
Pythagoras: His Life, Teaching, and Influence by Christoph Riedweg.
Translated from the German by Steven Rendall in Collaboration with
Christoph Riedweg and Andreas Schatzmann

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This book is a translation of *Pythagoras. Leben, Lehre, Nachwirkung. Eine Einführung* [Munich: C. H. Beck, 2002]. It is furnished with a rich and adequate bibliography, and a general index. However, it is not graced with the map which is on page 182 of the German original, and it also lacks the representations of Pythagoras on pages 81 and 83. These representations include a bronze coin from Samos from the second century BC, a bronze bust from the Villa dei Papi in Herculaneum, and a devotional relief from Sparta from the fourth century BC. This latter is particularly interesting and raises the question of the nature of the interest in Pythagoras in Sparta.

The general aim of the book is to present us with reliable information about Pythagoras' life and, more importantly, about the influence of his teachings on posterity, both ancient and early modern. The book divides into four chapters. The first describes the ancient narratives about Pythagoras. As one would expect, these narratives show remarkable differences and are sometimes contradictory. We find reports on Pythagoras as the coach of Milon of Croton, the wrestler who ate a lot of meat, and on Pythagoras' advocating vegetarianism. Vegetarianism also created the problem of whether to participate in the religious feasts of the *polis* involving sacrifices. On one account, in sacrificing to Zeus in a cave, Pythagoras wore black wool—which contravenes the Orphic-Pythagorean taboo on burying the dead in woolen clothing. Moreover, some of the reports may not have been derived from a direct knowledge of the sources concerning Pythagoras himself. A good example is Ovid, whose account in the *Metamorphoses* is heavily shaped by Empedocles [see Hardie 1995, which is not in Riedweg's bibliography].

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In the second chapter, Riedweg attempts to recover the historical figure of Pythagoras. He distances himself from two extreme positions. The one is held by Walter Burkert, who treats Pythagoras as a purely religious thinker and argues that the views concerning scientific issues were falsely attributed to him. The other is held by Leonid Zhmud, who is very much tempted to deprive Pythagoras of all the ritualistic elements. On Riedweg's view, nothing rules out the possibility that Pythagoras possessed both an extraordinary charisma, manifested in religious practices, and a scientific authority due to his own activity in certain sciences. For Riedweg, even if the sources talk about Pythagoreans and not about Pythagoras, we can still trace those scientific doctrines back to Pythagoras or his innermost circle. Perhaps, this is the context for interpreting Pythagoras' famous statement he is not a wise man (σοφός) but a lover of wisdom (φιλόσοφος). Riedweg offers a new investigation into the original meaning of the term. He comes to the conclusion [97] that it was not modesty that caused Pythagoras to describe himself as φιλόσοφος: the decisive consideration may have been the need to distinguish his superior insight from the many other skills—skill being the original meaning of 'σοφός'. The question he confronted is this: 'In what art (τέχνη) are you skilled (σοφός)?'—to which he answered that he was not σοφός in any τέχνη, but rather a φίλος-σοφος. That may also have been accompanied by the effort to distinguish himself from earlier sages. In any case, the term 'φιλόσοφος' does not thus denote something less important than does the term 'σοφός', but rather may signify something of greater importance. Examination of the relevant testimony [Cicero, *Tusc. disp.* 5.8 = Wehrli 1953, fr. 88] also shows that the context of the statement is religious as well in that the text may refer us to the Pan-Hellenic festivals in Olympia [92].

Riedweg's reconstruction of Pythagorean cosmology is based on Plato's *Philebus*. Plato claims to derive the knowledge of the fundamental distinction between 'unlimited' and 'limited' from ancient sources [*Phil.* 16c, 23c]. Riedweg takes this as a reference to the Pythagoreans, as have some others, although this interpretation has been severely criticized by Dorothea Frede [1997, 130–131]. As Riedweg sees it, Philolaos had a view similar to Plato's, though Philolaos was talking about 'limiters' (περσίνοντα) and 'unlimited things' (ἄπειρα). For Philolaos, the cosmos depends on harmony that fits the two elements together and determines its structure; and the origin of the

world is the central fire which may be equated with the ‘one’ (ἓν) or ‘unity’ (μονάς) [85]. The problem with this picture is twofold. First, there is a difference between Plato’s ‘limit’ (πέρας) and Philolaus’ ‘limiters’ in so far as the latter are active, whereas Plato introduces the intellect to establish an active force in the universe. Furthermore, there is a difficulty in accounting for the pairs of opposites on this basis. In *Meta.* 986a21–26, Aristotle lists ten pairs of opposites, which he calls principles. He attributes the theory to certain Pythagoreans. He does not say that they originate from one another; they are principles and as such they do not depend on one another. If this is the case, then we have to think of a fundamentally dualistic structure in which the positive elements are in no sense responsible for the existence of the negative ones. The right does not generate left, neither does the limit create the unlimited. If Philolaus’ central fire has any role in cosmogony, it may be in the arrangements of the physical elements. But, on the theory based on the pairs of opposites, the One does not generate multiplicity. In short, the theory which Aristotle recounts does not show the sign of a Platonizing transformation of the Pythagorean doctrine that made the One the origin of all that is.

In the third chapter, we find a thorough discussion of the Pythagorean societies. The author emphasizes the secrecy that characterized these societies. Such secrecy led to deviations from social norms. This, and a certain presumption of superiority, apparently aggravated the tensions with the non-Pythagoreans in the *polis*. The ancient sources diverge as to how many revolts against the Pythagoreans and their rule actually took place, and where. Aristoxenus writes about two, both in Croton. Other sources mention anti-Pythagorean attacks throughout Magna Grecia. As a result of these revolts, the Pythagorean communities lost many of their distinguished members and had to withdraw from political activity. That may not mean that they stopped doing scientific research, and in fact it is in this period that the μαθηματικοί separated from those who took political roles. Riedweg also offers a short and useful prosopography of the most important members.

The fourth chapter is devoted to the influence of Pythagoras and his pupils. While discussing the Presocratics, particularly Xenophanes and Heraclitus, Reidweg includes Parmenides as well, which may be too generous. To the best of my knowledge, we do not have any clear evidence for the thesis that Parmenides was indebted to

Pythagoras in the crucial points of his philosophy. There is nothing in Parmenides' mythical account that could not be derived from Orphic sources equally well; and doctrinal similarities, in any case, do not always amount to direct influence. For instance, the distinction between truth and appearance is very common in that age. If it originated in Pythagorean doctrines, then I am sure one could say that Sophocles was also under the influence of Pythagoras. On the other hand, Pythagoras' influence on Plato and his Academy is undeniable. The most outstanding result is the *Timaeus*. But the theory of principles in the 'unwritten doctrines' is remarkably different, even if Aristotle pointed out some similarities.

Riedweg rightly stresses [119] that the differences between Plato and the Pythagoreans became blurred with Theophrastus, who in his *Physical Opinions* treated the two philosophies as almost overlapping. Of the numerous Neopythagorean writings, Riedweg discusses at length the *Golden Verses* and the role of Nigidius Figulus (ca 100–45 BC), the naturalist and grammarian, in reinvigorating Pythagorean teachings—Iamblichus is examined in this context but Porphyry is not, though he was mentioned earlier in a different context. Riedweg also discusses early modern authors such as Reuchlin, who was the Christian Kabbalist, Copernicus, and Kepler, who was particularly influenced by such ideas as the harmony of the world and the music of the spheres. The last paragraph of the chapter mentions Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and modern authors such as Dannie Abse. Riedweg appends a chronological table of the main stages and persons of the Pythagorean movement, and of those who were influenced by it [135–140]. The only item I missed here is the *De natura mundi et animae* attributed to Timaeus of Locri (although it is most certainly a forgery). The date of its composition is not known but the work was included in the Platonic corpus, which ensured its survival.

As is made clear by the German title, the book is an introduction; and as such it is aimed at a general audience. This may explain some of the features of the presentation that may seem distinctly idiosyncratic. For instance, Riedweg asks whether Pythagoras can be called a guru [60ff., 73], or whether his circle can be considered a sect in the modern sense of 'an exclusive group that markedly stood out in various respects from the surrounding society' [99]. The first of these questions seems quite out of place. The description of the

charismatic leader with which Riedweg operates is that his followers attribute to him special, extraordinary abilities, whilst ‘outsiders usually reject him more or less brusquely’ [60]. No one could remain indifferent toward him. But do we know anything about the reaction of Parmenides? Is there any allusion in his work to the person of Pythagoras? If there is not, can it be the sign of Parmenides’ indifference? The problem is that there is no way to show that some of Pythagoras’ contemporaries neglected him, except by arguing from their silence. As for the question whether the Pythagoreans can be considered a sect, we are in an even more delicate situation. If we stick to the definition of sect quoted above, then we have to apply it to all sort of social groups (from the metics to Plato’s Academy and the Lyceum), since they in some way or another distinguished themselves, or were distinguished by others, from the surrounding society. To put it otherwise, the definition is all too general to reveal the specific nature of the Pythagorean societies.

Still, the author does offer meticulous analyses of the ancient reports on the social structure of the early Pythagorean circles. His sociological analysis centers around six features [99–104].

- The sect is a minority group having a somewhat strained relation to the majority.
- It recognizes a charismatic leader.
- It has a clearly recognizable form of organization.
- It is characterized by a high degree of spiritual integration.
- It regulates the life of the members in a way that deviates from the way of life that the majority follows.
- The members may also see themselves as an elite in society.

The only problem with this approach is that the twofold organization of the Pythagorean societies (*μαθηματικοί* and *ἀκουσματικοί*) makes the contrast with the rest of the society less sharp. It seems as if there was a more smooth transition between the Pythagorean circles and the rest of the society than the modern characteristics of a sect may suggest. There is an interesting suggestion on page 85 that in a certain sense some of the Pythagoreans may be considered forerunners of modern structuralism, ‘which is primarily concerned with hierarchical chains of binary oppositions in texts and other objects of analysis’. One might raise doubts about the extent to which these suggestions are justified. At first glance, at least, the role of

binary divisions in Pythagorean philosophy seems to differ from the one we may find in modern approaches.

I have found only a few slips, the most serious being the date of Alexander of Aphrodisias [81]. He flourished around 200 AD, not 200 BC (the German original says rightly ‘200 n. Chr.’). Likewise on page 123, it is said that the date of composition of the Pythagorean *Golden Verses* is somewhere between the second half of the fourth century BC (Thom) and fourth century BC (Nauck): Nauck, however, suggested the fourth century AD, as the German original says (‘n. Chr.’) on page 161. The author also seems to follow Sir David Ross’ translation of *διακόσμησις* in Aristotle’s *Meta.* 986a5–6 by ‘arrangement of the heavens’, which is not correct to my mind. The text is not about the generation of the uttermost sphere, rather it deals with the construction of the whole cosmos.

The translation is reliable; it follows the German original closely. On occasions, one might say, it follows it too closely by mirroring the grammatical structure of the original, which is quite unnecessary and sometimes results in garbled sentences. Sometimes, it takes considerable effort to find the structure of the sentence. But in sum, these considerations apart, Riedweg has written a good introductory work on the subject.

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