

The Place of Mysticism in Pythagoras' Theorem

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Abstract

Pythagoras is a mathematician as well as a mystical philosopher. Pythagoreanism is a philosophical school that describes the philosophy of Pythagoras and his followers. His philosophical ingress centred on the theory of numbers and his mystical philosophy centred on transmigration of the soul. The question now is how we can justify him as either a mathematician or mystic? The task of this paper therefore is to attempt clarifications on such question but with special attention to the mystical aspect of his philosophical postulations. To do this we shall employ the expository and analytic methods of philosophical research. Finally, the paper shall end with the proposal that Pythagoras did not just pick up the study of mathematics for the fun of it but that he used it to interpret issues in religious and mystical circles.

Keywords: Mysticism, Mathematics, Number, Soul, Pythagoras.

Introduction

Mysticism has been in the world long enough to justify us in regarding it as a fact in world history. It is no longer considered as the crazy belief of a few fanatics of erratic mind and irresponsible action. It is recognized as a branch of knowledge and a way of life. What was at one time the exclusive study and practice of a confidential circle whose members were scattered here and there in many lands through the centuries, has come to be a subject of ardent pursuit of students in every grade of society attracted by the higher culture of the present time (Andrea 5). Mysticism stands

primarily for a religious experience, but it also at any rate in its historical form and development, involves certain philosophical and theological presuppositions (Herman 6). But whether the mystical experiences provide enough evidence for the truth of mystical claims or mystical experiences are only for transmigration is another question that needs to be attempted. It should be accentuated that mystics value enduring states of consciousness over transient experiences. They value the personal transformation leading to the enlightened state free of a sense of a phenomenal self in which they are aligned with the way things really are as defined by their practices than the any social relationship. They prefer the absolute, insight, interior, to the exterior. This is why Moore Peter says that “mysticism is known as becoming one with God or the absolute” (Moore 2005). Mysticism is a matter of practices and ways of life. It is the experience of the miraculous, or at least supernatural, phenomena (Herman 15). Hence, the revival of interest in mysticism must be accepted as a fact but it remains to ask how much of it? Is it merely an unconsidered sympathy of minds touched with vague mysteries? What exactly is a mystical state of mind? How can we describe this trance-like quality of mystical awareness? Can we start by saying that mystical states of consciousness bring a sense of mystery and of the metaphysical duality of things? Can the feeling of an enlargement of perception which seems imminent ever completes itself? When taking all these mystical questions in a broad spectrum, Pythagoras cannot be neglected as a mystical philosopher because his religious community was a combination of the Greek scientific spirit with religious mysticism. This mystical aspect of Pythagoras’s philosophy is the prerogative of this paper.

What is Mysticism?

Mysticism is defined differently based on the angle the definition is fundamental. But etymologically, Mysticism is derived from the Greek verb “*Myo*” meaning to close the lips for silence and secrecy, especially in the context of the ancient mystery religions. Mysticism is also called contemplation in the Christian tradition rooted in the believer’s experience of a special kind of union with God (Craghan 573). This relationship between the religious man and the deity (God) he worships is, of course, a relationship of dependence, for the religious man sees himself as inferior to, depends on, the deity, he worships (Omogbe 3). This confirms why Schleiermacher defined religion as a “feeling of absolute dependence on God” (Schleiermacher 12). And Moore Peter defined mysticism as becoming one with God or the absolute. Hence, mysticism is a way of life based on a direct experience of God that leads one more and more into the reality of life and a loving union with God as the core revelation (Craghan 574). These direct mystical experiences of God are ‘*introvertive*’ and ‘*extrovertive*’ and both are tied to give knowledge of what a subject apprehends to be a strong sense of an un-mediated insight into ultimate reality. This mystical experience, by definition, is felt to be more real or ineffability. When classical mystics invoke ineffability, it is to assert that there is more to what was experienced than can be expressed in any language than to deny anything that can be said about the reality; this absolute ineffability or indescribability is an essential mark of mysticism that cannot be relegated. It is not always clear whether it is the experience or the object or both (experience or object of experience) that are considered ineffable by mystics. This actually brought about the paradoxes absorbed in the mystical experiences. It should be noted that locutions, visions, and ecstasies are indeed extraordinary but do not belong to the essence of mysticism. Though they differ depending on the perspectives of mysticism one is talking about, for the way a Christian mysticism interprets

such experiences will not be the same with a non-Christian mysticism and other types of mysticism. Hence, it is pertinent to say that mysticism differs in practice based on the tradition.

Unfortunately, mysticism is perceived today not as an esoteric oddity but as common, normal activity mainly carried out by spiritualists or diviners. This kind of notion nonetheless needs to be debunked and the proper notion of mysticism as a way of life that does not take an aspect of reality for the whole of reality, but tries to identify the ultimate or cosmic principles by which things come into existence (Umotong 1-9) should be broadcasted. Even Christian mysticism is a decisive aspect of being a follower of Christ, whether oneself experiences it or simply believes it to be true or at least possible (McGinn 458). All these subsequent philosophical aspects are but by products of these primordial individual experiences. As James puts it, “I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue.” (James 333-334). A mystical consciousness is not merely an expansion of our common consciousness. It is not a state of mind that leads us to a higher degree of what we already have in our daily perception. If we try to think of it simply as a sharper way of grasping reality one will inevitably arrive at a distorted picture. A mystical experience is the feeling or the realization of a truth that is incorporated as something that is undoubtedly reached in a real experience, an unquestionable occurrence that takes place in real life and it is not grasped by reasoning but comes as an astonishing flow. A dream can undoubtedly make us feel or realize something, but it is interpreted as a symbolic experience apart from life, and even though it may teach us about an important issue in life it is radically distinct from the mystical phenomenological standpoint.

The lesson gained during a mystical state is never something that can be truly handled by other means such as reading or listening. One thing is to listen, let’s say, about the oneness of nature,

men and God, and a whole different thing is to feel it. That is the reason James argues that “Consciousness of illumination is for us the essential mark of ‘mystical’ experiences.”. He stated four characteristics found in mystical experiences of God: 1. **Ineffable:** The experience is beyond proper description. The direct experience of God goes beyond human powers of description. 2. **Noetic:** Mystics receive knowledge of God that is not otherwise available. In this sense religious experiences are direct revelations from God. 3. **Transient:** The experience is a temporary one that cannot be sustained, although it may have long-lasting effects. 4. **Passive:** The experience is not initiated by the mystic but rather they feel that something is acting (James 316). Here, the problem is about the real nature of things including human beings. Things do not always appear as they are (Udoh 521). We often hear people say, “All that glitters is not gold”. That means that certain objects are fashioned to look like other known objects when they are not.

The Mystical Challenges

According to Raymund Andrea, the ways of mystical ascent stood as a specific form of concentration and meditation already offered. But it is one thing to set series of concentrative and meditative forms of procedure, but quite difficult to follow and interpret, without bias, the manifold intimate and difficult reactive experiences in heart, mind, and soul which accompany a dedicated effort to tread the way. “If the student says he has been quite unaware of any particular experiences of this nature, that he has followed the way for years and experienced nothing of stress or difficulty in life or circumstances, then I affirm that he knows nothing of practical mysticism” (Andrea 98). The same difficulties, the same trials, the same cross, figuratively speaking, await everyone who offers himself for the great adventure of mystical practices.

Secondly, a desire for uncommon knowledge, the reading of mystical works, affiliation with mystical societies, are preliminaries necessary and helpful for the mystics; but not until there is a

spontaneous readiness to become transmuted in thought, speech, and action by converting all these helps into living steps of interior fruition, can one consider himself really embarked on the way. (Andrea 99). This is always very tedious. We could live in an environment of peace and harmony, with no worldly responsibilities resting upon us, we could devote ourselves to uninterrupted study and meditation and to the docile enjoyment of natural beauty but the unfolding gifts and graces of mystical faculties can find us in conditions directly antagonistic to isolated and peaceful mystical attainment.

Thirdly, the challenge of continuous ‘spiritual militancy’ is another challenge of mysticism. The word ‘spiritual militancy’ as used in this write up does not imply the use of religious beliefs and ideologies to justify violent or extremist actions, with the aim of defending or promoting one’s own religion or attacking others rather it is the struggle to maintain a steady spiritual journey deprived of any setbacks and frailties. To have this kind of spiritual journey is tasking, so the mystics must be in constant watchfulness not to derail. Therefore, the most important quality to be made permanent in the mystic’s equipment, after the meditative and contemplative contact has been fully established, is that of spiritual militancy or spiritual watchfulness. This may be questioned, but we cannot retract. we would reemphasize it. We have heard the word of peace spoken, with all the variations of human rhetoric, when there is no peace. The world atmosphere in which we live is a militant one. We may close our eyes to it in our prayers and meditations, but we can no more shut out the world atmosphere of militancy than we can cease to breathe. An impartial observer said: “You talk of the brotherhood of man: look around you. A pertinent remark and true, although we on the way prefer to close our eyes and live in an illusion. The world knows that very well and has found and used such men. It is humiliating to poor humanity that, with all its aspiration, blind or enlightened, towards the divine, there has not been vouchsafed to it one man

of superhuman character and personality and dynamic forcefulness to stand forth and arrest the action of insolent tyrants who, with Machiavellian astuteness, trample upon the soul and honor of men. You will tell me, speaking from the chair of academic occultism, that it is the inevitable and lawful outworking of racial predicament”.

Pythagoras and his School?

Pythagoras was a Greek philosopher who had interest in mathematics, astronomy, religious mysticism and music. Pythagoras’s father was Mnesarchus and his mother was Pythais. His father was merchant who travelled from Tyre to Samos at a time of famine to sell corn and was granted citizenship of Samos as a mark of gratitude. As a child Pythagoras spent his early years in Samos but travelled widely with his father. This is what informed why he is seen as an itinerant-oral teacher with secrecy. There were, among his teachers, three philosophers who influenced him as a young man. One of the most important teacher was Pherekydes, the other two philosophers were [Thales](#) and [Anaximander](#) who both lived on Miletus. While, the Milesian philosophers seem to have proceeded with scientific concern and temperaments, they did not form their hypotheses the way modern scientists would, nor did they devise any experiments to test their theories. Their ideas have a dogmatic quality, a mood of positive assertion, rather than the tentativeness of true hypotheses (Stumpf 11). It is good to state that, as at that time, serious questions concerning the nature and the limits of human knowledge were not raised nor did the Milesians refer to the problem of the relation between spirit and body. Their reduction of all realities to a material origin certainly raises these questions later in the history of philosophy. So across a span of water from Miletus, located in the Aegean Sea, was a small island of Samos, was the birthplace of Pythagoras. He migrated to southern Italy and settled there in the prosperous Greek city of Croton, where his active philosophic life is usually dated from about 525 to 500BC

(Stumpf 12) because of the tyrannical rule of rich polychaetes. Notably, he did not produce any book, he delivered his teachings orally, along with a vow of secrecy. This idea of secrecy that is intrinsic in mysticism is why he was seen as a mystic. He was the founder of the school of mathematics and religious mysticism called Pythagorean, the initiates were sworn to secrecy and lived a communal ascetic lifestyle. This lifestyle entailed a number of dietary prohibitions (Huffman 8). The sect died out in the late fourth century B.C. Both men and women were allowed to become members of the society. They were allowed their own possessions and were not required to be vegetarians. They were not acting as a mathematics research group. They were not also interested in formulating or solving mathematical problems. Rather Pythagoras was interested in the principles of mathematics, the concept of number, the concept of a triangle or other mathematical figures as a proof of reality.

Pythagoreans and Numbers

Pythagoreans taught that there is order in the universe and the order is mathematical in nature and their overriding dictum was “Reality is number” and they practiced a kind of numerology or number religion and considered each number to have its own character and meaning. Pythagoras believed that relations could be reduced to number. The Pythagoreans having studied mathematics, thought that things are numbers and that the cosmos is a scale and a number. That the properties of numbers which would be familiar to mathematicians are “even and odd” numbers, [three-sided numbers](#), triangular numbers, rectangular numbers, square numbers (Onyeocha 103). According to them, each number had its own personality, masculine or feminine, perfect or incomplete, beautiful or ugly. Numbers were far more than abstractions; they were specific kinds of entities with meanings. The theorem of Pythagoras for a right-angled triangle, the square is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides. Pythagoras holds the square on the hypotenuse would

not be thought of as a number multiplied by itself, but rather as a geometrical square constructed on the side. To say that the sum of two squares is equal to a third square meant that the two squares could be cut up and reassembled to form a square identical to the third square. However, because of his belief that all things are numbers, it would be a natural task to try to prove that the hypotenuse of an isosceles right-angled triangle had a length corresponding to a number. They believed there is a numerical base for all things that has shape and size. With this conception of the universe, they graduated from Arithmetic to Geometry and the structure of reality. The number One, was the generation of all numbers, two represented opinions, three-harmony, four- justice, five-marriage, six-creation, seven- the seven planets, Planets or wondering stars. Odd numbers were thought of as female and even numbers as male. All things for Pythagoras consist of points and units and all distance or lines consist of infinite number of points. To them reality is number and number constitutes the nature of all things (Nwanegbo 251). They believed that in studying the mathematical harmony of the universe, the souls will be purified and we will achieve an inner harmony also. The goal of religion for them was purification and the goal of purification was the salvation of one's soul. They believed that the soul was immortal and that after death it migrates into another body, possibly an animal's body and the only way to achieve release from this "wheel of birth" and the prison of the body was to purify the soul (Lawhead 13).

Therefore, since mathematics prevents us away from the senses and the physical world which was thought to be the soul's prison, pursuing the life of the mind can be a spiritually purifying and liberating endeavour for the soul. Pythagoras, for the purpose of purification of the soul was so interested with mathematics because he believed that mathematics is the best purifier of the soul. What therefore gave rise to the Pythagorean circle was the yearning among humans for a deeply spiritual religion that could provide the means for purifying the soul and for guaranteeing its

immortality. Pythagoras and his group said that all things were made up of numbers, because they were impressed by two things: the regulation of movement, and the harmonious proportions of things and came to the conclusion that it was in the numbers expressing these proportions that the whole of reality consisted (Onyeocha 102). It is good to note from the above that, Pythagoras sees beyond the sensualist horizon of the Ionians, and reaches the degree of abstraction but he fails to perceive the true object of the intelligence, which includes both spiritual and corporeal works. **The three kinds of lives** or by implication the three divisions of the soul distinguished by Pythagoreans are three kinds of men who go to the Olympian games. The lowest class is made up of those who go to buy and sell and make profit. Next are those who go to compete, to gain honours. The highest of all, he thought, are those who go as spectators, who reflect upon and analyse what is happening. Of these, the spectator illustrates the thinker, whose activity as a philosophy liberates him from the involvements of daily and its imperfections (Onyeocha 104).

Pythagoras as a Mystic (orphic) cult

An indebt analysis of all the teachings of Pythagoras appear to reflect his mystical world view. Pythagoras teachings show that he was interested in mathematics for religious reasons. This implies that he and his followers tried to use mathematics to interpret religious issues. This can be buttressed from the fact that he posits that the study of mathematics is the best way to purify the soul. According to Samuel Stumpf, “what gave rise to the Pythagorean sect was the yearning among men for a deeply spiritual religion that could provide the means for purifying the soul and for guaranteeing its immortality” the Pythagorean philosophy postulates that the human soul is immortal and lives in a world for better than the present one we live in the soul of man descended into this world for world for purification from sins committed from past incarnations. The body is the prison of the soul. At death the soul transmigrates into another body, thus leaving one prison

for another. The soul can move from a human body to an animal body depending on the gravity of the offence committed. It is based on this doctrine of transmigration of souls that the Pythagoreans forbid the killing or eating of animals. They believed that even to maltreat an animal is wrong because one could be maltreating a reincarnated soul of a friend or a member of one's own family. The process of reincarnation and transmigration of the soul continues until the soul achieves freedom or liberation. The Pythagoreans believe that through philosophy and abstinence from eating any animal flesh, the soul will be able to achieve salvation and return to the world of the divine and reconcile with the universal spirit or soul. Salvation for them is the liberation of the divine nature in us from bondage of the body. To effectively execute this, they posited that man should abstain from eating meat, beans or fish. The avoidance of beans as was posited is that it smells like the human foetus and many have magico-religious reason (Stumpf 14). Pythagorean mystical religious philosophy reflects the ideology of many ancient religions and mysticism.

Evaluative conclusion

The dawn of the present mystical cycle was analogous. The ideas explained in this work were really very old ones, but destined to emerge in a new form in the future. It appeared in a shape exactly suited to the exigencies of the people to which it came. The time was propitious, for thousands were waiting for it. In its simplest presentation it voiced the urgent truth that there was a way of life within man which, in a materialistic age, he had entirely overlooked. Mysticism stressed the truth that here and now, in the living and suffering heart of a longing humanity there existed the mystic lamp of the spirit which, with careful nurture, would illumine the dark temple of pain and sorrow, disperse the shadows of perplexity and error, and raise the mortal self into alignment with the divine, this is called transmigration of soul.

From the above, it is lucid that mysticism looks to no creed, ignores the imposing authority of men, and makes humble homage to one living within the temple of the soul. Pythagoras, a mystic and a mathematician applied to all things these principles for the sake of purification of the soul. He emphasised form over matter, his followers believed that philosophy is not a matter of intellectual curiosity only but a way of life. For Pythagoras, there was no division between religion and science, or between worship and the intellectual; for intellectual life is a continuum with their religious worship. Invariably, bearing in mind these learnings, Pythagoras studied mathematics for the sake of soul's purification, it would be reasonable to deduce that Pythagoras was more of a mystical philosopher than a mathematician. To say that Pythagoras was more a mystical philosopher than a mathematician may be seen a claim of philosophical absolutism which can still generate a debate. But one thing is sure, whether as a mystical philosopher or a mathematician, the Pythagorean blend of mathematics and mysticism can be a better epistemic tool in the precinct of philosophical epistemology, because in the idea of Pythagoras is containing the epistemic traits that addresses the certainty of knowledge claim and the limitations of human knowledge (Umotong, *The crucible*, 25). It carries also the concept that, there are certain things that are beyond human understanding which is referred to as the unknown. This still goes to ascertain the fact that epistemology deals with the origin and structure of knowledge, as well as the methods and validity of knowledge acquisition of the known and the unknown (Umotong, *Exploration of Knowledge* 14). For Pythagoras, therefore, intuition plays a great role in the aspect of knowledge acquisition and that could be recognised as a reliable source of knowledge rather than sense experience. Controversy concerning Pythagoras' role as a scientist, mystics and mathematician would continue but his philosophical contributions cannot also be downgraded by rational methods.

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