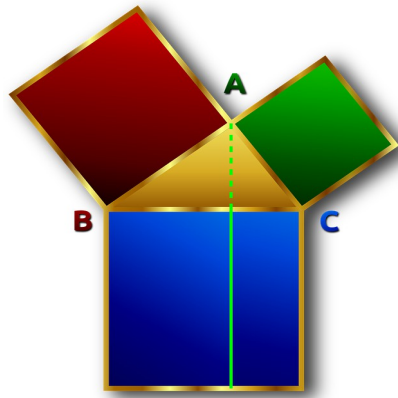


*Docendo discimus.*¹

Classical Thought²

The Pythagorean Philosophers



We know little reliable about Pythagoras³ (c. 570 – c. 495 BC), his life, what he taught, discovered or believed. He is credited with the discovery that there are reliable, predictable relationships in this world which we call *mathematical* relationships. The theorem that bears his name: the square on the hypotenuse⁴ is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ is true of all right angle triangles – always. Pythagoras and his followers therefore are thought to have deduced that there was an order to reality. Regularity was to a certain extent easy to perceive: seasons are regular, for instance, although not exact always exactly predictable. Triangles, however, have a predictable reality. Numbers remain constant despite change. For instance, if you have five apples you have five even if the apples change – if they rot for instance. Pythagoras is also supposed to have discovered the relationship between the length of a vibrating string and a musical pitch. If so, he discovered that the basis of music was in predictable, mathematical relationships. The discovery of mathematical, predictable order in this fluctuating natural world is supposed to have led the Pythagorean philosophers to say that *all* reality must have an explanation that is mathematical. If some things can be explained mathematically, they argued, then all things may be. In the resulting metaphysics all reality consists of numerical relationships and geometrical shapes. Mathematics came to have the place in the metaphysics of Pythagoras that water, “the boundless” and air had for the Milesian philosophers.

This may not seem intuitive to us but it does have a certain logic to it. When we look at a milk shake for instance we do not initially see something made of ordered relationships like a triangle. But if we were to delve into the chemical properties of the components of a milk shake, their molecular structure and so on, we might be more inclined to think Pythagoras had a point.

Pythagoras thought the supreme value for human life was intellectual. He believed in the transmigration of souls – that the soul transferred on death to another creature either higher or lower – and that the soul reached its highest state through intellectual activity coupled with certain religious rites and aestic⁵ practices. Here we can see where trying to work out a philosophy

¹ We learn by teaching.

² These lessons come from material in *The History of Western Philosophy* 3 Courses Taught at Christ College by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen. These are available from Covenant Media Foundation <https://www.cmfnow.com/>. As far as I am aware they are the best (if not the only) rigorous treatment of the whole of the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective. Please note that I do not endorse the Theonomist perspective of CMF and the late Dr. Bahnsen. This perspective does not, however, mar the usefulness of these lectures.

³ Find him on your Synchronological Chart of History.

⁴ Side of a right angle triangle opposite the right angle – the longest side.

⁵ Aesthetic – denying bodily pleasures and indulgences.

without God's word fails. He had found something good about God's world: it has order – mathematics. He did not give God thanks for His orderly creation and enjoy God's provision. Instead he tried to rigorously restrict and deny enjoyment of creation while worshipping the created mathematics instead of the creator Himself.

Pythagoras believed in the brotherhood of all living things and is reputed by some to have been a vegetarian. This was because he believed in the idea of the transmigration of souls. If after death your soul passed on to some other creature then to eat meat meant you could be eating one of your ancestors! Plants are living things, of course, but he did not advocate that we should not eat them either – except for beans which he was adamant should not be eaten!

If you have a Synchronological chart use it to find out where Pythagoras fits in with the rest of world history.