

Critically discuss the Pythagorean theory of reincarnation.

What issues does the idea of reincarnation raise concerning the nature of the self, and the definition of personal identity?

We know very little about many of the Ionian Philosophers, but we do have fragments capable of interpretation. In the case of Pythagoras, we do not even have any fragments, so it is reasonable to assume that he wrote nothing. However, other philosophers we know to be Pythagoreans did write, although we still have the problem of deciding whether the ideas they write about are their own or attributable to the Master. We can, however, be reasonably sure that he was a believer in transmigration of the soul.

In general, ancient Greeks did not believe in reincarnation; the dead, according to Homer and Hesiod descended beneath the Earth to continue their existence as miserable shades in Tartarus. However, there were pockets of belief in reincarnation. For example, there were groups of Orphists, and participation in the Eleusian mysteries, re-enacting the fate of Demeter and Persephone involved a degree of belief in some form of reincarnation.

As far as Pythagoras's own beliefs are concerned, he was believed to have been influenced by Pherecydes of Syros, and may have even been a pupil. Pherecydes was an early believer in reincarnation. We also have the testimony of Philolaus as to the importance of the doctrine to the Pythagoreans.

Transmigration of souls refers to the belief that the soul is separate from the body, and is capable of continued existence after the death of the body. The soul becomes embedded in another newly born human or animal either immediately or after a period of wandering. It is not necessary for the soul to be immortal; there may be a number of reincarnations, after which the soul dies. However, many advocates of the doctrine believe in immortality. Also, although it is not a necessary adjunct to reincarnation, some versions say that the soul is "promoted" or "demoted" into superior or inferior beings, depending on the merits of the life led during the last incarnation. If the devotee continues to live a blameless life, the soul is eventually released from the cycle of rebirth, and enjoys a final reward of some kind – perhaps reunion with some "universal" soul.

There are many questions related to reincarnation. Do all creatures, or only all men, or only a select few, undergo transmigration? What sort of substance is it that is reborn? Are all living things potential recipients of human souls? Is transmigration cyclical? Is there a fixed hierarchy of incarnations? Are there gaps between incarnations? and do they involve some sort of Judgment Day? Is metempsychosis part of a wider moral theory, way of life, or a theology?

Because of the secrecy of the Pythagoreans, we do not know the exact nature of their form of transmigration, but it is possible to reconstruct it hypothetically.

We know that the Pythagorean sect regarded virtuous living as necessary for the soul. There is some evidence that they believed that a soul went through several incarnations before being re-united with the universal soul. The soul was a prisoner in the body before being released. Pythagoras was connected with the cult of Apollo, associated with light and reason. His name, Pythagoras, is thought to be derived from the Pythian Oracle at Delphi, which had the motto "Know Thyself" enscribed above the entrance.

The Pythagoreans vigorously pursued such a search for knowledge using philosophy and mathematics as a means of purification.

How did the Pythagoreans account for the manner in which body and soul cohabited? Why would a wandering bodiless soul choose a particular new body to be reincarnated in? Body and soul were attuned to each other, very much as a musical instrument and a tune. The musical instrument is the body and the tune is the immortal

soul. Although Plato criticised this analogy in the *Phaedo*, it is an apt metaphor because of the Pythagorean belief in number as the factor underlying musical harmony. The attunement of body and soul can be explained by numerical ratios.

Additionally, the Pythagorean scholar Philolaus developed a view of the cosmos as divided into “unlimited” and “limiters”. There is much discussion as to what these elements are, but it seems that the unlimited consisted of numbers plus the basic elements of the Milesian philosophers; earth, air, fire and water. The unlimited took on shape and form through being “limited”. It is tempting to think that the Pythagoreans regarded the soul as unlimited, and took on an earthly manifestation through being limited by the body. The numerical ratios of harmonia would achieve this “attunement”.

If we detach the religious cult element from the doctrine of metempsychosis we are in a better position to explore the implications of transmigration. Even if we disbelieve in reincarnation, we can still see that its implications are very similar to issues which would be raised by a breakthrough in cryogenic and cloning technology. Also, reincarnation can be closely linked to the other Pythagorean obsession of number. Norbert Wiener wrote in the 1960’s at the dawn of microcomputing and artificial intelligence, that the identity of an individual could be summarised as a pattern of numbers, and could also be transmitted as such. Given the appropriate technology, the human identity could be downloaded to one clone after another.

However, whether we are speaking of cloning, cryogenics, AI or reincarnation, there are significant implications for human identity.

What is most important is that the Pythagoreans thought of the soul as much more than just the “breath of life”, or anima; to them, the soul was the psyche, or the bearer of human identity. The whole point of metempsychosis is that the essential characteristics of human identity are preserved from one existential crisis to another, the greatest crisis being that of death of the body. If we strip away all of the supernatural paraphernalia of reincarnation, then the Pythagoreans can be credited with this early contribution to the discussion of human identity and its preservation.

What is the relationship between the original soul and its re-incarnation in a new body?

If I am A, in one lifetime, die, and am reincarnated as B in another life, is B the same person as A?

If I hold to the belief that A and B are the same person if they have the same body, then I would have to hold that A and B are different. However, if we hold to the “same body” criteria of identity, then we are also ruling out the possibility of reincarnation in the first place (unless we admit cryogenic revival cloning and AI as possible high tech versions of immortality).

If I believe in the separate existence of the soul and also believe that soul is the criteria of personal identity then I would have no trouble with holding that A and B are the same person.

If I believe that psychological continuity from one phase to another as the basis of identity, then the position would become more complicated. If B had the same psychological make-up as A, and the same set of recollected memories, then I might hold that B is identical to A. With transmigration of souls, the matter would come down to deciding whether these recollections were passed on during the reincarnation process. For example, Pythagoras had good recollection of his earlier incarnations as athletes and/or warriors. Today, there is such an organisation as the Past Life Therapy Association (PLTA), whose members enthusiastically conduct sessions with clients enabling them to “regress” to past lives. The purpose of such therapy is to enable people to “know themselves” by reconnecting with their past incarnations.

In undertaking the research for this essay I have undergone something of a change of opinion on the

Pythagoreans. It is only too easy to regard them as merely another religious sect, with unusual ideas about beans. However, on reflection, it seems that they held a consistent view of the cosmos consisting of the unlimited elements, given form and shape through number and harmony. In addition, the belief in re-incarnation can be viewed as a significant contribution to the problems of immortality of the soul and the persistence of human identity.