

Many people are familiar with the name Pythagoras in connection with the famous "Pythagorean theorem", i.e., the sum of the squares of the legs of a right triangle is equal to the square of the hypotenuse. But Pythagoras contributed a great deal more to ancient science and philosophy, although many of his ideas sound a bit peculiar to modern ears. One ancient thinker by the name of Plato, however, was much influenced (for good or for ill) by the ideas of Pythagoras, and so the latter cannot simply be dismissed by students of ancient philosophy.

Pythagoras (569-470 B.C.?) had quite an adventurous life: born on the Greek island of Samos, he travelled to Egypt at the age of 22, only to be taken captive by invading Persians; he spent some years in Babylon before regaining his freedom, and eventually migrated to Italy where he founded a "society of followers" at Croton. It was here that he preached a revolutionary and secret doctrine that combined science, religion and philosophy, and won for himself the reputation of being a worker of miracles.

The main tenets of his doctrine were: 1) the immortality of the soul; 2) reincarnation of the soul; 3) the interrelationship of all living things; and 4) the power of numbers. The first three are related, since Pythagoras believed that immortal souls (psyches) could be reborn time and time again either in humans, animals or plants. Pythagoras himself claimed that his soul had lived previously as a son of the god Hermes named Aithalides, and that Aithalides had been reincarnated as men named Euphorbus, Hermotimus and Pyrrhus, each having a total recollection of

his former life. In fact, Pythagoras seems to have believed in a movement of the soul between plants and animals and human beings, with a period of 216 years between each incarnation.

Given the immortality and reincarnation of the soul, it was important to Pythagoras and his followers to avoid polluting the soul in any way (while the soul was immortal it apparently could still become sick). Accordingly certain prohibitions arose, such as not eating meat (since animals have souls, and, after all, one would not want to eat an animal housing the soul of a deceased relative or friend!). Also to be avoided were beans, notorious for discomfitting the inner self, as many of us can attest from personal experience. Pollution of the soul could also be effected by excess passion, and Pythagoras claimed that "psychic harmony" was disturbed when one's reason was overcome by one's desires. Members of the society were thus advised to drink no wine and to exercise self-control.

As for his doctrine on numbers, Pythagoras believed that numbers were divine and had certain mystical powers and properties which should be known only by his followers. For example, odd numbers were thought to be good, while even numbers were bad. The number one was supposed to represent "supreme reality" and be the "source of all number"; as a "creator", the number one produced the number two, an evil number which was the source of inequality in the universe. One and two together produced the number three, considered by Pythagoras to be the first real number and to symbolize the universe. Four, in turn, was seen as the cosmic

creator and source of nature, while five was the number symbolizing marriage and love. The "all perfect" number was ten, which apparently held the universe together.

One could multiply these examples, but the general idea is obvious: to the Pythagoreans numbers were much more than numbers - in fact, they were divine entities, having an existence of their own quite apart from human beings. Pythagoras even believed that the soul could purify itself by the contemplation of number.

How, one might ask, did Pythagoras convert people to such beliefs? One answer lies in the man himself, for Pythagoras cultivated the image of being more than a man, of being somehow akin to the divine. He is said to have possessed a golden thigh as a symbol of his more than human status; he claimed to see things that others could not (his use of opium might be relevant here!), and to hear the wonderful "music of the cosmos". He performed miracles, predicted the

future, appeared in two places at the same time, and talked to animals. He was, in brief, a charismatic "guru" who attracted around 2600 followers in Italy.

Yet we should not forget many of the less peculiar aspects of his work, such as his reverence for all living things, his avoidance of extreme passion, his advocacy of moral reforms, his desire to create civic harmony, and his respect for elders. He believed that rulers should be good people, that men were all equal (Pythagoras was clearly anti-slavery, and even allowed women to join his society), and that one should love his enemies. He made many contributions to the theory of music and to mathematics, even if his approach seemed to be more mystical than "scientific" in the modern sense. In the end, Pythagoras has to be viewed as an odd, but gifted thinker, and many of his ideas lived on in Plato and were still popular in imperial Rome. Only the advent of Christianity dimmed the light ignited by his unique mind.