

Ovid on Pythagoras' teachings and ethics

Translated by Anthony S. Kline



Pythagoreans celebrate sunrise (1869) Fyodor Bronnikov

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Vegetarianism

“There was a man here, Pythagoras, a Samian by birth, who had fled Samos and its rulers, and, hating their tyranny, was living in voluntary exile. Though the gods were far away, he visited their region of the sky, in his mind, and what nature denied to human vision he enjoyed with his inner eye. When he had considered every subject, through concentrated thought, he communicated it widely in public, teaching the silent crowds, who listened in wonder to his words, concerning the origin of the vast universe, and of the causes of things; and what the physical world is; what the gods are; where the snows arise; what the origin of lightning is; whether Jupiter, or the storm-winds, thunder from colliding clouds; what shakes the earth; by what laws the stars move; and whatever else is hidden; and he was the first to denounce the serving of animal flesh at table; the first voice, wise but not believed in, to say, for example, in words like these:

“Human beings, stop desecrating your bodies with impious foodstuffs. There are crops; there are apples weighing down the branches; and ripening grapes on the vines; there are flavoursome herbs; and those that can be rendered mild and gentle over the flames; and you do not lack flowing milk; or honey fragrant from the flowering thyme. The earth, prodigal of its wealth, supplies you with gentle sustenance, and offers you food without killing or shedding blood.

“Flesh satisfies the wild beast’s hunger, though not all of them, since horses, sheep and cattle live on grasses, but those that are wild and savage: Armenian tigers, raging lions, and wolves and bears, enjoy food wet with blood. Oh, how wrong it is for flesh to be made from flesh; for a greedy body to fatten, by swallowing another body; for one creature to live by the death of another creature! So amongst such riches, that earth, the greatest of mothers, yields, you are not happy unless you tear, with cruel teeth, at pitiful wounds, recalling Cyclops’s practice, and you cannot satisfy your voracious appetite, and your restless hunger, unless you destroy other life!

“But that former age, that we call golden, was happy with the fruit from the trees, and the herbs the earth produced, and did not defile its lips with blood. Then birds winged their way through the air in safety, and hares wandered, unafraid, among the fields, and its own gullibility did not hook the fish: all was free from trickery, and fearless of any guile, and filled with peace. But once someone, whoever he was, the author of something unfitting, envied the lion’s prey, and stuffed his greedy belly with fleshy food, he paved the way for crime. It may be that, from the first, weapons were warm and bloodstained from the killing of wild beasts, but that would have been enough: I admit that creatures that seek our destruction may be killed without it being a sin, but while they may be killed, they still should not be eaten.

“From that, the wickedness spread further, and it is thought that the pig was first considered to merit slaughter because it rooted up the seeds with its broad snout, and destroyed all hope of harvest. The goat was led to death, at the avenging altar, for browsing the vines of Bacchus. These two suffered for their crimes! What did you sheep do, tranquil flocks, born to serve man, who bring us sweet milk in full udders, who give us your wool to make soft clothing, who give us more by your life than you



grant us by dying? What have the oxen done, without guile or deceit, harmless, simple, born to endure labour?

“He is truly thankless, and not worthy of the gift of corn, who could, in a moment, remove the weight of the curved plough, and kill his labourer, striking that work-worn neck with his axe, that has helped turn the hard earth as many times as the earth yielded harvest. It is not enough to have committed such wickedness: they involve the gods in crime, and believe that the gods above delight in the slaughter of suffering oxen! A victim of outstanding beauty, and without blemish (since to be pleasing is harmful), distinguished by sacrificial ribbons and gold, is positioned in front of the altar, and listens, unknowingly, to the prayers, and sees the corn it has laboured to produce, scattered between its horns, and, struck down, stains with blood those knives that it has already caught sight of, perhaps, reflected in the clear water.

“Immediately they inspect the lungs, ripped from the still-living chest, and from them find out the will of the gods. On this (so great is man’s hunger for forbidden food) you feed, O human race! Do not, I beg you, and concentrate your minds on my admonitions! When you place the flesh of slaughtered cattle in your mouths, know and feel, that you are devouring your fellow-creature.¹

Metempsychosis

“Now, since a god moves my lips, I will follow, with due rite, the god who moves those lips, and reveal my beloved Delphi and the heavens themselves, and unlock the oracles of that sublime mind. I will speak of mighty matters, not fathomed by earlier greatness, things long hidden. I delight in journeying among the distant stars: I delight in leaving earth and its dull spaces, to ride the clouds; to stand on the shoulders of mighty Atlas, looking down from far off on men, wandering here and there, devoid of knowledge, anxious, fearing death; to read the book of fate, and to give them this encouragement!

“O species, stunned by your terror of chill death, why fear the Styx, why fear the ghosts and empty names, the stuff of poets, the spectres of a phantom world? Do not imagine you can suffer any evil, whether your bodies are consumed by the flames of the funeral pyre, or by wasting age! Souls are free from death, and always, when they have left their previous being, they live in new dwelling-places, and inhabit what received them. I myself (for I remember) was Euphorbus, son of Panthoüs, at the time of the Trojan War, in whose chest was pinned the heavy spear of the lesser Atrides, Menelaüs. I recognised the shield I used to carry on my left arm, recently, in the temple of Juno at Argos, city of Abas!

“Everything changes, nothing dies: the spirit wanders, arriving here or there, and occupying whatever body it pleases, passing from a wild beast into a human being, from our body into a beast, but is never destroyed. As pliable wax, stamped with new designs, is no longer what it was; does not keep the same form; but is still one and the same; I teach that the soul is always the same, but migrates into different forms.

¹ Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, Bk. XV, 60-142



So, I say as a seer, cease to make kindred spirits homeless, by wicked slaughter: do not let blood be nourished by blood!²

The Eternal Flux

“Since I have embarked on the wide ocean, and given full sails to the wind, I say there is nothing in the whole universe that persists. Everything flows, and is formed as a fleeting image. Time itself, also, glides, in its continual motion, no differently than a river. For neither the river, nor the swift hour can stop: but as wave impels wave, and as the prior wave is chased by the coming wave, and chases the one before, so time flees equally, and, equally, follows, and is always new. For what was before is left behind: and what was not comes to be: and each moment is renewed.

“You see the nights’ traverses tend towards day, and brilliant light follow the dark of night. The sky has a different colour when all weary things are at rest, at midnight, than when bright Lucifer appears on his white charger, and alters again when Aurora, herald of the dawn, stains the world she bequeaths to Phoebus. The shield of the god himself is red, when it rises from beneath the earth, and still red, when it is hidden below the earth, again: but is white at the zenith, because there the atmosphere is purer, and it escapes far from the contagion of earth. And Diana, the moon, can never have the same or similar form, and is always less today than tomorrow if her orb is waxing, greater if it is waning.³

The Four Ages of Man

“Do you not see that the year displays four aspects, passing through them, in a semblance of our life? For spring, in its new life, is tender and sap-filled, and like a child: then the shoots are fresh and growing, delicate, without substance, quickening the farmer’s hopes. Then everything blossoms, the kindly land is a riot of brightly coloured flowers, but the leaves are still not strong. From spring, the year, grown stronger, moves to summer, and becomes a powerful man: no season is sturdier, or more expansive, than this, or shines more richly. Autumn comes, when the ardour of youth has gone, ripe and mellow, between youth and age, a scattering of grey on its forehead. Then trembling winter, with faltering steps, its hair despoiled, or, what it has, turned white.

“And our bodies themselves are always, restlessly, changing: we shall not be, tomorrow, what we were, or what we are. There was a time when we were hidden in our first mother’s womb, only the seed and promise of a human being: nature applied her skilful hands, and, unwilling for our bodies to be buried, cramped in our mother’s swollen belly, expelled us from our home, into the empty air. Born into the light, the infant lay there, powerless: but soon it scrambled on all fours like a wild creature, then, gradually, helped by a supporting harness, it stood, uncertainly, on shaky legs. From that point, it grew strong and swift, and passed through its span of youth.

“When the middle years are also done, life takes the downward path of declining age. Milon, the athlete, grown old, cries when he looks at those weak and flabby arms, that were once, like those of Hercules, a solid mass of muscle. Helen, the daughter of

² Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, Bk. XV, 143-175

³ *Ibid.*, 176-98



Tyndareus, also weeps, when she sees an old woman's wrinkles in the glass, and asks why she has been twice ravaged. Devouring Time, and you, jealous Age, consume everything, and slowly gnawing at them, with your teeth, little by little, consign all things to eternal death!⁴

The Elements

"Even the things we call elements do not persist. Apply your concentration, and I will teach the changes, they pass through. The everlasting universe contains four generative states of matter. Of these, two, earth and water, are heavy, and sink lower, under their own weight. The other two lack heaviness, and, if not held down, they seek height: that is air, and fire, purer than air. Though they are distinct in space, nevertheless they are all derived from one another, and resolve into one another. Earth, melting, is dilated to clear water: the moisture, rarified, changes to wind and air: then air, losing further weight, in the highest regions shines out as fire, the most rarified of all. Then they return, in reverse, revealing the same series of changes. Since fire, condenses, turns into denser air, and this to water, and water, contracted, solidifies as earth.

"Nothing keeps its own form, and Nature, the renewer of things, refreshes one shape from another. Believe me, nothing dies in the universe as a whole, but it varies and changes its aspect, and what we call 'being born' is a beginning to be, of something other, than what was before, and 'dying' is, likewise, ending a former state. Though, 'that' perhaps is transferred here, and 'this', there, the total sum is constant.⁵

Geological changes

"For my part, I would have thought that nothing lasts for long with the same appearance. So the ages changed from gold to iron, and so the fortunes of places have altered. I have seen myself what was once firm land, become the sea: I have seen earth made from the waters: and seashells lie far away from the ocean, and an ancient anchor has been found on a mountaintop. The down rush of waters has made what was once a plain into a valley, and hills, by the deluge have been washed to the sea. Marshy land has drained to parched sand, and what was once thirsty ground filled with a marshy pool.

"Here, Nature generates fresh springs, and there seals them up, and rivers, released by deep earthquakes, burst out or dry up, and sink. So when the Lycus is swallowed by a chasm in the earth, it emerges far off, reborn, from a different source. So, engulfed, flowing as a hidden stream, the mighty Erasinus emerges again, in the fields of Argos. And they say that Mysus, ashamed of its origin and its former banks, now flows elsewhere, as Caicus. Amenanus flows sometimes churning Sicilian sands, at other times dried up, its fountains blocked. Anigrus, once drinkable, now flows with water you would not wish to touch, since, unless we deny all credence to the poets, the bi-formed centaurs washed their wounds there, dealt by the bow of club-bearing Hercules. Is the Hypanis, born in the Scythian mountains, not ruined by bitter salt-water, that once was sweet?

⁴ Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, Bk. XV, 199-236

⁵ *Ibid.*, 237-38



“Antissa, and Pharos, and Phoenician Tyre, were surrounded by sea: of which not one, now, is an island. The former settlers of Leucas lived on a peninsula: now the waves encircle it. Zancle also is said to have been joined to Italy, till the waves washed away the boundary, and the deep sea pushed back the land. If you look for Helice and Buris, cities of Achaia, you will find them under the waters, and sailors are accustomed, even now, to point out the submerged towns with their sunken walls.

“There is a mound near Troezen, where Pittheus ruled, steep and treeless, that once was the flattest open space on the plain, and now is a mound. For (strange to relate) the wild strength of the winds, imprisoned in dark caves, longing for somewhere to breathe, and struggling in vain to enjoy the freer expanses of sky, since there was no gap at all in their prison, as an exit for their breath, extended and swelled the ground, just as a man inflates a bladder, or a goatskin taken from a twin-horned goat. The swelling remained there, and has the look of a high hill, solidified by long centuries.⁶

Physical changes

“Though many instances, I have heard and known of, come to mind, I shall relate only a few more. Does not water, also, offer and receive new forms? Your stream, horned Ammon, is chill at mid-day, and warm in the morning and evening, and they tell of the Athamanians setting fire to wood, by pouring your waters over it, when the moon wanes to her smallest crescent.

“The Cicones have a river, whose waters when drunk turn the vital organs to stone, and that change things to marble when touched. The Crathis, and the Sybaris, here, near our own country, make hair like amber or gold: and what is more amazing, there are streams that have power to change not merely the body but the mind as well. Who has not heard of the disgusting waves of Salmacis, and the Aethiopian lakes? Whoever wets his throat with these, is either maddened, or falls into a strange, deep sleep.

“Whoever slakes his thirst at Clitor’s fountain, shuns wine, and only enjoys pure water, whether it is due to a power in the water that counteracts hot wine, or whether, as the natives claim, Melampus, Amythaon’s son, when he had saved the demented daughters of Proetus from madness, by herbs and incantations, threw the remnants, of what had purged their minds, into its springs, and the antipathy to wine was left behind in its waters. The flow of the River Lyncestius has the opposite effect, so that whoever drinks even moderately of it, stumbles about, as if they had drunk pure wine. There is a place in Arcadia, the ancients called Pheneus, mistrusted for its dual-natured waters: beware of them at night, drunk at night they are harmful: in the day they can be drunk without harm. So, rivers and lakes can harbour some power or other.

“There was a time when Ortygia floated on the waves, now it is fixed, and the Argo’s crew feared the Symphlegades’ collisions, and the spray of their crashing waves, islands that now stand there motionless, and resist the winds.

⁶ Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, Bk. XV, 259-306



“And Aetna that glows, with its sulphurous furnaces, was not always on fire, and will not always be on fire. For if the earth is a creature, that lives, and, in many places, has vents that breathe out flame, she can alter her air passages, and as frequently as she shifts, she can close these caverns and open others. Or, if swift winds are confined in the deep caves, and strike rock against rock, or against material containing the seeds of fire, and Aetna catches alight from the friction, the caves will be left cold when the wind dies. Or, if it is bituminous substances that take fire, and yellow sulphur, burning with little smoke, then, when the ground no longer provides rich fuel, or nourishment for the flames, and their strength fails after long centuries, earth herself will lack the support of devouring nature, and will not withstand that famine, and forsaken, will forsake her fires.

“There is a tale of men in Hyperborean Pallene, who are used to clothing their bodies in soft plumage, by plunging nine times in Minerva’s pool: for my part, I can scarcely believe it: also the women of Scythia are said to practise the same arts, sprinkling their bodies with magic liquids.⁷

Autogenesis

“However if trust is only placed in proven things, do you not see that whenever corpses putrefy, due to time or melting heat, they generate tiny creatures? Bury the carcasses of sacrificed bulls (it is a known experiment) in the ditch where you have thrown them, and flower-sipping bees, will be born, here and there, from the putrid entrails. After the custom of their parent bodies, they frequent the fields, are devoted to work, and labour in hope of harvest.

“A war-horse dug into the earth is the source of hornets: If you remove the hollow claws of land-crabs, and put the rest under the soil, a scorpion, with its curved and threatening tail, will emerge from the parts interred: and the caterpillars that are accustomed to weave their white cocoons, on uncultivated leaves (a thing observed by farmers) change to a butterfly’s form, symbol of the soul.

“Mud contains the generative seeds of green frogs, and generates them without legs, soon giving them legs for swimming, and, at the same time, with hind legs longer than their forelegs, so that they are fit to take long leaps. The cub that a she-bear has just produced is not a cub but a scarcely living lump of flesh: the mother gives it a body, by licking it, and shapes it into a form like that she has herself. Do you not see how the larvae of the honey-carrying bees, protected by the hexagonal waxen cells, are born as limbless bodies, and later acquire legs, and later still wings?

“Who would believe, if he did not know, that Juno’s bird, the peacock, that bears eyes, like stars, on its tail; and Jupiter’s eagle, carrying his lightning-bolt; and Cytherea’s doves; all the bird species; are born from the inside of an egg? There are those who believe that when the spine decomposes, interred in the tomb, human marrow forms a snake.⁸

⁷ Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, Bk. XV, 307-60

⁸ *Ibid.*, 361-90



The Phoenix

“Yet these creatures receive their start in life from others: there is one, a bird, which renews itself, and reproduces from itself. The Assyrians call it the phoenix. It does not live on seeds and herbs, but on drops of incense, and the sap of the cardamom plant. When it has lived for five centuries, it then builds a nest for itself in the top-most branches of a swaying palm tree, using only its beak and talons. As soon as it has lined it with cassia bark, and smooth spikes of nard, cinnamon fragments and yellow myrrh, it settles on top, and ends its life among the perfumes.

“They say that, from the father’s body, a young phoenix is reborn, destined to live the same number of years. When age has given it strength, and it can carry burdens, it lightens the branches of the tall palm of the heavy nest, and piously carries its own cradle, that was its father’s tomb, and, reaching the city of Hyperion, the sun-god, through the clear air, lays it down in front of the sacred doors of Hyperion’s temple.

“If there is anything to marvel at, however, in these novelties, we might marvel at how the hyena changes function, and a moment ago a female, taken from behind by a male, is now a male. Also that animal, the chameleon, fed by wind and air, instantly adopts the colour of whatever it touches.

“Vanquished India gave lynxes to Bacchus of the clustered vines, and, they say that, whatever their bladder emits, changes to stone, and solidifies on contact with air. So coral, also, hardens the first time air touches it: it was a soft plant under the waves.”⁹

Transfers of Power

“The day will end, and Phoebus will bathe his weary horses in the deep, before my words can do justice to all that has been translated into new forms. So we see times change, and these nations acquiring power and those declining. So Troy, that was so great in men and riches, and for ten years of war could give so freely of her blood, is humbled, and only reveals ancient ruins now, and, for wealth, ancestral tombs. Sparta was famous, great Mycenae flourished, and Cecrops’s citadel of Athens, and Amphion’s Thebes. Sparta is worthless land, proud Mycenae is fallen, and what is the Thebes of Oedipus but a name, what is left of the Athens of Pandion, but a name?

“Even now, there is a rumour that Rome, of the Dardanians, is rising, by Tiber’s waters, born in the Apennines, and laying, beneath its mass, the foundation of great things. So, growing, it changes form, and one day will be the capital of a whole world! So, it is said, the seers predict, and the oracles that tell our fate. As I remember also, when the Trojan State was falling, Helenus, son of Priam, said to a weeping Aeneas, who was unsure of his future: “Son of the goddess, if you take careful heed, of what my mind prophesies, Troy will not wholly perish while you live! Fire and sword will give way before you: you will go, as one man, catching up, and bearing away Pergama, till you find a foreign land, kinder to you and Troy, than your fatherland. I see, even now, a city, destined for Phrygian descendants, than which none is greater, or shall be, or has been, in past ages.

⁹ Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, Bk. XV, 391-417



“Other leaders will make her powerful, through the long centuries, but one, born of the blood of Iūlus, will make her mistress of the world. When earth has benefited from him, the celestial regions will enjoy him, and heaven will be his goal.”

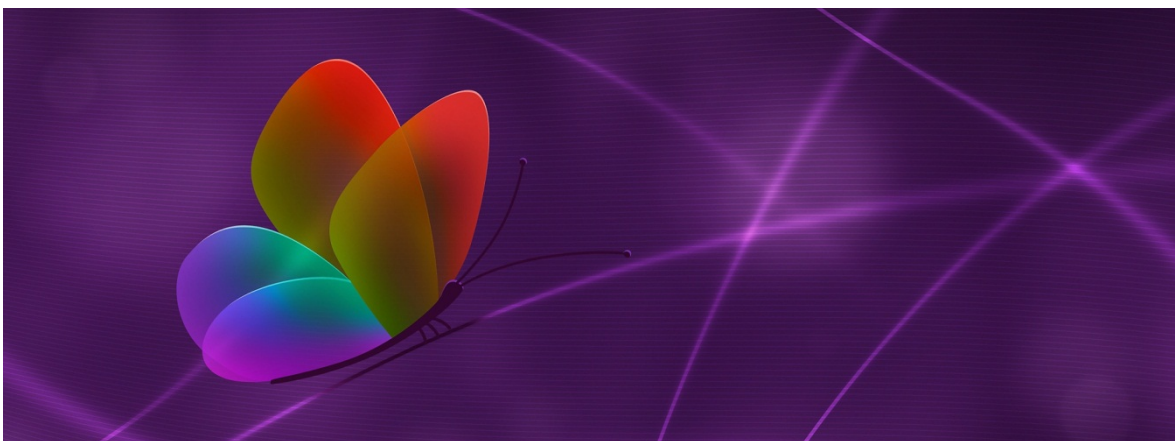
“These things, I remember well, Helenus prophesied for Aeneas, as Aeneas carried the ancestral gods, and I am glad that the walls, of his descendants, are rising, and that the Greeks conquered to a Trojan’s gain.”¹⁰

The Sanctity of Life

“Now (lest I stray too far off course, my horses forgetting to aim towards their goal), the heavens, and whatever is under them, change their form, and the earth, and whatever is within it. We, as well, who are a part of the universe, because we are not merely flesh, but in truth, winged spirits, and can enter into the family of wild creatures, and be imprisoned in the minds of animals.

“We should allow those beings to live in safety, and honour, that the spirits of our parents, or brothers, or those joined to us by some other bond, certainly human, might have inhabited: and not fill our bellies as if at a Thyestean feast! What evil they contrive, how impiously they prepare to shed human blood itself, who rip at a calf’s throat with the knife, and listen unmoved to its bleating, or can kill a kid to eat, that cries like a child, or feed on a bird, that they themselves have fed! How far does that fall short of actual murder? Where does the way lead on from there?

“Let the ox plough, or owe his death to old age: let the sheep yield wool, to protect against the chill north wind: let the she-goats give you full udders for milking! Have done with nets and traps, snares and the arts of deception! Do not trick the birds with limed twigs, or imprison the deer, scaring them with feathered ropes, or hide barbed hooks in treacherous bait. Kill them, if they harm you, but even then let killing be enough. Let your mouth be free of their blood, enjoy milder food!”¹¹



¹⁰ Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, Bk. XV, 418-52

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 453-78

