

# Pythagoras—The First Animal Rights Philosopher

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Pythagoras was born on the Aegean island of Samos in the 60th Olympiad (f. c. 530 B. C.). His father Mnesarchus was a merchant, probably from Tyre. His mother Parthenis, a Samos native, had changed her name to Pythias on the advice of the Delphic oracle prior to Pythagoras' birth. Because Samos was only a few kilometers from Asia Minor, Pythagoras traveled there frequently during his education. He also visited the central island of Delos, the sacred birthplace of Apollo.

As a young man from a prosperous family, Pythagoras was educated by the mystic Pherekydes and the founders of the Ionian school, Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes of Miletus, who influenced him greatly. Like Pherekydes and the Ionians, Pythagoras mixed myth and logic, theology and the search for wisdom. Yet Pythagoras also demanded of wisdom that it should be a rule of life. With his amazing breadth of outlook, he constructed a system combining thought and conduct, to provide a rational explanation of the universe, and also satisfy the religious craving for union with the divine. Unlike the other sages, Pythagoras refused to describe himself as "wise." For no one, he said, is wise

except god. Thus, he invented the word "philosopher" to describe himself: a "lover of wisdom."

In approximately 535 B.C. Pythagoras journeyed to Egypt and was initiated in the rites and mysteries of the Egyptian temples. Their secrecy and silence became a model for the secret societies Pythagoras founded in Italy. Like the Egyptian priests, Pythagoras was a strict vegetarian who dressed in linen clothes and sandals made of papyrus: they would not wear clothing or shoes made from animal skins. He thus revealed himself to be a devotee of Isis. While in Egypt Pythagoras also studied mathematics and geometry, including, in all likelihood, the "Pythagorean theorem" concerning the right-angled triangle.

Pythagoras remained in Egypt for about 10 years. Among the beliefs he studied there was that of reincarnation. There are similarities between the Egyptians' worship of Osiris and legends concerning Apollo, whose purification after slaying the Python involved servitude to Admetos, identified as Pluto, and/or yearly sojourns in Hyperborea, said to have been part of the death realm. Thus, like Osiris and the Orphic god Zagreus, identified with Dionysos, Apollo was said to have died and been reborn. However, the Egyptians did not believe in the transmigration of souls, and Pythagoras may have encountered this in Babylon.



## PHILOSOPHY

Whatever its origins, the implications of a belief in transmigration are clear. If souls of humans enter into bodies of animals, all creatures must be viewed as kin. Eating animal flesh becomes cannibalism, and killing animals becomes murder, incurring the same bloodguilt as slaying a human.

Pythagoras' name declares him to have been a servant or prophet of Pythian Apollo, and his identification with Apollo may have reinforced his beliefs concerning the killing of animals.

The appellation Pythian Apollo was derived from Apollo's slaying the serpent Typhon, said to have been the son of Gaia (the earth mother), and also identified with the monster Hera bore. The chthonian religions of Greece, Crete and Egypt also identified the Python with the mother goddess (Gaia or Chthonie) herself. In Greece, these early religions worshipping the earth goddess had been suppressed but never totally eradicated. Some statues and sculptures of Athena show a snake peering from beneath her bronze shield by her side. Near Athena's temple, the Parthenon, was a building known as the Erechtheum, the home of Athena's snake. At Delphi, Apollo's home, the woman who brought forth oracles of divine wisdom was called the Pythia. Coiled about her tripod stool was a snake known as Python. Aeschylus recorded that at this holiest shrine the Goddess was extolled as the Primeval Prophetess. Although Apollo was worshipped as an Olympian deity, many associations with his chthonic origins remained, with many similarities to the Egyptian and Cretan worship of the Serpent Goddess. Thus, in killing the Python, Apollo killed an animal who was either his half-brother (the son of Hera/Gaia) or the earth mother herself. This explains the need for purification which was absent in similar Olympian myths.

Other legends claimed that Apollo was the son of Silenos, leader of the Silenoi. They were men with the tails, legs and ears of horses. This may have further strengthened Pythagoras' belief in the kinship between animals and men, and the concept that to kill either is a terrible offense.

However, Pythagoras' prohibitions against killing or eating animals were not based on superstition, totemism or taboo. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pythagoras is portrayed as pleading with men to show compassion for the suffering of sentient beings, especially the oxen, sheep and goats who help men so willingly:

Loyal, innocent, and kind, and born to labor—  
Has he done anything that's counted wrong?  
You'd call a man crazy, a thoughtless fool  
Who hasn't earned the right to reap his barley,  
The gift of earth, or oats or corn or wheat,  
Who, as he lifts the burden of the plough  
From his companion's back, then murders him,  
Raises an axe to strike across his shoulders,  
Raw with labours of the plough and bent  
Pulling through roots and earth to sow new  
harvests.

Pythagoras expressed horror of men who inserted the dead bodies of living breathing creatures into their bodies, eating the "sad flesh of the murdered beast." He warned them, "as you eat your joints of lamb and beef...know that your feast was of good friends and neighbors." Butchers, said Pythagoras, are impervious to the pleadings of a lamb or calf despite the fact that their cries are similar to a baby's cries. Pythagoras was the first to introduce these beliefs to Greece and the Western world.

In 525 B. C., when Kambyses the Persian king invaded Egypt, Pythagoras went to Babylon, where he studied under the Chaldeans and a sage called Zaratas, an important Magos of the Zoroastrian religion. Zaratas taught Pythagoras how to purify himself from the pollutions of his previous life, how the wise can be undefiled, and the metaphysical principles concerning nature and the cosmos. Again, there are similarities to Apollo's purification at Tempe after slaying the Python. Several doxographers suggest that Pythagoras visited or had contact with China, where his doctrines parallel those of the Taoists, or India, where he may have encountered the concept of karma. Esme Wynne-Tyson points out that Pythagoras' philosophy was essentially that of the highest teaching of Hinduism and that his name may have been conferred on him by the Brahmins, referring to "Pitta Guru" or Father-Teacher.

However, it is fairly certain that after leaving Persia Pythagoras returned to Samos. He then journeyed to Sparta and Crete, and was initiated into the rites of the Cretan (chthonian) gods. Pythagoras founded a school called the Semicircle. It drew students from all over the Greek world, especially those interested in his mathematical teachings. A few years later Pythagoras left Samos for Croton, in Magna Graecia (southern Italy). Possibly he chose Croton because of the city's

high esteem for Apollo. The tripod, the god's symbol, appears on many of Croton's coins.

Wynne-Tyson notes that Italy had connections with worship of the goddess Hestia; after the fall of Troy, Aeneas brought the sacred fire of the Goddess of the Hearth to Italy. Pythagoras, unlike most philosophers of his day, rejected the view that the earth is the center of the world. He believed that the earth revolves around a fire called Hestia or Hearth. The philosophical school of Pythagoras founded at Croton was of a type never before seen in Greece, requiring adherence to rules concerning practical conduct and morality as well as the study of philosophy, mathematics and music. In addition, Pythagoras and his followers governed the community so well that, according to Diogenes Laertius, it was considered a true aristocracy, i.e., government by the best. It should be noted that the Pythagoreans were not identified with either the popular or aristocratic faction, and among Pythagoras' followers were slaves and barbarians. Pythagoras had, in fact, freed his slave Zalmoxis and made him his friend. He also numbered women among his students.

Pythagoras' egalitarian ideas were absent in most of the other sages of the day, with the exception of Socrates. His social reforms were said to have invented the tradition of criticism and discussion. They transcended the ties of kinship, according to Cornford, thereby sowing the seed of the doctrine "that all men are brothers; the sense of solidarity, set free from the old limits, can spread to include all mankind, and even beyond that to embrace all living things."

As to the teachings of Pythagoras imparted to his Croton community, these can be summed up by saying he developed a philosophy to bring the soul into harmony with the divine. Of paramount importance were his theories involving music and mathematics. Both had mystical associations with Apollo. Pythagoras' musical experiments playing the kithara led him to the understanding of numerical ratios, and the discovery of the foundation of mathematical science. Some historians have questioned the tradition that Pythagoras discovered mathematical science and the Pythagorean theorem. However, Burnet writes that it is difficult to reject the tradition, for that science was certainly in existence by the middle of the 5th century B. C., "and it must have been the work of someone. If the credit is really due to another than Pythagoras, it is strange that his name should have been forgotten."

Pythagoras was said to have been the first to call the world "kosmos," from its inherent order and linked with the concepts of *peras* (limit), orderly arrangement, structural perfection and beauty. Just as harmony between the ten cosmic opposites (light/dark, finite/infinite, etc.) resulted in Pythagoras' "music of the spheres," so was it necessary for the human soul to attain an attunement of opposites, since the soul is a fragment of the heavenly fire. Pythagoras believed that calm, soothing music cured mental disturbances and sick souls by restoring harmony. This was unique in antiquity, when health was largely connected with bodily phenomena.

Of particular importance was Pythagoras' preoccupation with how the soul could be freed from bondage to the body. This concept left its impress upon the whole body of classical Greek philosophy and, through Plato, upon all of Western thought. Pythagoras taught that the soul is immortal; it migrates into other animals; and all beings with souls should be regarded as kin. Because of its sins, the soul is imprisoned within the body ("*soma* = *sema*"). But the soul is rational and responsible for its actions, and can determine its fate. This is achieved by keeping itself pure, free from the pollutions of animal flesh and other bodily passions. The soul was purified by *theoria*, contemplation of the divine order of the world. In this way the soul eventually can rise to its proper god-like state.

These concepts were alien to the Greeks, who viewed body and psyche as interdependent. Even those who were initiated in the Elusian Mysteries and hoped for an afterlife in the Islands of the Blest believed their immortality involved a resurrection with a body, not a disembodied existence as Pythagoras envisioned. It was undoubtedly a new and astonishing thing to be told that the soul was the seat of the moral and intellectual faculties, and therefore, of far greater importance than the body.

The concept of transmigration also heralded a new moral view of the individual as opposed to that of the tribe or blood group. Previously actions could be expiated by one's family. Pythagoras' theory of transmigration enabled the individual soul to obtain justice for itself. This led to the idea of the individual as "a unit with a personal sense of sin and need for personal salvation, along with a new consciousness of the soul's dignity and value," writes Cornford.

Another innovation of Pythagoras' was vegetarianism as a form of religious purification. As noted earlier,

Pythagoras refused to differentiate between animal and human flesh and blood. He spoke of a Golden Age where people “did not defile their lips with blood.” There was no violence, and all lived in peace. In sacrificing to the gods, Pythagoras and his followers burned incense and offered plants—oak to Zeus, laurel to Apollo, the rose to Aphrodite and the vine to Dionysos. Another tradition claims Pythagoras offered up only cakes with honey, and frankincense and hymns, since animals, like humans, enjoy the privilege of having a soul.

Many miraculous tales were told about Pythagoras and his rapport with animals. Iamblichus described the miracle of the fishes as follows. When Pythagoras was going from Sybaris to Croton along the beach, he met some fishermen whose net was still in the sea. He predicted the number of fish they would catch, and the fishermen agreed to do anything he told them if he was right. When the net was brought ashore and the fish counted, it turned out Pythagoras had predicted the number exactly. His request was to let the fish go, which the fishermen did—miraculously, none of the fish had died during the time it took to count them. Pythagoras paid the men the price of the fish and resumed his journey to Croton.

As Gorman notes, “This story is typical of Pythagoras’ attitude to animals and sentient things: one should not eat them. Many other stories are told about Pythagoras’ relations with animals, all pointing out the same moral of vegetarianism.” Furthermore, he adds, Pythagoras was kind to animals because he revered life, and also thought the animals might contain the psyche of a departed friend. As all accounts of Pythagoras’ teachings agree, he believed that humans and animals were kin. Humans were not superior to the animals, just as the human form was not the image of the divine. The real man or woman was not his or her body, but the psyche, the immortal soul which returns to its divine source upon release from the body’s prison.

Pythagoras was said to have gotten most of his moral doctrines from the Delphic priestess Themistoclea. He was a servant or prophet of the Pythian, and his followers believed he was an actual epiphany of Apollo Hyperboreios. W. K. C. Guthrie wrote about Apollo that he “stands as a unique bridge between the two worlds” of the Olympian and chthonian gods. He is both sky god who is all sunlight and rational, opposing all that is mysterious and irrational, while at the same time many of his attributes are those of chthonian gods, including

Apollo’s purification rites (katharmoi), mantic ecstasy and woman-priesthood.

Above all, Apollo was the giver and interpreter of laws such as “Know thyself” and “Nothing too much.” The Delphic oracle was consulted by Greek lawmakers and private citizens for information and advice regarding such problems as how to appease an offended deity or cleanse a family from the miasma caused by murder or another crime. Apollo’s original connection with homicide explains his continued authority in this area: his essential nature is the god of purification (katharsis). Purifications from guilt and miasma, according to Guthrie, “were in the gift of Chthonian powers like Demeter [Chthonie], Pluto, Dionysos and him of Crete.” Thus, Apollo’s championship of law and order, criminal, civil and constitutional codes in religious or secular life “points not to Olympos but to the Chthonian depths.”

To communicate with men, Apollo spoke through Pythia, whose pronouncements came by way of inspired prophecy. Apollo is unique among the Olympian gods in having a woman-priest prophet, the Pythia or Sybil. Guthrie traces this woman-priesthood to Anatolia, where he and other doxographers are inclined to see Apollo’s original home. Martin Nilsson concluded that Apollo was originally from Babylon, based on the day of the month on which his festivals were held.

Thus, Guthrie notes, the teachings of Pythagoras reflect all sides of Apolline religion, and this is a tribute to his greatness. Any good Greek could see in Apollo the preacher of “Nothing too much” and “Know thyself,” but to see Apollo steadily and whole “was perhaps the unique achievement of Pythagoras.”

The Orphics also believed in transmigration and had much in common with Pythagoras and his followers. They too practiced a certain way of living, including abstention from meat, which was the foremost requirement. Both the Orphics and Pythagoreans believed in katharsis, purification of the soul, and the concept of soma = sema (the soul’s imprisonment in the body). Both Pythagoras and Orpheus charmed animals with their music, and both were missionaries of Apollo in foreign lands.

Although Orpheus was from prehistoric Thrace, the Orphic religion did not exist before the 6th century B. C. and makes its first appearance in Athens or South Italy. Some doxographers agree with Ion of Chios that Pythagoras had, in fact, composed the Orphic writings under the name of Orpheus. However, despite the

similarities, Pythagoreanism was a philosophy as well as a religion. The Orphic cosmogony is mythical, whereas Pythagoras sought a rational and mathematical explanation of the world order.

Pythagoras died at the turn of the century, shortly after an uprising in Croton dispersed his community. His ideas and beliefs lived on in various forms. Archytas (who sold Plato the famous Pythagorean book of Philolaus) was a prominent Pythagorean politician and mathematician. The philosopher Empedocles (493-433 B.C.) taught Pythagoras' doctrines regarding transmigration and vegetarianism, as did Porphyry in the third century A. D. The Stoics and Cynics adopted Pythagoras' detachment from the material world, and the vegetarian Essene Jews also incorporated some of his tenets. Plotinus tried to establish a Pythagorean community, "Platonopolis," near Rome, in the third century A. D. This failed, as did the emperor Julian's attempts at "Neopythagoreanism."

As shown above, many concepts developed by the brilliant mind of Pythagoras were seminal to Western thought, especially those ideas popularized by Plato; he followed in the footsteps of Pythagoras by combining the religion of teletai with philosophy and mathematics. The pages of Plato are permeated with Pythagoras' mystical teachings, such as Socrates' exhortations to love one's enemies and to seek knowledge and improve one's life by self-questioning. The doctrine of the tripartite soul attributed to Plato was first taught by Pythagoras in his comparison of human objectives to people attending the Olympic Games. Some came to buy and sell, others to compete; best of all are those who simply observe. Accordingly, men may be classified as lovers of gain, lovers of honor, and lovers of wisdom. And these distinctions also apply to the individual soul.

Both Democritus' Forms, referring to Atoms, and Plato's Forms, representing the ultimate realities, were based on adaptations of the Pythagorean concern with form. According to Burnet, Pythagoras' greatest contribution to philosophy was his doctrine of Limit (peras) as giving form to the Unlimited. The Melesians had reached the conception of "matter," and Pythagoras supplemented this by identifying "form," which led to understanding abstract space. Plato, echoing Pythagoras' belief in mimesis, maintained that through "participation" in the divine Forms, people became like god. After death and escape from the body's prison, the soul flies back to the world of Forms or Ideas, which it dimly

remembers. In order to achieve this, people must purify their souls by ridding them of material influences. In the Meno and Phaedo, Socrates maintains that the things we perceive with our senses remind us of things we knew when the soul was out of the body and could perceive reality directly, and he discusses Pythagoras' concept of "anamnesis," the recollection of previous incarnations. Socrates is shown teaching a young slave a version of the Pythagorean theorem to prove that the slave retained a memory of the geometrical knowledge he had acquired in the world of Forms.

Karl Popper points out that the Socrates in the Meno is decidedly egalitarian; this surely would have pleased Pythagoras, who freed his slave Zalmoxis and became his friend. This concern for and rapport with all humanity, and all living creatures, explains why Pythagoras was thought to have been touched by the divine in a way that elevated him above other sages and philosophers. According to John Mansley Robinson: "Plato says that Pythagoras taught 'a way of life,' and we can now see what the purpose of that life was. It was to live in accordance with what is highest in us, remembering always its divine origin."\*

\* An earlier version of this paper appeared in Argo: The Magazine of Greek History, Heritage and Culture.

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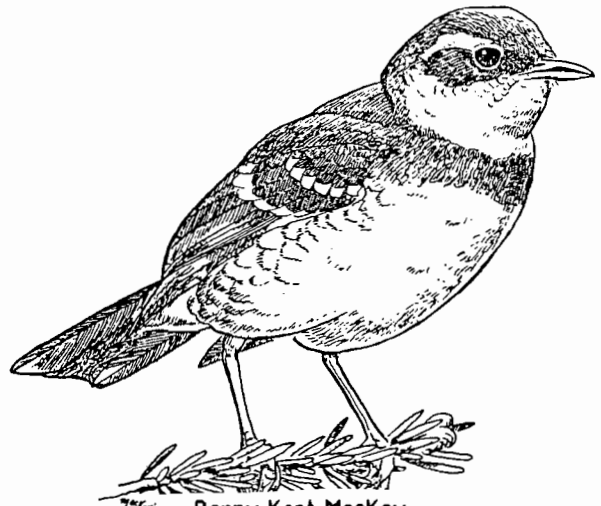
## BOOKS RECEIVED

**Nicolette Perry**  
**SYMBIOSIS**  
*Nature in Partnership*  
London: Blandford, 1990 (1983)  
122 p. bibliography, index  
\$12.95 paperback

## THE STEER

Standing staunchly, sturdy legs grip the firmness  
of the ground,  
Broadset eyes are wary as you keep apart,  
watching me feed the Brahma  
Traced hard and dark in your brief history,  
the human smell scatters disjointed visions  
through your memory  
dusting your dreams with fear  
Now the sun's welcome rays pour down yellow hot  
on sibilant pastures blessed with others of your kind  
Rain sodden grasses, spongy underfoot  
must call some bovine heaven to your mind  
It was not always thus  
Your ragged, rusty coat, once red and white  
The innocence torn forever from your eyes  
Bespeak that other place, that other time  
How did one single steer get here?  
How did you escape the veal crate, the rodeo ring,  
the feed lot, the slaughterer's knife?

**Mary Sternberg**



Barry Kent MacKay  
Animal Protection Institute (API)  
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