ARISTOTLE ON PYTHAGORAS: PORTRAIT OF THE GREEK BHAGAVAN

From Aristotle comes two notices on the soul in Pythagorean teaching. The first of these, from the *De Anima* (A2.404a16) says that there were some who identified soul with the motes in the air (ἐν τῷ ἀέρι ξύσματα), and others, with what moved them (τὸ ταῦτα κινοῦν); the second of these notices, which comes in his *Metaphysics* (A5.985b26) says that the Pythagoreans took such and such a modification of number (τῶν ἀριθμῶν πάθος) to be 'soul' and 'reason', just as they took other modifications of number to be 'justice', 'opportunity' and so on.

The conception of soul as a modification of number must belong with the Pythagorean cosmological scheme, in which the whole heaven was conceived as a musical scale and the *eidos* of all things numerically expressible. The pseudo-Aristotelian *Magna Moralia* (A1.1182a11) states that Pythagoras himself was responsible for referring the virtues to numbers; and it is not unlikely that the conception of the soul too as a number goes back to him. As the macrocosm, the whole heavens, was thought to be a harmonic scale and a number, so the microcosm, the human being, would have been comprehended in terms of a harmony and a number. What it was that expressed this harmony as soul may not have been elucidated by the early Pythagoreans – or if they did, there is no knowing what it was. There seems to have existed a different view known to Aristotle, namely, that the soul *had* a harmony. As he says, "The majority of the wise say the soul is a harmony, but others of them say it has a harmony".[1] But the identification of the soul (ψυχή) with intelligence (νοῦς) at this point in Aristotle is rather dubious, and if it is not another instance of his misrepresenting Presocratic thought, indicates strongly that it is considerably later than the late sixth, early fifth centuries B.C. Perhaps it may have been a well-intentioned attempt on his part to salve the transmigrant, that equivalent of Empedocles' *daimon*, from perishing with the body, if it could not be shown to be anything more than an expression of a favourable relationship of the bodily elements, which would then cease to be with the being's demise.

Aristotle had known the notion of soul as a harmony of the opposites of the body as one that was convincing to many (πιθανὴ πολλοῖς).[2] Plato likewise speaks of it as one that most people believed.[3] But Plato seems to have

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1 *Pol.8.*1340b18: διὸ πολλοί φασι τῶν σοφῶν οἱ μὲν ἁρμονίαν εἶναι τὴν ψυχὴν, οἱ δἔχειν ἁρμονίαν.

2 *De An.* A4.407b27

3 *Phaedo* 92c-d. See G.C.Fields *Plato and his Contemporaries* London (1930) p. 179 and the whole of ch. xii. W.L.Lorrimer 'Plato Phaedo 92C-D' *Cl.Rev.* vol. LIII p. 165 takes this to be "wildly untrue" and emends text. But see J.Tate 'Plato Phaedo 92c-d' *Cl.Rev.* vol. LIII p. 2

known it advocated in two distinct forms; firstly, as a materialist doctrine "broadcast among practically all mankind", which believes that the soul begins with the organic union of the bodily opposites and ends with their disunion or disruption,[4] and secondly, the conception found in the *Phaedo*, in which soul, similarly conceived, is yet thought to be immortal.

In other words, the selfsame notion of soul was held by people with diametrically opposite views on the question of immortality. Who represented the former group we do not know; perhaps they were not of any particular school of thought as such, but individuals who had heard the theory and realized its obvious implications. The latter group, however, would at least have included Philolaus, Echecrates and Simmias, who as a young man visited Socrates in jail on the last day of his life and heard him speak on the immortality of the soul; and for that reason we may take as peculiarly Pythagorean.

It would appear then that the *psyche-harmonia* doctrine of the *Phaedo* was held by the Pythagoreans of Thebes, probably developing in the teachings of Philolaus, and (as would have been hoped) without prejudice to the original religious belief of the school in the immortality of the soul. That these later Pythagoreans never faced up to the contradiction that arose as a result of such a conception of soul is to be inferred from the *Phaedo*. That the notion of the soul as a harmony in this form would not be earlier than the school of Thebes discloses itself from the fact that there is no evidence of such before that time, together with the considerations that (i) the *Phaedo* seems to pin it on Philolaus (who seemed even ignorant of the Pythagorean contention against suicide), and (ii) it goes beyond Alcmaeon in making soul, not health, the harmony of the bodily opposites – and indeed thus beyond Empedocles as well in making what that man took to be soul (*daimon*) and not merely consciousness (arising from the blood round the heart) the manifestation of a harmony in the body; (iii) it also presumes a development of the theory of the 'mixture' (κρᾶσις) of opposites in the Sicilian school of medicine up to the point where, not health but life (ζωή) undistinguished from soul (ψυχή), was thought of as the product of a mixture of the opposites. (The transition in metaphor from that of medicine to that of music, i.e. from *krasis* to *harmonia*, with tension and attunement replacing proportion and blend must of course be Pythagorean). Indeed it would be surprising if such a notion of soul was maintained by the early Pythagorean school when the eschatological teachings were a most serious concern and belief in reincarnation of an immortal soul the central tenet of these.[5]

– 3. He argues that this view was held by many and that there is no evidence that it was specially Pythagorean.

4 *Laws* 889 b-c. All creatures are 'harmonies' of hot and cold etc. when these combine in a fitting manner, and this creation is by a 'blend of opposites'.

5 Macrobius *Som.Scip* i. 14.19 gives Pythagoras and Philolaus both as taking soul to be a 'harmony' and makes no distinction between their

The notions of soul as the motes in the air or what caused them to move, given by Aristotle,[6] are themselves also quite fascinating. E.R.Dodds, referring to the former, writes, "Another view of the persistent 'occult' self, attributed by Aristotle to 'some Pythagoreans', represented it as a tiny particle (ξύσμα), a notion which has plenty of primitive parallels."[7] J.E.Raven, on the other hand, thinks the notion belongs to the "unwittingly corporealist generation which thought that units were extended in space."[8] Against Dodds however it may be shown that Aristotle's words imply that soul was not a single mote but rather a cluster of them, not a ξύσμα but ξύσματα. Besides this, it is hardly likely that the Pythagoreans would at any time have been so naive as to have taken the motes themselves to be constituents of the soul. If indeed they did, it would have been through the influence of Pythagorean science upon Pythagorean religion, and after Zeno, perhaps even post-Anaxagorean, and arising from a conception of soul as composed of fine soul-atoms rather than "units extended in space".

But the key to the interpretation must lie in the reason given by Aristotle as underlying the conception, viz. the continuous motion of these motes (δίοτι συνεχῶς φαίνεται κινούμενα).[9] One possibility is that in the moving motes we have only a simile which describes the subtlety of soul-matter and its capacity for self-motivation and that this has been misapprehended by someone who failed to realize it was after all only a simile. But what is more probable is to be found in the alternative given by Aristotle, namely that souls are responsible for the disturbance of these motes in the air, souls themselves being something other than these motes. This would suggest that souls were invisible, even if corporeal, entities, and that the disturbance for no apparent reason (he says, "even when there was a total absence of wind" (κἂν ᾖ νηνεμία παντελής) was the result of the passage through the air of such invisible souls.[10]

This may well have been a crude Pythagorean attempt to substantiate the folk belief adopted by them that the air was full of disincarnate souls biding the time to invest new bodies. It appears that Alexander knew of such a belief

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conceptions of it. Apparently he is reading back to Pythagoras what he finds traceable to Philolaus and his contemporaries in the *Phaedo*.

6 *De An.* A2.404a17

The Greeks and the Irrational, Berkeley, California (1951) p. 174, n. 111.

8 *Pythagoreans and Eleatics*, Cambridge (1948) p. 261 – 262.

9 *De An.* A2.40.4a20-21

10 *De An. loc. cit.*

among the Pythagoreans that the souls wandered about in the air in the likeness of the body; that the whole air was full of them; that they are called *daimones* and *heroes* and that they are responsible for the signs of illness and health, not only in men but even in sheep and other cattle.[11] In his *De Anima* (A5.410b28) Aristotle mentions a teaching which he says occurs in the "so-called Orphic writings" that "the soul, being borne by the winds, enters (the body) from the whole as we breathe" (τὴν ψυχὴν ἐκ τοῦ ὅλου εἰσιέναι ἀναπνεόντων, φερομένην ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνέμων). These cannot be the exact words in which this idea was couched; τὸ ὅλον certainly looks a sophistication of Aristotle or his source for some expression meaning 'the world outside', or simply 'from without'. The idea of souls occupying the air and investing the bodies of the new-born takes us back to the *Tritopatores* (third forefathers) of Greek folk-religion, the souls of dead ancestors, popularly considered wind-spirits or sometimes even called 'winds' (ἀνεμοί) themselves, waiting to be reborn into the tribe in the birth of its new members. Though Aristotle's statement lends itself to the interpretation that the soul's entrance into the body was coextensive with our continuous breathing, so that more and more soul entered with every breath, or again that soul entered with every inhalation and exited with every exhalation - both ridiculous constructions – the implication was obviously that the new-born drew in the soul with its first breath.

Reference to the movement of the motes in the air even when the day was altogether windless, recalls Socrates' jibe apropos survival made in the presence of Simmas and Cebes in the *Phaedo* (77d) that if the soul was constituted of material particles, one should take care not to die on a windy day, lest the soul be dispersed helter skelter and cease to be.

Aristotle (*De Anima* A3.407b20) says he cannot conceive how, as he puts it, "a chance soul can occupy a chance body", as the Pythagoreans believed. This is proof enough that he was aware that the Pythagoreans believed in such a happening, i.e. transmigration. The earliest piece of evidence on Pythagoras, Xenophanes fr. 7, tells of how the sage recognized the rebirth of the soul of a friend of his (ἢ φίλου ἀνέρος .... ψυχή) as a dog; later accounts drag a peacock into the incarnations of Pythagoras himself – which must have inspired Lucian to satirize it as a barnyard cock, and following Lucian, caused Malvolio's apprehension concerning the soul of his grandam in Shakespeare.[12]

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11 apud Diog. Laert. viii. 24 – 32, perhaps 33.

12 Ennius fr. 11 (15) Skutch; see O.Skutch 'Notes on Metempsychosis' in *Studia Enneana* London (1968) p. 151; reprint from *Cl. Phil.* vol. LIV (1959) p. 114. See also Ps. Acro. Hor. c 1.28.10 and Perseus *Sat.* vi. 9.11. See also Lucian *The Dream or The Cock* and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* iv. II. 52 – 63. For a discussion see my 'The Pythagorean Background to Pythagoras' Opinion' in Shakespeare' *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*, vol. XV nos 1 & 2 (1992) p. 83 – 97.

As for Aristotle's implied criticism, it goes to show the kind of thing the religious teaching of the old school had begun to face during the past century or so, as also its concern with the nature of the soul as being of great relevance to what befell it. But once again, the transmigrant soul about which the Pythagoreans were talking may not have been the same as that which Aristotle understood, i.e. something co-extensive with one or more of the psychological faculties.

This, together with a single other reference, which is of thunder frightening the dead in Hades,[13] are the only allusions to anything like Pythagorean religious teaching in Aristotle's extant works. W.Rathmann[14] suspects both these notices but has little grounds for doing so or for arguing that the former does not imply a teaching that souls could invest other bodies.

Later writers drew on a work on Pythagoras attributed to Aristotle, the meagre extant fragments of which are, strangely enough, accepted without demur by Rathmann[15] - though he does so only to point out that the information is no more than legend. Too little of this work survives to make any guess as to Aristotle's source, but from the few scraps we have, it would appear that he had set about indiscriminately compiling all the information on Pythagoras and his teachings that had come his way (or perhaps set a pupil of his to do so) for the good reason that even in his time definite knowledge of Pythagoras and the teachings of the early school was meagre, and that too in danger of fading away or being overrun by more recent fiction. The fragments, published by Herman Diels from V.Rose,[16] roughly fall into three groups: anecdotes about Pythagoras himself, religious observances and teachings.

The legend of Pythagoras, beginning with Xenophanes and gathering strength with the allusion to him by Empedocles as a man of prodigious mental powers, who could, when he exerted them to the full, see "each one of existing

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13 *An. Post.* B11. 94b33.

14 *Quaestiones Pythagoreae, Orphicae, Empedocleae*, diss. Halle (1933) p. 18. But see E.Rodhe *Psyche: the Cult of Souls and Beliefs in Immortality* transl. W.B.Hillis London (1925) p. 375; D.Fimmen 'Die Entstehung der Seelenwanderungslehre des Pythagoras' *Arch. fur Rel.* vol. XVIII (1914) p. 514; see also A.Cameron *The Pythagorean Background to the Theory of Recollection*, Menasha, Wisconsin, (1938) p. 13.

15 *op.cit.* p. 16 – 19.

16 *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (henceforth *Vors.* Berlin vol. I (ed. 1961) Pythagoras 15.A.7 = p. 98 - 99.

things in ten or even twenty lifetimes of men",[17] seems to have swelled into a broad concourse of notices and anecdotes which credited him with much that had grown around other such remarkable men as Abaris, Aristeias of Proconnesus, Hermotimus, Epimenides and Pherecydes before him, and yet others after him.

Aristotle says that Pythagoras, coming after them, first took to mathematics and number, but later could not desist from the 'miracle-working' (τερατοποιία) of Pherecydes. He had also heard that Pythagoras had prescience of the presence of a corpse in a ship that was still to reach the shore; again, that he gave prior intimation of the appearance of a white bear in Caulonia. Among the many other things Aristotle wrote of Pythagoras he recorded the tradition that in Tyrrhenia he had bitten to death a deadly viper that had bitten him; that he had predicted to his followers the dissension that was to rise among them; that nobody saw him when he went to Metapontum, and that when he was crossing the Kasa with some others he had heard a louder-than-human voice cry from beneath the river, "Fare thee well, Pythagoras!", ignoring the rest. Aristotle had also heard of a story of Pythagoras' power of bilocation – it seems he had, on one and the same day and at one and the same time, been seen in both Croton and Metapontum. Again he records that once when the sage rose from his seat in the theatre, those who were still seated observed that he had a golden thigh; also that the Crotoniates addressed him as the Hyperborean Apollo. The tradition was also known to Aristotle that Pythagoras had made his disciple, Mullias of Croton, recollect that he had in a former birth been the Phrygian king Midas, son of Gordias, and that on one occasion he had stroked a wild white eagle and that it had submitted itself to his caresses.[18] All this information stands in stark contrast to the two brief references in Aristotle's extant works. One of these is that of the *Metaphysics* (A5.986a30) to the effect that Alcmaeon was a young man in the old age of Pythagoras, and his own belief that Alcmaeon's view of health as a harmony of the bodily opposites was influenced by Pythagorean teaching, not theirs by his.[19] The other is of his *Rhetorics* (B23.1398b14), and on the authority of Alcidamas, that Pythagoras was honoured by the Italiotes as a wise man.

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17 fr. 129. Empedocles does not identify Pythagoras by name, but all probability and the consensus of scholars weighs towards the personality so described as being the philosopher.

18 *Vors. loc.cit.*

19 Some suspicion exists that the detail that Alcmaeon was a young man in the old age of Pythagoras (ἐπὶ γέροντι Πυθαγόρα) is a late interpolation, though it may well be true. It is not found in ms. A(b), nor is there mention of it in Alexander; see Ross note *ad loc.* Diogenes Laertius vii. 83 says Alcmaeon learnt under Pythagoras (Πυθαγόρου διήκουσε); Iamblichus *Vit. Pyth.* 104 and 276 include him in the list of Pythagoreans; but see Simplicius *De.An.* xxxii. 33.

The dearth of reference in general to Pythagoras' scientific teachings as opposed to the religious and mystical is a fact worthy of note by those who are all too certain that Pythagoras was reputed in his day more as a philosopher than as a religious guru. Indeed Rohde had the assurance to declare that he was not a philosopher at all but a teacher of this sort.[20] But even if we fall back on the fragment of Aristotle that Pythagoras did busy himself with mathematics and number before he took to what he calls 'miracle-working', the tradition Aristotle encountered in his time seems to have preserved the same image of the man as the evidence of our earliest sources. The paucity of reference even to this kind of information in the philosophical works of Aristotle may be from Aristotle's consideration of their unreliability, if not simply their irrelevance or their relative unimportance to anything he was discussing at the time. The probability should not be ignored that his own development had taken a course opposite to that of Pythagoras, moving from an interest in religion and mysticism to philosophy and science.

Porphyry writes that Pythagoras said certain things in 'a mystical manner symbolically' (μυστικῶι τρόπωι συμβολικῶς), which for the most part Aristotle committed to writing; for instance, that he called the Bears 'the hands of Rhea', the Pleiads 'the lyre of the Muses'.[21] Diogenes Laertius, giving a number of 'verbal' (perhaps 'mystical') teachings (ἀκοῦσματα) and 'symbolic utterances' (σύμβολα), records that his source, Alexander, says Aristotle discovered them in the Pythagorean memoirs.[22] These aphorismic dicta seem to be a mixed bag of occult concepts, magical observances, taboos and quasi-rational principles and may for the most part have belonged with the older Pythagoreans, though accretions from rituals and holy rites (ἁγνεία) of other cults and religions are not impossible from that time onwards. Isocrates had mentioned Pythagoras' concern for matters of sacrifice and rites,[23] and before him, Herodotus bore witness to the existence of such rites among the Pythagoreans, as among the Orphics, Bacchics and Egyptians.[24] Observance of these may have constituted part of the Pythagorean 'way of life' of which Plato makes mention in the *Republic*.[25]

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20 'Die Quellen des Iamblichus' *Rh. Mus.* vol. XXVI (1871) p. 554 f., though he seems to partially retact in p. 556 – 557.

21 *Vit. Pyth.* 41 = *Vors.* 58.A.2 = p. 462 – 463.

22 viii. 36 = *Vors.* (58.C.3). For these teaching, see *Vors.* 58.C.1 f. = p. 462 – 466.

23 *Bus.* 28

24 ii. 81

25 600b. This is Plato's only reference to Pythagoras.

Of more direct relevance to the central Pythagorean doctrine of reincarnation would have been reference from Aristotle to the abstinence from killing and flesh-eating, which Aristotle would have known well enough and is amply evidenced in other sources. Nothing from Aristotle however bears directly on the general stricture but he seems to have been aware of particular avoidances of particular kinds of animals, which would then come from other considerations, as for instance the taboo an white cocks, kinds of fish considered sacred, mullet, blacktail, eggs and oviparous animals, sea-anemones and the like, whether for sacrifice or food.[26] He also knew of Pythagorean strictures on the eating of certain parts of animals, such as the womb and the heart, with leave for the consumption of the rest.[27] Such particular avoidances, be they of creatures or parts of creatures, bespeak magical, ritualistic, hygienic, utilitarian or simply aesthetic considerations which the Pythagoreans may have observed (as in the case of the avoidance of beans known to Aristotle as well)[28] over and above the

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26 Diogenes (viii.34) and Strabo (xv.716) refer to a total avoidance of killing all living things, the former (viii.20) of even sacrificing. Porphyry (*Vit. Pyth.* 6) citing Eudoxus, says Pythagoras bid his followers avoid murder and murderers, even (like the Buddha) butchers and huntsmen. Athenaeus (ii. 47a = fr. 27) has even Aristoxenus saying that the fare of the Pythagoreans was bread and honey – though the reason given is health. See Porph. *Vit. Pyth.* 19; Pythagoras considered all creatures to be of similar stock.

27 Diog. viii. 12 = Fr. 194 Rose. There is evidence from other sources for the avoidance of other parts of the animal anatomy from various considerations. See for instance Porph. *Vit. Pyth.* 42, 43, 45.

28 Diog. viii. 34. Aristotle gives more than one reason for this taboo. Gellius iv.11.1 couples it with the avoidance of flesh but only to deny the truth of them. See also Porph. *Vit. Pyth.* 43: Pythagoras bade people avoid beans as much as human flesh! Gellius (iv. 11.4) says Aristoxenus "a man most devoted to the study of ancient scriptures and a student of Aristotle" says beans were Pythagoras' favourite vegetable! Aristoxenus appears to be contradicting Aristotle. He contradicts himself as well when one of the things he alleges (fr. 13 W: as also Diodorus) that Pythagoras learnt from Zoroaster is this avoidance of beans! Gellius (iv. 11.2) observes that Callimachus the poet (fr. 128) said that Pythagoras forbade his followers the eating of beans – as did he himself. It is as a taboo, not a recommendation, that beans are

general stricture arising from the belief in metempsychosis, which (as for instance by Buddhists the world over today) they appear to have observed with varying degrees of sincerity. On the one extreme are those Pythagoreans whom Aristoxenos knew, who were largely of the scientific persuasion and ate every kind of meat,[29] on the other were the the *sannyasi*-like ascetic (or beggar) philosophers whom we find jibed at in Middle Comedy for their abstinence from taking life or eating flesh.[30]

Two fragments from Aristotle remain which throw significant light on some details of doctrine. One of these says that Pythagoras taught men that they were sprung from "a better seed than accorded with their mortal nature" (κρειττόνων γεγένηται σπερμάτων ἢ κατὰ τὴν φύσιν τὴν θνητήν), in other words, that they shared in the nature of beings higher than worldly creatures, i.e. the gods.[31] The implications are many but we may safely presume from the emphasis on the words 'mortal nature' (τὴν φύσιν τὴν θνητήν) that the superior nature of man certainly included immortality, i.e. of the soul, perhaps even that, as Empedocles taught, men were gods or daimons of a sort before they fell into incarnate existence and consequent mortality.[32] One recalls Heracleitus' paradoxical description of the existence of men as alternating between mortality and immortality, "living the death of those and dying the life of these".[33]

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29 Diogenes (viii. 20 = *Vors.* 14.A.6 = p. 101) says Aristoxenus said Pythagoras permitted the eating of all flesh, except of plough-oxen, and rams. See Aristox. fr. 28 W. and 29a W.) Gellius (iv.11.1) refers to it as a false opinion that Pythagoras did not eat flesh or beans. See also viii. 20 and Gellius iv. 11.6 and 7. Aristoxenus says Pythagoras ate piglets and tender calves – which information he seems to have got from Xenophilus, a Pythagorean friend of his, and from others of the older Pythagoreans.

30 See the relevant fragments collected in Diels *Vors.* 58.E. Theocritus calls them 'Pythagoristai', saying they were pale and barefooted. Schol.z.d.St. contributes that the Pythagorikoi paid full attention to their bodies, whereas they Pythagoristai (*sic*), wearing a wrap-around, lived in squalor.

31 Ael. *V.H.* iv. 17 = *Vors.* 14.B.7 = p. 99.

32 fr. 115, with 117, 118, 119, 120, 125, 126 etc.

33 fr. 62.

It would however be quite wrong to suppose that this observation implied that animals were sprung from a different and lowlier seed – that they were fundamentally different in kind and not just in elevation in the scale of life. Or, to put it in another way, that men were a special creation. It would indeed be strange if Pythagoras thought so, when he himself taught metempsychosis, with the classic demonstration of the fact through his own recognition of a dog as the rebirth of a onetime friend of his, a man. If Malvolio was certain of one thing more than any other as the signal teaching of Pythagoras, was it not the possible prospect of the soul of his grandam reincarnating in a bird? – even if it did baffle Aristotle how a chance soul could come to invest a chance body.

The second of the fragments is both interesting and illuminating when taken in the light of the first. Aristotle tells us that in the most secret teachings of the Pythagoreans was a threefold distinction of rational beings into men, gods and 'people like Pythagoras'.[34] Here men (including people like Pythagoras) are put together with the gods to form the category of 'rational beings' (λόγικα ζῶια), with the implication that all other creatures were non-rational (ἄλογα).

The term λόγικα ξῶια by which the category is defined here may be Aristotle's own; but this is no reason for thinking that the distinction of living things as 'rational' and 'non-rational', together with the further gradation of lives on a simple psychological basis into god, man, animal and plant, cannot have gone back to Pythagoras himself. If nothing else, the term *eidos* used of 'parts' of the soul in the tripartion of the soul in Plato bespeaks a Pythagorean distinction, while a similar categorization is also reflected in that other and clearly Pythagorean story which treats of life as comparable to the Olympic games, where some came to earn (the appetitive: τὸ ἐπιθυμητικόν), some to compete (the spirited: τὸ θυμοειδές) and others simply to watch (the rational or speculative: τὸ λογιστικόν).[35]

The distinction of rational creatures from the non-rational and the inclusion of men with gods in the former should not, as stated earlier, lead us to suppose that only rational creatures were "of a better seed than their mortal nature". As mentioned before, this observation about men is without prejudice to the rest of moral creatures. But at the same time, of creatures of mortal nature (φύσις θνητή) man alone has found his way up from the class of non-rational

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[34] Iambl. *Vit.Pyth.* 31 = *Vors.* 14. A. 7, p. 99 = fr. 192 Rose. ἱστορεῖ δὲ καὶ Ἀριστοτέλης ἐν τοῖς Περὶ τῆς Πυθαγορικῆς φιλοσοφίας διαίρεσίν τινα τοιάνδε ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνδρῶν ἐν τοῖς πάνυ ἀπορρήτοις διαφυλάττεσθαι. τοῦ λογικοῦ ζώιου τὸ μέν ἐστι θεός, τὸ δὲ ἄνθρωπος, τὸ δὲ οἷον Πυθαγόρας.

[35] See Plato *Rep.* 436a f.

creatures (ἄλογα) to the class of rational creatures (λόγικα ξῶια), to the highest rung of which belong the gods. If this is declared of man, it is declared of him since man alone is capable of apprehending the fact and building upon it and thus winning ultimate liberation from the 'wheel of births' (κύκλος τῆς γενέσεως)[36] and achieving the immortality and the bliss which make him godlike. Which is why the achievement of a human existence is rated as something difficult and rare (*durlabha*) in Indian estimate and an opportunity for liberation from rebirth which is not to be lost.

Most interesting in this most secret teaching of the Pythagoreans – and perhaps it was this that reserved it in secrecy among them – is the appearance in it of a category of 'rational beings' coming between men and gods and not otherwise recognized in the overt division – beings who, while not being gods, were still above ordinary human beings. This distinction, not incomparable to that of 'divine men' (θειοὶ ἄνερες), be they hailed in their respective religions as *arahats*, *bhagavans* or saints, is surely one that would not have been accommodated in any exoteric psychological categorization that was even prepared to admit, even if hypothetically, the gods. The reason for this utmost secrecy is therefore quite understandably to preserve it from the cynicism and ridicule of detractors, of whom the Pythagoreans were never short down the ages.

In place of a definition or designation for this new class of rational beings, which the Pythagoreans slip in between men and gods, Aristotle had found them doing no more than pointing to the instance of Pythagoras and leaving the hearer to surmise what sort of persons they would be, and what it was about them that demonstrated them to be above the rest of mankind so as to make them thus distinctive. But with one whose personality is so obscured in all the numerous anecdotes and notices that had covered him from the earliest times like the shells, sea-weeds and rocks that clung to the sea-god, Glaucus, only a broad idea can be had what sort that could be.

To arrive at any such one needs to put together the popular reputation of Pythagoras, supplementing it with much that Empedocles, who spoke of him with such admiration,[37] claimed for himself – a mix between a *sadhu* and *guru* devoted to some god or other (usually the Hyperborean Apollo), who taught in an *ashram* of sorts or, like the Master himself,[38] went about preaching and

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36 Proclus. *Tim.* 1.32

37 fr. 129. Re such beings, see also Empedocles' own claims – truth attends his words (fr. 114); he has the power of prophesy and healing (fr. 112); he can perform miracles such as stay the winds, control the rain and summon spirits of the dead from Hades. Like Pythagoras he makes out he is able to recollect his former births (fr. 117).

38 Inferable for Samos from Herod. iv. 95, who refers to it as an ἀνδρεῶν, and for Croton from the nature of Pythagoras school there.

performing *pujas* for the benefit of individuals or cities, like Pherecydes and Epimenides, and was accredited with superhuman psychic powers, involving bilocation, forevision, birth-recollection and birth-recognition, healing, purification etc., not infrequently displaying physical signs of his uniqueness or carrying symbols of his calling and leading an ascetic life which included abstention from killing and flesh-foods and claiming to be the reincarnation of one or more remarkable personalities of the past or to be the *avatar* of some god.

There is a further implication, and one of which we have more definite evidence, in this category which Aristotle found broadly described as 'beings like Pythagoras'. This is the claim that such beings were then in their last incarnate existence, non-returners to the world of men. They were reputed to be on the threshold of liberation, paralleled in the Greek doctrine used by Pindar (and in deference to his own particular audience) to the ultimate incarnation as "noble kings and men outstanding in strength and wisdom"[39] and in Empedocles to "seers, poets, physicians and leaders of men",[40] but now among the Pythagoreans, to beings more distinctly religious and spiritual in their achievement, as was the Master himself. But over and above this, it appears that that remarkable being had attained the state of liberation in this very life itself and, like a Buddha who had gained enlightenment, was living out his residual mortal life. It is of such beings that the Pythagoreans constituted their class of 'beings like Pythagoras', not just those who were at the pinacle of mortal life as sages, kings, poets or whatever. Thus, Empedocles, who could have adopted such a notion from the Pythagoreans no less (whatever be the truth of his own claim to the achievement), declares himself to walk among men already "an immortal god, a mortal no longer",

ἐγὼ δ´ ὑμῖν θεὸς ἄμβροτος, οὐκέτι θνητός
πωλεῦμαι μετὰ πᾶσι τετιμένος, ὥοπερ ἔσικα[41]

while his own followers had got to calling Pythagoras the Hyperborean Apollo.

If it is contended that this important piece of evidence as to the possibility of a man attaining liberation in this very life comes to us from Empedocles and not the Pythagoreans, there is still a piece of evidence, and a very early one at that, which should clinch this condition with early Pythagoreanism as well. I refer to a four-line fragment coming from the tragic poet, Ion of Chios (B.C. 490 – c 421), which not only witnesses such a doctrine, but in doing so, associates Pythagoras with that man Pherecydes who was generally reputed to be his *guru* and in whose sort of miracle-working Aristotle

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39 fr. 127 Bowra = 133 Bergk – quoted by Socrates in Plato *Meno* 81 b-c.

40 fr. 146.

41 fr. 112.

himself (even if deprecatingly) say that Pythagoras had got himself involved.[42] For what Ion of Chios says of this Pherecydes is:

ὣς ὁ μὲν ἡνορέηι τε κεκασμένος ἠδὲ καὶ αἰδοῖ
καὶ φθίμενος ψυχῆ τερπνον ἔχει βίοτον,
εἴπερ Πυθαγόρας ἐτύμως ὁ σοφὸς περὶ πάντων
ἀνθρώπων γνώμας εἶδε καὶ ἐξέμαθεν.

So did he excel in his humanity and dignity
That, now that he is dead, he has for his soul an existence of bliss,
If Pythagoras the truly wise
Learnt and understood the natures of all men.

Rathmann,[43] arguing that the qualities of ἡνορέη and αἰδώς more properly applied to a hero (*vir fortis*) than to as religious man (*theologus*), concluded that the first two verses may have been grafted to the second pair in later times upon the belief that Pherecydes was Pythagoras' teacher. This seems rather far-fetched. Apart from the easy extension of these qualities to the moral and spiritual fields – together they encompass most of the virtues recognized by the Greeks – there is no reason to doubt that the association of Pythagoras with Pherecydes did not reach back to Ion himself.

Opinion has also been expressed that Pythagoras was here responsible only for the doctrine concerning souls in general while it was Ion who brought the specific case of Pherecydes under it, basing it upon the reputation of the sage and of his having tutored Pythagoras. Or was Ion reporting Pythagoras as regards Pherecydes as well? Again, there are some who would read the 'truly' (ἐτυμῶς) in respect of Pythagoras' wisdom as making the assertion by Ion conditional upon a doubt as to that wisdom of Pythagoras. The assertion is made – whether by Pythagoras himself or Ion – upon Pythagoras' learning the γνῶμας of all men. Again, one could look at this observation in the light of the charge of Heracleitus that Pythagoras was a man who had no intelligence (νοῦς) but was only a polymath who had, practicing inquiry (ἱστορίη) beyond all other men and making a selection from what he had thus acquired,

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42 Diog.; 118; Diod. x.3.4. According to Aristoxenus Pherecydes was wasting away with *pheiriasis* (*pediculosis*, louse-disease) on the island of Delos; Pythagoras journeyed thither, tended him as a son would a father, and when he did not recover due to his age and the virulence of the affliction, he buried him there and returned. Those who accept he was Pythagoras' teacher date him to mid 6th century B.C.; others place him nearly a century earlier. He was credited with prophesying a ship-wreak, an earthquake, the capture of a city. According to Cicero (*Tusc.* 1.16.38) he was the first to say that the souls of men were immortal; Suidas (Diog. xi.46) says he was the first to propound the doctrine of metempsychosis.

43 *op.cit.* p. 44 f.

contrived a 'wisdom' of his own, which was no more than a load of learning, a worthless acquisition.[44]

But such a construction put on the wisdom of Pythagoras would only have succeeded in debasing the expectation with regard to Pherecydes, if Ion had indeed any intention of glorifying the sage. As I see it, there is no need here to bother how Pythagoras built up his wisdom, or even whether it was he or Ion (basing himself on Pythagoras) who made the assertion about Pherecydes, so long as what we have here can be presumed to be a Pythagorean doctrine that is being applied to Pherecydes. As regards the πάντων ἀνθρώπων γνώμας which Pythagoras learnt and understood, my own interpretation is that it was not their 'opinions' but rather their 'minds' or 'mental dispositions'. This would not only make better sense of the verses but rid the observation of any nuances of doubt or sarcasm that would otherwise creep into it. It should be remembered that this same Ion of Chios, in his *Triagmoi*, far from accusing Pythagoras of lifting other people's knowledge to build a wisdom of his own, charges him of the very opposite thing – of trying to father some of his own poems on some other person! And interestingly enough, this other person happens to be none other than Orpheus, the teachings of whose sect are often confounded with his own.[45]

As for the evidence of this important fragment, it bears out the Pythagorean belief in an ultimate state of bliss (τερπνὸν βίοτον) which is enjoyed, not by the individual, body and soul, but by the soul alone (ψυχῇ) when once he has died (φθίμενος).[46] Next, that it is the attainment of a man reputed in Greece for practices which Aristotle knew Pythagoras himself took up (the τερατοποιία) and whom – even if we disregard the evidence that he was Pythagoras' teacher and one whom he treated with great respect and regard - tradition related to Pythagoras from the similarity that was seen between their respective practices and beliefs.[47]

If then some idea is to be gained from the claims of Empedocles of the type of beings that the Pythagoreans would have categorized as "beings like Pythagoras" whose ultimate life on earth was to be followed by immortality and bliss for the soul, it appears Pythagoras himself had conceded such to Pherecydes, while to his own followers he himself remained the classic example

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44 Heracleitus fr. 40 and 129.

45 Diog. viii.8 and Clem. *Strom.* 1.131 = *Vors.* 36.A.2

46 R.C.Bluck (*Plato's Meno* Cambridge (1961) p. 67) cannot be right in supposing that the joyful existence awaiting Pherecydes was to be in a new incarnation.

47 At any rate the tradition seems to be quite old, if it goes back to Ion on the similarity of the two in respect of practices and beliefs; see n. 33 above.

of such a non-returner. Men such as these two had walked the earth as beings of special attainment, who could no longer be deemed to be 'men' and yet were not gods either, but beings who, upon the event of death would then assume immortality and eternal bliss for their souls, not incomparable with the immortal gods. With death their souls escape into the air, which is full of them, moving about like motes on a windless day or disturbing them in their passage through it, as Aristotle had heard. But these were not, as *gandhabbas,* souls biding their reincarnation. Instead, liberated and in a disincarnate state, they enjoyed a life of ecstatic bliss in some other plain, not unlike the very gods. Thus the Golden Verses of the Pythagoreans say,[44] recalling the claim of Empedocles:

> ἦν δ' ἀπολείψας σῶμα ἐς αἰθερ' ἐλευθερόν ἐλθῆς,
> ἐσσεαι ἀθάνατος θεὸς ἄμβροτος οὐκετι θνητός,
>
> *When once you leave the body and pass into the air of freedom,*
> *You will remain deathless, an immortal god, a mortal no longer.*

Whence the call of the Master for his followers to remember that, though plunged in incarnate existence, they were sprung from "a better seed than their mortal nature."

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44 vs. 70. I am aware that the Golden Verses are of later date; but this by itself does not preclude the tenet being old, especially when it is seen to accord with the other evidence and is unlikely to have been original with Empedocles.