

PYTHAGORAS: SELF-DISCIPLINE

In the second class of emblems in the lecture of the Sublime Degree of a Master Mason, we find and hear these words uttered.

The Forty-seventh Problem of Euclid. This was an invention of our ancient friend and brother, the great Pythagoras, who in his travels through Asia, Africa, and Europe, was initiated into several orders of priesthood, and raised to the Sublime degree of Master Mason. This wise philosopher enriched his mind abundantly in a general knowledge of things, and more especially in Geometry or Masonry. On this subject he drew out many problems and theorems; and among the most distinguished he erected this, when, in the joy of his heart, he exclaimed, “Eureka”, in the Grecian Language signifying “I have found it,” and upon the discovery of which he is said to have sacrificed a hecatomb. It teaches Masons to be general lovers of the arts and sciences.

“Self—discipline is that which, next to virtue, truly and essentially raises one man above another.

Joseph Addison.

Pythagoras, the Greek philosopher and mathematician, led a semi-religious, semi-scholastic organization, whose members came to be known as the Pythagoreans, in the Greek colony of Croton in southern Italy and imposed a rigid discipline on the organization’s members. In this, however, he did not merely order or direct, but set the example, subjecting himself to an even harsher discipline and regimen of self-denial than that which he demanded from the other members and students of the Pythagoreans.

Pythagoras was born about 580 B.C. in Samos, the son of Mnesarchus. Almost nothing reliable is known of his early life, except that he acquired a reputation of being learned and of having an obsessively inquiring mind. He married Theano, probably before leaving Samos, and their daughter, Damo, was probably born there. He reputedly left Samos to escape the tyranny of Polycrates and settled in Croton some time between 531 and 529 B.C. At some period of his life, possibly before leaving Samos for the last time, possibly after leaving Samos, but before taking up residence in Croton, he traveled extensively in the Middle East, Egypt and Europe. While in Egypt, he studied geometry and astronomy under the priests there, learning much that he would use later. Teaching had become his profession by the time that he migrated to Croton and he had probably followed that occupation before leaving Samos.

Whether the organization which later became known as the Pythagoreans was already in existence when Pythagoras reached Croton or whether he founded it is not entirely clear, but he soon became the leader of it. Initially, the group was a semi-religious order dedicated to moral reformation. Beginning with its membership, it tried to achieve this reformation through religious rites and strict self-denial, self-control and abstinence designed to purify the soul of the adherent. Members vowed loyalty to both their leader and to each other, along with, apparently, strict oaths of secrecy. The rule barred the eating of meat, eggs or beans and discouraged the drinking of wine. Modesty in dress was required and laughter, as well as any form of levity, forbidden. Pythagoras lived according to these rules and applied them more strictly toward his own conduct than he did toward the conduct of others. He lived mostly on bread, honey and vegetables and ate these only in moderation. He never laughed or joked. This rigid adherence to his own rules insured the respect and obedience of his followers, the most devoted of whom were his wife and daughter.

Pythagoras and his co-religionists believed in immortality, reincarnation and transmigration of the soul, a doctrine that contributed to their strict adherence to a vegetarian diet, lest, by eating animal flesh, they might eat a deceased friend or relative. They considered the body as the tomb of the soul, a tomb from which they sought permanent release through purification, rather than a transfer of the soul into the body of an animal. Like many other religions that believed in transmigration and reincarnation, the Pythagorean sought an end to the cycle of birth, suffering and death, seeing the final release not as eternal life, but a permanent death. Much of this doctrine is attributed directly to Pythagoras.

The scholarly pursuits of the Pythagoreans seem to have been only indirectly related to their religious beliefs. They emphasized the study of mathematics and astronomy, the subjects with which Pythagoras had become familiar in Egypt. The concentration on mathematics may or may not have resulted initially from Pythagoras' discovery of the relationship between an arithmetic progression and musical intervals. This led to their belief that numbers constituted the basic elements of all things, that numbers did not serve as indicators of the relationships of things, but as the essences of the things themselves. Whether before or as a result of musical discovery, Pythagoras initiated the study of mathematics as a science among the Greeks, not merely as an implement of commerce. In the course of this study, Pythagoras brought forth the Pythagorean Theorem - in a right triangle, the square of the hypotenuse equals the sums of the squares of the two bases - although whether he actually discovered this proposition is debatable. The Babylonians have discovered it anew or he may have learned of it in Egypt, then introduced it into the Greek world. The story that upon discovering this, Pythagoras shouted "Eureka" and sacrificed a hecatomb - 100 animals - in gratitude seems improbable, given his professed belief in transmigration. In geometry, Pythagoras and his followers were responsible for much of the subject matter later contained in several of the books of Euclid's ELEMENTS.

As a result of his studies in Egypt and his work with music and mathematics, Pythagoras also made some contributions to the study of astronomy, but the Pythagoreans main efforts in this area appear to have come from his followers. Some authorities believe him to have been the first individual to conceive of the earth as a sphere in a spherical universe. He brought his concept of numbers as the real essence of things into his study of astronomy and used astronomy as an example of the reality of numbers, then moved on into philosophy. Many consider Pythagoras to have been the first philosopher and to have invented the term "philosophy". Too modest to use the term "sophia", meaning "wisdom", to describe his efforts, he substituted "philosophia", meaning "love of wisdom". The concept of numbers as the essence of reality, the only true reality, was the foundation of his philosophy and he sought a unity based upon numbers in all aspects of life, the world and the universe. He certainly never found it, but he may have thought that he had.

The Pythagoreans became involved in politics even during Pythagoras' lifetime, although their efforts and influence increased greatly after his death. That involvement resulted from their effort to apply the various theories of Pythagoras to practical government. In 510 B.C., as a result of their support of the aristocratic party against the democratic one - they wanted an aristocracy ruled by an intellectual elite, themselves - a strong reaction developed in Croton against the Pythagoreans. This reaction turned violent and, according to one account, resulted in Pythagoras' death. The more generally accepted belief is that the persecution led to Pythagoras forced exile from Croton to Metapontium, where he remained until his death around 500 B.C. According to one story, he starved himself to death. The Pythagorean movement continued for another 150 years and remained a powerful political force for at least 50 years after Pythagoras' death.

Pythagoras is honored in the Symbolic Rite, Third Degree, as an ancient friend and brother in Masonry, who had, during his travels in Asia, Africa and Europe, been initiated into several orders of priesthood and had become a Master Mason. He is stated to have studied geometry and to have invented the Forty Seventh Problem of Euclid - the Pythagorean Theorem. The statement is phrased in such a way as to imply that Euclid and Pythagoras were contemporaries or even that Euclid lived before Pythagoras, when, in fact, Pythagoras lived over two centuries before Euclid.

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