



The Presocratics 2: Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans

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The birthplace of Pythagoras is uncertain. He is generally called the Samian, and we know, at all events, that he lived for some time in that island, during or immediately before the famous tyranny of Polycrates. All manner of legends are told of the travels of Pythagoras to Egypt, Chaldaea, Phoenicia, and even to India. Others tell of a mysterious initiation at the sacred cave of Jupiter in Crete, and of a similar ceremony at the Delphic oracle. What is certain is that at some date towards the end of the sixth century B.C. he removed to Southern Italy, which was then extensively colonised by Greeks, and that there he became a great philosophic teacher, and ultimately even a predominating political influence.

He instituted a school in the strictest sense, with its various grades of learners, subject for years to a vow of silence, holding all things in common, and admitted, according to their approved fitness, to successive revelations of the true doctrine of the Master. Those in the lower grades were called Listeners; those in the higher, Mathematicians or Students; those in the most advanced stage, Physicists or Philosophers. With the political relations of the school we need not here concern ourselves. In Crotona and many other Greek cities in Italy Pythagoreans became a predominant aristocracy, who, having learned obedience under their master, applied what they had learned in an anti-democratic policy of government. This lasted for some thirty years, but ultimately democracy gained the day, and Pythagoreanism as a political power was violently rooted out.

Returning to the philosophy of Pythagoras, in its relation to the general development of Greek theory, we may note, to begin with, that it is not necessary, or perhaps possible, to disentangle the theory of Pythagoras himself from that of his followers, Philolaus and others. The teaching was largely oral, and was developed by successive leaders of the school. The doctrine, therefore, is generally spoken of as that, not of Pythagoras, but of the Pythagoreans. Nor can we fix for certain on one fundamental conception, upon which the whole structure of their doctrine was built.

One dictum we may start with because of its analogies with what has been said of the earlier philosophies. The universe, said the Pythagoreans, was constituted of *indefinites* and *definers*, *i.e.* of that which has no character, but has infinite capacities of taking a character; and secondly, of things or forces which impose a character upon this. Out of the combination of these two elements or principles all knowable existences come into being. "All things," they said, "as known have *Number*; and this number has two natures, the Odd and the Even; the known thing is the Odd-Even or union of the two."

By a curious and somewhat fanciful development of this conception the Pythagoreans drew up two parallel columns of antithetical principles in nature, ten in each, thus:—

Definite	Indefinite
Odd	Even
One	Many

Right	Left
Male	Female
Steadfast	Moving
Straight	Bent
Light	Dark
Good	Evil
Four Square	Irregular

Looking down these two lists we shall see that the first covers various aspects of what is conceived as the ordering, defining, formative principle in nature; and that the second in like manner comprises various {25} aspects of the unordered, neutral, passive, or disorganised element or principle; the first, to adopt a later method of expression, is *Form*, the second *Matter*. How this antithesis was worked out by Plato and Aristotle we shall see later on.

While, in a sense, then, even the indefinite has number, inasmuch as it is capable of having number or order imposed upon it (and only in so far as it has this imposed upon it, does it become knowable or intelligible), yet, as a positive factor, Number belongs only to the first class; as such it is the source of all knowledge and of all good. In reality the Pythagoreans had not got any further by this representation of nature than was reached, for example, by Anaximander, and still more definitely by Heraclitus, when they posited an Indefinite or Infinite principle in nature which by the clash of innate antagonisms developed into a knowable universe. But one can easily imagine that once the idea of Number became associated with that of the knowable in things, a wide field of detailed development and experiment, so to speak, in the arcana of nature, seemed to be opened. Every arithmetical or geometrical theorem became in this view another window giving light into the secret heart of things. Number became a kind of god, a revealer; and the philosophy of number a kind of religion or mystery. And this is why the second grade of disciples were called Mathematicians; mathematics was the essential preparation for and initiation into philosophy.

Whether that which truly exists was actually identical with Number or Numbers, or whether it was something different from Number, but had a certain relation to Number; whether if there were such a relation, this was merely a relation of analogy or of conformability, or whether Number were something actually embodied in that which truly exists—these were speculative questions which were variously answered by various teachers, and which probably interested the later more than the earlier leaders of the school.

A further question arose: Assuming that ultimately the elements of knowable existence are but two, the One or Definite, and the Manifold or Indefinite, it was argued by some that there must be some third or higher principle governing the relations of these; there must be some law or harmony which shall render their intelligible union possible. This principle of union was God, ever-living, ever One, eternal, immovable, self-identical. This was the supreme reality, the Odd-Even or Many in One, One in Many, in whom was gathered up, as in an eternal harmony, all the contrarities of lower existence. Through the interchange and intergrowth of these contrarities God realises Himself; the universe in its evolution is the self-picturing of God. God is diffused as the seminal principle throughout the universe; He is the Soul of the world, and the world itself is God in process. The world, therefore, is in a sense a living creature. At its heart and circumference are purest fire; between these circle the sun, the moon, and the five planets, whose ordered movements, as of seven chords, produce an eternal music, the 'Music of the Spheres.' Earth, too, like the planets, is a celestial body, moving like them around the central fire.

By analogy with this conception of the universe as the realisation of God, so also the body, whether of man or of any creature, is the realisation for the time being of a soul. Without the body and the life of the body, that soul were a blind and fleeting ghost. Of such unrealised souls

there are many in various degrees and states; the whole air indeed is full of spirits, who are the causes of dreams and omens.

Thus the change and flux that are visible in all else are visible also in the relations of soul and body. Multitudes of fleeting ghosts or spirits are continually seeking realisation through union with bodies, passing at birth into this one and that, and at death issuing forth again into the void. Like wax which takes now one impression now another, yet remains in itself ever the same, so souls vary in the outward form that envelops and realises them. In this bodily life, the Pythagoreans are elsewhere described as saying, we are as it were in bonds or in a prison, whence we may not justly go forth till the Lord calls us. This idea Cicero mistranslated with a truly Roman fitness: according to him they taught that in this life we are as sentinels at our post, who may not quit it till our Commander orders.

On the one hand, therefore, the union of soul with body was necessary for the realisation of the former ((Greek) *soma*, *body*, being as it were (Greek) *sema*, *expression*), even as the reality of God was not in the Odd or Eternal Unity, but in the Odd-Even, the Unity in Multiplicity. On the other hand this union implied a certain loss or degradation. In other words, in so far as the soul became realised it also became corporealised, subject to the influence of passion and change. In a sense therefore the soul as realised was double; in itself it partook of the eternal reason, as associated with body it belonged to the realm of unreason.

This disruption of the soul into two the Pythagoreans naturally developed in time into a threefold division, *pure thought*, *perception*, and *desire*; or even more nearly approaching the Platonic division, they divided it into *reason*, *passion*, and *desire*. But the later developments were largely influenced by Platonic and other doctrines, and need not be further followed here.

Music had great attractions for Pythagoras, not only for its soothing and refining effects, but for the intellectual interest of its numerical relations. Reference has already been made to their quaint doctrine of the music of the spheres; and the same idea of rhythmic harmony pervaded the whole system. The life of the soul was a harmony; the virtues were perfect numbers; and the influence of music on the soul was only one instance among many of the harmonious relations of things throughout the universe. Thus we have Pythagoras described as soothing mental afflictions, and bodily ones also, by rhythmic measure and by song. With the morning's dawn he would be astir, harmonising his own spirit to his lyre, and chanting ancient hymns of the Cretan Thales, of Homer, and of Hesiod, till all the tremors of his soul were calmed and still.

Night and morning also he prescribed for himself and his followers an examination, as it were a *tuning* and testing of oneself. At these times especially was it meet for us to take account of our soul and its doings; in the evening to ask, "Wherein have I transgressed? What done? What failed to do?" In the morning, "What must I do? Wherein repair past days' forgetfulness?"

But the first duty of all was truth,—truth to one's own highest, truth to the highest beyond us. Through truth alone could the soul approach the divine. Falsehood was of the earth; the real life of the soul must be in harmony with the heavenly and eternal verities.

Pythagoreanism remained a power for centuries throughout the Greek world and beyond. All subsequent philosophies borrowed from it, as it in its later developments borrowed from them; and thus along with them it formed the mind of the world, for further apprehensions, and yet more authentic revelations, of divine order and moral excellence.

John Marshall. *A Short History of Greek Philosophy*. Chapter 3. London: Percival and Co., 1891.

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