill snakes - but expelled from the Order and then talked about as dead - that is; dead for the Pythagorean Order.)

My first idea was to write a novel of what happens to a human being or to a society like that of the Pythagorean when the fundamentals on which it has built all its understanding of the world and on which its ethical values also rest, suddenly cease to be valid. Four, five years ago I wrote a novel that partly took place in St Petersburg in the beginning of 1990, a couple of years after the collapse of the Soviet society. During those years, a lot of fundamental values of the soviet society - values that people had lived for and even died for - turned out to be false. A tot of truths turned out to be lies. I thought that I perhaps could use the experience of the late 20th century Russia - i.e. the feeling of having lost all the ethical principles and the need to re-establish the values of living and the definitions of truth - to describe the sentiment within the Pythagoreans society after the fatal discovery of the irrational numbers.

But it did not work out well. The text did not come alive. I realized that I needed a deeper understanding of the man Pythagoras himself. An understanding of Pythagoras before he became the radical philosopher Pythagoras. And above all I needed some explanation to the reason why on earth was it felt relevant to expel all the living gods from Being and instead replace them with such a crude statement as "All reality is number".

The legends about the life of Pythagoras are numerous, while the facts are few and uncertain. But as I was writing a novel, I felt I could choose freely among the legends, and use the ones that I liked the best. According to some legends, the father of Pythagoras was called Mnesarchos, he was (like the philosopher Thales by the way) a

Phoenician by birth, and came to Samos as a tradesman, a goldsmith or an engraver. Or maybe all of the above.

In my novel I follow the life of Pythagoras throughout his childhood and youth. As the son of an engraver, he might have been able to see the first Samoan coins made from gold or electrum (a natural amalgamation of silver and gold found in the Lydian rivers) - he might have seen these coins being minted in the workshop of the tyrant of Samos, because the first coins on the island were struck around this time. Much later, when living in Kroton, Pythagoras himself was probably involved in striking the first, very beautiful coins of this city-state. These coins had the tripod on the reverse. The tripod was the mark of Apollo and also the genius of Pythagoras.

To make a long story short: Following the old Greek proverb that like knows alike, I make this knowledge of Pythagoras, i.e. his understanding of the secret of the value of the money, the starting point for his radical ontology. From the procedure of estimating the value of commodities in the pure numbers of money (instead of for example oxen, as in Homer), he generalized this to include the universe as a whole. This is not so farfetched as it may seem at a first glance. We know from general history that the introduction of an economy based on exchange and money had a tremendous impact on the society as a whole. It is impossible to think that it did not also affect thinking in some way. According to me, it affected thinking in this way. It made it relevant and interesting to speculate with the idea that everything in the universe could be given a numeric value.

But the best thing with this hypothesis is that it can be tested in an almost scientific way. According to nowadays natural science a phenomenon can be considered to be a result of an other, if, when the second occurs, also the first will appear. And this is the fact in the late middle Ages, when money economy reappears in the North Italian city-states: we can see the uprising of a new Pythagorean ontology, namely in the philosophy of for example Nicolaus Cusanus and Galileo Galilei.

□ There is something that I consider to be a weakness within the traditional epistemology, and that is the tendency to refer thoughts only to other thoughts (and not to life and dreams and sufferings of the time being). As if philosophy and thinking was born in an empty space consisting only of language and ideas. That is not, according to me, the case, and it becomes especially clear when it comes to early Greek philosophy. The marvellous thing with these early speculations is that their concepts are so transparent; that we so dearly can see from which part of life they have been borrowed.

□ Take for example the word ontology, which I have used here already a couple of times. The concept comes from the Greek word *ta onta*, which originally did not have anything to do with the abstract, entire Being, but came from a very concrete everyday experience. *Ta onta* meant - and I quote the famous scholar Werner Jaeger - "goods and commodities in a man's household".

So - once again - abstract speculations seems to have its roots in concrete *oikonotnia*; in the art of housekeeping.

The historical novel, on the other hand, deals with life, with feelings and real things, and thus seems to bring us closer to past ages and previous centuries. But this is also a very problematic effect, and the result of the novel's capacity to create artificial

worlds that seem to be real. We can say almost for sure that it is impossible to fully understand the past for the simple reason that understanding is being (or - to put it in philosophical terms: that the existence is the essence of understanding). We can only exist here and now, and here and now we have other fears and other expectations - that is, other lives -than the Greeks. This is the difference. But still we have to try and try and still again try to recreate an image of the past for our orientation of what it is to live in the present.

When it comes to Antiquity, the problems are obvious. When one stands for example on the slope of the Athenian Acropolis, and looks at the sand-coloured marble that carries its stony message of the past through the ages, the Antiquity feels very close. But the picture one receives of it is always a mirage. We cannot even be sure of how the so-called eternal values or phenomena like time, space or even love or death was experienced by the ancient Greeks. But if I have to draw a line of demarcation between the mankind in ancient times and another kind of man that we anyhow, is some ways, are able to identify with, I would put that border in the year AD 390. That year the Christian Roman emperor Theodosius had the Apollo temple in Delphi closed. An epoch thus came to an end, a mentality died, a way of experiencing time was concluded, and a conception of the world was rejected. The last oracle is said to have been told to the renegade-emperor Julianus - the one who tried to re-establish paganism in the already Christian Roman empire: "Tell to the King: the splendid courts have died out, Phoebus Apollo has lost his home, no one coronate the sibyl with laurel any more, the murmuring well has dried up and the honey-smooth water has turned silent."

But only three years earlier a thirty three year old pagan, called Augustinus, was baptized in another part of the Roman Empire. He is the first to express a new spirit of the time and of what time really is. After that, time is not seen as the work of a blind Destiny. Instead, time becomes the space for the development of mankind and of man. At first, time is defined as the space for the development of man towards Salvation. Later on, with just a slight change of expression, it becomes the space for the development towards freedom. Augustinus introduces (and he is the first to do this) a history both for the individual and the human race; a history that begins with the Fall and Condemnation of man. But Augustinus also introduces a future for man and mankind, both for the individual and for the whole Christian community. This promised future, the Salvation of their immortal soul, is not the result of a ruthless and persistent Destiny, as among the Greeks, but the consequence of the individual's own will, of his determination to obey and serve the Lord. Life becomes an individual project directed against the future. This is new in the history of Greek and Roman mentalities. On the other hand it is a very old Jewish belief, and also a very profound but unwritten slavish concept of time and life, and in fact, it is the gift of the Greek and Roman slaves to our time.

And this is perhaps also the reason why it is a slave that tells this story of mine, the story, of my life as Pythagoras.