

Pythagoreans, Orphism, and Greek Religion¹

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7.1 Pythagoreanism and Orphism: Introduction

At the end of antiquity the relationship between Orpheus and Pythagoras seemed unproblematic. These two founding figures of Greek culture proclaimed the same theological and metaphysical doctrines, although formulating them in different genres. Proclus, writing about a millennium after Pythagoras founded his association (*hetairia*), could declare that

... all that Orpheus transmitted through secret discourses connected to the mysteries, Pythagoras learnt thoroughly when he completed the initiation at Libethra in Thrace, and Aglaophamus, the initiator, revealed to him the wisdom about the gods that Orpheus acquired from his mother Calliope. (Procl. *in Tim.* 3.168.8)

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For Proclus, just as for his teacher Syrianus, Plato expresses the very same teaching in his dialogues. The Muse Calliope, Orpheus, Aglaophamus, Pythagoras, the Pythagorean Timaeus, and Plato are links in the unbroken chain of transmission of divine wisdom that constitutes the backbone of the Greek philosophical tradition and is at the same time the foundation of the right religious attitude towards the gods.

Proclus reproduces here almost verbatim a text that Iamblichus quotes from a work called *Sacred Discourse (Hieros Logos)*, in which Pythagoras, its purported author, gives a first person account of the story (Iamb. *VP* 146-7). The quotation serves Iamblichus to demonstrate that the core of Pythagorean theology, which takes numbers to be the divine first principles, as well as the exemplary piety of Pythagoras and his followers manifested in their religious taboos and precepts, issue from Orpheus' teaching. "If someone, then, wishes to learn from whence these men received such a degree of piety, it must be said that a clear model for Pythagorean theology according to number is laid down in (the writings of) Orpheus" (Iamb. *VP* 145, tr. Dillon and Hershbell, slightly modified).

Much closer to the time of Pythagoras, the authors of the classical age show no knowledge of his initiation into the Orphic mysteries by Aglaophamus (the story is never attested before Iamblichus' text)² and are often far more sceptical about Orpheus, whom they tend to treat as a mythical character, just as we do. Nonetheless, already the earliest stratum of evidence about Pythagoras and his immediate followers assumes a tight connection with Orphism with regard both to cult and to poems of theological and

² Cf. Brisson 2002. Brisson thinks that Iamblichus himself might have invented the story about Aglaophamus (2002: 421).

eschatological content. Herodotus, composing his *Histories* about sixty years after Pythagoras' death, claimed in a much-discussed passage that “the so-called” Orphics and the Pythagoreans shared with the Egyptians a particular ritual prohibition, which is otherwise alien to Greek tradition and which proscribes burying the dead in wool. Because of a discrepancy between two alternative versions of the transmitted text, it is unclear whether Herodotus speaks about Orphics and Pythagoreans, and if so, whether or not he means to equate the two groups or, alternatively, about Orphic and Bacchic rituals, which he identifies as in reality being Egyptian and Pythagorean.³ On either construal, Herodotus asserts a non-accidental connection between Orphic and Pythagorean funerary ritual, in all probability based on some shared and non-standard eschatological beliefs, which, as Herodotus adds, were explained in sacred discourses (*hieroi logoi*).

Other fifth- and fourth-century BC writers, being doubtful about the historicity of Orpheus, maintained that Pythagoras and his acolytes, far from drawing their wisdom from Orphic writings (as the Neoplatonists would later claim), actually authored those writings. Ion of Chios “says in the *Triagmoi* that he [Pythagoras] composed some poems and attributed them to Orpheus” (D.L. 8.8 = Ion of Chios 36B2 DK; cf. Clement *Strom.* 1.21.131 Stählin). Epigenes, an author plausibly dated to the early fourth century, wrote a treatise with the title *On Works Attributed to Orpheus*. According to the

³ Hdt. 2.81. The latter version, vindicated somewhat tentatively by Burkert (1972a: 127-128), is favored by most current interpreters. For a detailed, and to my mind still rather persuasive, defense of the former version, see Linforth 1941: 38-50 and now Zhmud 2012a: 224.

information transmitted by Clement, Epigenes discussed the authorship of four poems, the *Descent to Hades*, the *Sacred Discourse*, the *Robe*, and the *Physica*, and ascribed each of them to authors whom he took to be Pythagoreans—the first two to Cercops, the latter two to Bro(n)tinus.⁴ The same tradition is recorded also by Cicero: “Aristotle informs us that the poet Orpheus never existed, and the Pythagoreans maintain that the Orphic poem now current was the work of a certain Cercops” (Cicero *ND* 1.107 = Aristotle fr. 7, tr. Walsh). It is tempting to read Herodotus’ remark in the same manner. He knew about “sacred discourses” that were attributed to Orpheus, and that provided the justification for the burial taboos, but Herodotus claims these texts to be of Pythagorean origin.⁵

The affinity between Orphism and Pythagoreanism was thus perceived very early on. There is, however, a fundamental difference. Whereas for the Neoplatonists the theology and piety taught and displayed by Orpheus, and following him Pythagoras, were supremely reverent and at the center of the Greek religious tradition, most authors of the classical age consider them as fringe phenomena, proclaiming outlandish myths

⁴ Clement, *Strom.* 5.8.49 and 1.21.131 Stählin. For this dating, see Linforth 1941: 114-118, followed, with some reservations, by Gagné 2007: 7-8. On this dating, Epigenes might be identical with the one mentioned by Plato (*Ap.* 33e; *Phd.* 59b) and Xenophon (*Mem.* 3.12) as an associate of Socrates. For a later, Hellenistic date, see Zhmud 2012a: 117. See also West 1983: 9.

⁵ The text allows two readings. Herodotus might mean that the *hieroi logoi* are Egyptian (so Burkert 1972a: 219 with n. 10) or that they are Orphic/Pythagorean (so Graf and Johnston 2007: 142 and 175). I am inclined to the latter view.

and prescribing puzzling taboos and alien rituals.⁶ While withholding value judgments, modern historians of religion would agree rather with the second view. Traditional forms of religious practice and belief that permeate the life of every Greek, from birth to death, from dawn to evening, during festivals and on regular days, are firmly rooted in the local traditions of the *polis*. As we shall shortly see, neither the phenomena related to Orphism, nor the beliefs and cultic precepts attributable to Pythagoras and his followers were integrated in these local ancestral traditions. What remains debated is how far membership in a Pythagorean *hetairia* or active participation in Orphic cult activities would actually oppose actors to their respective local traditions and exclude them from institutionalized forms of worship in the *polis* religion. Central to this problem is of course the question of vegetarianism, to which we shall return soon.

Modern assessments of the extent, nature, and direction, of the connection between Orphism and Pythagoreanism remain widely divergent. Some find the association so close that, following a practice current in the earlier part of the last century, they use the coinage “Orphico-Pythagorean” to describe various cultic practices and eschatological ideas. Others emphasize the “fundamental differences” between Orphism and Pythagoreanism (Zhmud 2012a: 228) or argue that they were originally two largely independent and parallel phenomena that got confused on account of some perceived similarities (Kahn 2001: 21). As to the question of historical priority, some think that—even if not quite in the way described by Iamblichus and Proclus—Orphic writings could indeed serve as a major source of inspiration for Pythagorean philosophy and ritual precepts (cf., e.g., Riedweg 2005: 74-76; Guthrie 1993: 219-221). Others

⁶ Cf. Edmonds 2008.

suggest that Pythagoreanism came first, so that “Orphism was the product of Pythagorean influence on Bacchic mysteries” (Bremmer 2002: 15) and that early Orphic poems were primarily, or even exclusively, composed by Pythagoreans (West 1983: 7-20; Kahn 2001: 20). Scholars are not less divided on the question whether the doctrine of metempsychosis, often assumed to be among the most important points of contact, originated with Orphism or was rather introduced into Greece by Pythagoras.

There is nothing surprising in this bewildering discord of voices about the nature of the relationship in view of the lack of consensus about the natures of the two terms of the relationship. It seems easy to agree with Guthrie: “Clearly, the best hope of discovering something about the relationship between Orphics and Pythagoreans lies in an examination of the two system themselves” (Guthrie 1993: 217). But this is exactly where problems erupt; indeed, it is highly doubtful whether one can justifiably speak about “systems” to describe either Orphism or Pythagoreanism.

To be sure, the scholarly landscape has significantly changed since Guthrie first wrote these words in the thirties. On the side of Pythagoreanism, Walter Burkert’s epoch-making *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism* (Burkert 1962a; Burkert 1972a) put the study of early Pythagoreanism on a new footing. By accentuating its religious aspects, and formulating strong reservations about its scientific side, Burkert’s study inevitably brought Pythagoreanism closer to Orphism. At the same time, a series of fascinating archaeological discoveries has made Orphism considerably more tangible. A collection of tiny inscribed bone plates found in Olbia and dated to the fifth century BC strongly suggests that—at least there and then—Orphic communities

existed.⁷ The enigmatic inscriptions of the bone plates indicate a connection between Dionysus, Orphic cult, and an interest in the afterlife. The mention of *bacchoi* on the gold tablets found in Hipponion, and the reference to Dionysus Bacchius releasing the souls of the initiates on the gold tablets found in Pelinna, testify further to the Dionysiac nature (of at least some aspects) of Orphism. The same finds invalidate the attempts of Zuntz to distance the gold tablets from Orphism and to ascribe them to Pythagoreanism.⁸ Finally, the Derveni papyrus, the remains of which were found among the ashes of a funerary pyre close to Thessaloniki, and the text of which was probably written around the time of Plato, presents incontrovertible evidence that Orphic poems of theogonic nature were in circulation by the fifth century at the latest.⁹ Most scholars would agree that the combined weight of this body of newly found evidence makes the hypercritical position of Wilamowitz and Linforth—according to which Orphism as a religious phenomenon is a figment of ideologically motivated modern scholarship—hardly tenable.

Burkert, already taking into account most of the new evidence and armed with his formidable knowledge of Pythagoreanism, summed up a brief but nuanced analysis of

⁷ Cf. Rusjaeva 1978; West 1982; Zhmud 1992b.

⁸ Zuntz 1971. For recent editions and discussions of the gold tablets, see Graf and Johnston 2007; Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal 2008; Edmonds 2011. For a fascinating account of the history of the scholarship on the gold tablets and Orphism, see Graf in Graf and Johnston 2007: Ch. 2. For a recent, and to my mind somewhat desperate, attempt to question that all the gold tablets can be characterized as Orphic, see Edmonds 2011.

⁹ Kouremenos et al. 2006; Betegh 2004.

the relationship with a memorable image: “Bacchic, Orphic, and Pythagorean are circles each of which has its own center, and while these circles have areas that coincide, each preserves its own special sphere” (Burkert 1985: 300). This remains the most promising general characterization; it nonetheless requires due caution and possibly some refinements. Above all, it is not obvious what could count as the respective centers of Pythagoreanism and Orphism—or indeed, if they had such identifiable nubs at all. Moreover, we should not, I would insist, take Burkert’s circles as referring to systems of beliefs, and practices connected to them, with internal consistency and fixed borders. Rather, I would suggest, there was a group of phenomena that can be by some broad characterization ranged under the heading, e.g., “Orphism”; yet there is no guarantee that these phenomena have anything clearly specifiable in common, in terms of beliefs and practices, with all the other phenomena that can with equal right be described as “Orphic.” The gamut of new and old evidence presses for a non-essentialist conception of Orphism. One common feature in Orphism seems to be an authority granted to poems attributed to Orpheus and their use in rituals, which were assumed to have an effect on the fate of the soul—but even this might be too strict because, for instance, Orpheus is not mentioned on the gold tablets, and we cannot be sure whether, and if so how, they were supposed to be connected to Orphic poems. On the other hand, one shared feature among Pythagoreans seems to be the observance of a set of religiously motivated precepts sealed by the authority of Pythagoras—but even this might be too strict, because we don’t have sufficient evidence to show that all Pythagoreans adhered to these laws of conduct and there is reason to think that different Pythagoreans attributed different precepts to the founder. If so, some elements of the batch of Orphic

phenomena can justifiably be linked, more or less closely, with some phenomena, no less multifarious, that we range under the heading “Pythagoreanism.”

In the rest of this chapter, I shall substantiate these claims by presenting a number of examples and concentrating on individual actors, phenomena, and specific texts. First I shall focus on those features that are most commonly considered as the principal areas of overlap between Orphism and Pythagoreanism. The outcome, in some respects, will be on the minimalist side. In the second part of the paper I shall, however, suggest a few possible general and specific points of contact that have received relatively little or no attention.

7.2 Vegetarianism and Metempsychosis in Pythagoreanism and Orphism

The most commonly mentioned points of contact between Orphism and Pythagoreanism are a belief in metempsychosis and, closely related to this, vegetarianism. On a common interpretation of Burkert’s circles, these two are constitutive, or even essential, features of both Orphism and Pythagoreanism, and can therefore safely be located in the area where the two circles intersect.¹⁰ I would suggest a somewhat different picture.

To begin with, I strongly doubt that all actors who were involved in Orphic religious phenomena were vegetarians or believed in metempsychosis. Take for instance the “Superstitious Man” as sketched by Theophrastus (*Char.* 16). Among the

¹⁰ Burkert (1972a: 180-183) presents a more nuanced view about the place of vegetarianism among Pythagoreans, but his caveats are often disregarded. For a confident statement that Pythagoreans were vegetarians, see, e.g., Frank 1923: 223.

hotchpotch of taboos he observes and rituals he performs, he also visits the local Orphic initiators (Ὀρφεοτελεσταί) on a monthly basis with his wife and children to repeat a set of rituals (τελεσθησόμενος). Surely, Theophrastus draws a caricature here. Yet the phenomenon he describes finds confirmation in *Republic 2*, where Plato describes itinerant priests, who perform their rituals according to a “hubbub of books of Musaeus and Orpheus,” and who make rich individuals and whole cities believe that by means of sacrifices, purifications, and incantations they can expiate personal and ancestral guilt and cure or cause harm, as the client wishes (*R.* 364b–365a). The author of the Derveni papyrus presents a comparable image of gullible people who pay for the services of those “who make craft of the holy rites” (*PDerv* col. 20.3-8). Although the clientele of these Orphic initiators was certainly in the sphere of Orphism, there is no compelling reason to suppose that the individuals involved switched to a vegetarian diet, believed in metempsychosis, or had anything to do with Pythagoreanism. The contact with Orphism, Orphic texts and *orpheotelestai* does not seem to bring about any standing alteration in the life-style of these people. Indeed, Adeimantus in the *Republic* finds these practices so reprehensible precisely because they make people think that they can secure various advantages for themselves simply by performing some ritual actions, without any deeper and lasting transformation in their ideas or comportment. Similarly, the Derveni author finds it disappointing and pitiable that people who have paid to go through the rites leave without any genuine understanding or real change.

What about the *orpheotelestai* themselves? We simply don’t know. There is, however, clear evidence that at least some people connected to Orphism led an alternative life-style, that Plato calls “the Orphic life,” the most conspicuous features of

which were vegetarianism and abstention from bloody sacrifices (Plato *Laws* 782c; cf. Euripides *Hipp.* 952; Aristophanes *Frogs* 1032).

The evidence about vegetarianism among Pythagoreans is notoriously confused and confusing, ranging from a denial of Pythagoras' vegetarianism, emphasizing his predilection for certain type of meats (Aristoxenus in Aulus Gellius 4.11; cf. D.L. 8.20), through the attribution of abstention from some animals or parts of animals (e.g., Arist. fr. 195 = D.L. 8.33 and 34; Iamb. *VP* 85), to strict vegetarianism (e.g., Eudoxus in Porph. *VP* 7) among some or all members of the group.¹¹ A unified explanation in which all these pieces of evidence find their places seems impossible. Nonetheless, I find it conceivable that different groups and individuals applied different rules. The very discrepancy among the sources indicates that there was a serious interest in relaxing vegetarianism in such a way that it did not block participation in public rituals involving animal sacrifice and feasting on the ritually slaughtered animals. Although dietary taboos were no doubt important in Pythagoreanism from the beginning and it could be that some Pythagoreans observed a fully meatless diet it appears that a strict form of vegetarianism, allowing no exceptions, was not conceived as a core feature of Pythagoreanism. On the other hand, "hard core" Orphism seems to be characterized precisely by a complete avoidance of bloodshed and the eating of meat and the

¹¹ For a helpful overview of the different sources, see Guthrie 1962: 187-90. On how the first two might be harmonized, see Huffman 2012c: 167-174.

complementary use of alternative “pure sacrifices” (ἀγνὰ θαύματα) based on honey, cakes, etc.¹²

In a great number of sources, starting with Empedocles’ staggering image of father inadvertently slaughtering his son incarnated in a sacrificial animal and children killing their parents and eating their flesh (31B137 DK), adherence to the doctrine of metempsychosis is presented as a preemptory reason for abstention from bloody sacrifices and the eating of meat. The reasoning only works if souls can alternately be incarnated in humans and non-human animals. Yet, apparently even this version of the doctrine does not automatically imply vegetarianism. Plato, to all appearances, was fully committed to metempsychosis, including incarnation in animal bodies, in his late period. Nonetheless, he seems not to have observed or promulgated a meatless diet—indeed, he presents the vegetarian “Orphic life” as something rather distant. Remarkably, his disciple Xenocrates appears to have dissociated the two starting from the opposite direction, observing that the recognition of the fundamental relatedness of all ensouled creatures provides a sufficient reason to become vegetarian, without accepting the doctrine of metempsychosis (Porph. *De Abst.* 4.22 = fr. 98 Heinze).¹³

The new pieces of evidence make it more manifest than ever that the soul and its fate after death were of special concern in Orphism. On one of the Olbia bone plates we read “Dio(nysus),” then “truth” and then “body soul,” whereas in the gravely damaged first columns of the Derveni papyrus the author discusses eschatological topics,

¹² See now also PDerv. col. 6, where the *magoi* and following them the initiates perform bloodless sacrifices involving sacrificial cakes, and wineless libations.

¹³ See Ch. 12.3 below.

including how to secure a safe passage for the soul by appeasing impeding *daimones* (*PDerv* col. 6). The steady growth of gold tablets found in various parts of Greece gives further detail to the picture. However, from this accumulation of data no unified, clearly specifiable doctrine emerges.¹⁴ In particular, the new documents still have not provided incontrovertible evidence for a strong presence of metempsychosis in Orphism. On one of the Olbia bone plates, we read “life death life” below which the word “truth” is inscribed. *Prima facie*, it is natural to think that the sequence was meant to be repeated, and the second mention of “life” refers to a new incarnation. This is, however, not necessary. On the Pelinna gold leaves the soul of the deceased is greeted by the words: “Now you have died and now you have been born, O thrice happy, on this very day.” Surely, rebirth in this case does not mean reincarnation, but a new, better, life after death; the second mention of life following death might mean the same on the Olbia bone plate (Graf 2011: 56). The most explicit reference to metempsychosis remains line 5 of one of the Thurii tablets (Bernabé no. 488 = Graf–Johnston no. 5): “I have flown out of the heavy difficult circle.”

The strongest pieces of evidence come from Plato. In a well-known passage of the *Meno* Socrates evokes “priests and priestesses who have made it their concern to be able to give an account (*logos*) of their practices” and who teach that the immortal soul is periodically reincarnated and punished for previous sins. (81a10-d4). Plato also associates the *logoi* of these officiants with a quotation from Pindar in which we hear

¹⁴ In this stronger sense, Wilamowitz’ of-quoted dictum “One should still prove that there was an Orphic doctrine of the soul” (Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1931 vol. 2: 194) remains valid.

about “the ancient grief” of Persephone (fr. 133). This, in turn, is often, although by no means unanimously, taken to refer to the myth tracing the origins of mankind to the ashes of the Titans who had torn apart and devoured Persephone’s child, the young Dionysus, and were struck by Zeus’ thunderbolt in punishment.¹⁵

Although less often quoted, a passage from the *Laws* is also relevant:

... we must tell the account which is so strongly believed by many when they hear it from those who seriously concern themselves with these matters in the mystic rites (*teletai*): retribution comes in Hades for such [crimes], and when the person returns to this world again from there, one is necessarily obliged to pay the full penalty according to natural justice and suffer the same thing he had meted out to his victim ... (870d5-e2)

¹⁵ It remains debated whether the “Orphic anthropogony” belongs to the archaic stratum of Orphism or whether it was a later invention. Johnston, in her insightful presentation and analysis of the myth, tentatively dates it to the second half of the sixth century BC (Graf and Johnston 2007: Ch. 3). See also Bernabé 2008 (with bibliography) and Alderink 1981: 55-86. For a staunchly sceptical view, arguing that the anthropogonic narrative is a much later invention, see Edmonds 1999. Holzhausen 2004 questions whether Pindar’s verse is a reference to the myth of Dionysus torn apart.

Plato leaves the identity of these priests and cults vague in both the *Meno* and the *Laws*. It is nonetheless fair to assume that the reference at least includes Orphic *teletai*.¹⁶ Plato, thus, seems to know about priestly figures connected to Orphism who propagated a retributive eschatology involving metempsychosis and might have integrated the Dionysiac myth of the origin of mankind into their *logoi*. This, however, seems meager grounds for the claim that metempsychosis was an inalienable feature of Orphism, so that all the *orpheotelestai* whom we hear about in Adeimantus' harangue, Theophrastus, or the Derveni papyrus, and the initiators who distributed the gold tablets all around Greece, made metempsychosis integral to the practices that they derived from the "books of Orpheus and Musaeus." Notably, the individual constituents of the "maximal picture" reconstructed primarily on the basis of these Platonic passages are not indissociable. The Orphic anthropogony does not imply metempsychosis—later generations can inherit the sin of the Titans without being reincarnations of the first humans stemming from the ashes. The reference to the myth of Dionysus on the Pelinna text can make perfect sense without assuming metempsychosis, just as the Derveni author can expound a retributive eschatology without any indication of such a doctrine. All in all, with respect to metempsychosis, we can observe just the reverse of what I

¹⁶ It is often thought (see, e.g., Bernabé 1995) that a further piece in the puzzle is provided by Plato when he quotes in the *Cratylus* (400c1-9) the etymology of "body" (σῶμα) from "tomb" or "sign" (σημα), capturing the belief that our souls are locked up in our bodies as a penalty for a sin. The sin in question could then be the crime of the Titans against Dionysus. Yet, I agree with Burkert 1972a: 248, n. 47 and Huffman forthcoming XXX that Plato does not attribute this etymology to the Orphics.

have remarked above about vegetarianism. Metempsychosis is one of the most well-documented tenets of Pythagoras¹⁷—even though it remains unclear whether or not it was standardly accepted by his followers¹⁸—whereas the evidence for metempsychosis in early Orphism remains relatively scarce and mostly indirect.¹⁹

To sum up, the evidence invites a decidedly pluralistic picture. There were some actors in the sphere of Orphism, such as some of the *orpheotelestai* and their initiates, who were vegetarians, probably but not necessarily because they believed in metempsychosis, possibly but by no means necessarily in connection with the myth about Dionysus and the Titanic origins of mankind, and there were others who did not avoid meat and had different, more or less clear-cut eschatological conceptions.²⁰ Greek religion is marked by a high degree of variation at the level of local communities and individual conceptions. I find no reason to believe that phenomena connected with Orphism would constitute an exception to this general characteristic. This entails that

¹⁷ See Ch. 1 above. For a balanced recent review of the evidence, see Casadesús 2011, with bibliography of the earlier literature.

¹⁸ Nothing in the fragments of Philolaus and Archytas decides this question. Cebes' report in Plato's *Phaedo* (61d) that Philolaus forbade suicide cannot be taken as conclusive evidence for his belief in metempsychosis. For a fascinating account of Philolaus' concept of *psychê* and its possible connection with Pythagoras' own views, see Huffman 2009.

¹⁹ For a more confident recent statement about the presence of metempsychosis in Orphism, see Bernabé 2011.

²⁰ Cf. also Johnston in Graf and Johnston 2007: 135.

the relationship of actors, their practices and beliefs, to Pythagoreanism was far from homogenous.

Let me conclude this part of the chapter with an additional observation. One recurrent element in the different texts connected to Orphism is a focus on *teletai* (mystic rites). Indeed, Orpheus was often supposed to be the one who introduced such rites into Greece (e.g., Aristophanes *Frogs* 1032; [Euripides] *Rhesus* 933–944; Diodorus 4.25.3). As opposed to the private and communal ritual actions performed at regular intervals according to the laws of the *polis*, *teletai* were isolated events of special importance, performed once in a lifetime or at times of extreme crisis. (Theophrastus' *Superstitious Man* becomes ridiculous by performing them on a regular basis.) Contact with Orphism, for most people, focused on these extra-ordinary occasions that were supposed to change the status of the individual into an initiate, remove the malefic effects of personal or ancestral guilt, and hence cure present ills and secure a better afterlife.

The Pythagorean precepts, by contrast, concern primarily actions of everyday life, what to do and what to avoid, from how to leave one's bed in the morning, through what to steer clear of in one's everyday dealings, to observing silence when the lights are out at night. The emphasis is on how to *maintain* purity by a regulated standing praxis, rather than on how to *regain* purity by ritually paying the penalty for personal or inherited sin on the special occasions of the *teletai*. This is fully in line with the sociological aspect of the two phenomena. In Pythagoreanism, membership in a Pythagorean *hetairia* is crucial—and this meant standing social interactions, common

meals, and life-long personal ties. Such a set-up is obviously more geared towards a regulation of everyday life than the one-off encounters with an *orpheotelestes*.²¹

7.3 Reinterpretation of Natural Philosophy

Up to this point, I have primarily concentrated on the performative side, *teletai* and their participants, as well as broad eschatological conceptions and their possible connections with alternative life-style and diet. Let us now turn to the level of literary phenomena, texts written by Pythagoreans and poems attributed to Orpheus, and the more specific doctrinal points expressed in them. After all, our sources from the classical age locate the connections primarily at this level. I will start by bluntly stating three broad structural features, which—I would suggest—are shared by related phenomena within Orphism and Pythagoreanism, once again taken in the highly pluralistic sense for which I have argued above. First, in both cases there is an authority figure, Orpheus and Pythagoras respectively, whose special authority has particular relevance for religious beliefs and practices, although it is not necessarily restricted to such beliefs and practices. It is noteworthy that the early Greek tradition does not know of many such religious authorities apart from these two. Second, the pronouncements of these authority figures, revealed in the Pythagorean *symbola* and the Orphic poems, allow, or indeed require, interpretation. These interpretations can take various forms from literal to strongly allegorical interpretations. Third, both the original pronouncements

²¹ On the sociological differences, see Burkert 1982 (without however accepting Burkert's characterization of Pythagorean *hetairiai* as "sects").

attributed to the authority figures and the interpretations offered thereof include theoretical considerations and are in constant contact with current philosophical developments. Yet, at the same time, they give these theoretical considerations and concepts a new religious significance. In what follows, I will give examples to unpack these bald statements. I have picked cases that will, I hope, make palpable how these features manifest themselves in Pythagorean and Orphic texts, but which can at the same time point towards more subtle, specific interconnections between Orphic and Pythagorean documents.

Aristotle in the first chapter of *On the Heavens* argues for the claim that the maximal number of dimensions is three, because three is *teleion*, "complete and perfect." He draws his central argument from the Pythagoreans:

For, just as the Pythagoreans say, the whole and all things are delimited (or "defined," ὁρισται) by the three; for end, middle, and beginning have the number of the whole, which is that of the triad. Wherefore, we use this number also in the worship of the gods, taking it from nature, as a law of it. (268^a10-15)²²

Although Aristotle does not identify the rituals that are supposed to evince the prominence and specific meaning of the number three, we know that several cult actions in Greek religion had to be repeated thrice. Most relevant is that people at *symposia* and other communal meals—which had a central role also in the life of Pythagorean

²² For a detailed discussion of Aristotle's reference to the Pythagoreans in *Cael.* 1.1, see Betegh et al 2013, esp. Appendix 2.

hetairiai (associations)—performed the third and final libation to Zeus *Sôtêr* (Deliverer) also called Zeus *Teleios* (Fulfiller).

Attributing a specific significance to the number three appears to be part of typical Pythagorean number speculation. Connecting it with wholeness through the trio of beginning, middle, and end is, so to speak, “topic neutral”; Aristotle is just using it for the demonstration of a highly abstract metaphysical point. It is, however, backed up by a reference to standard religious practice, which can also evoke the targeted term *teleios*. The outcome is double. On the one hand, the religious customs regulating the performance of these ritual actions now turn out to be applications of a higher numerological principle: these religious customs (*nomoi*) are derived from the role of the number three in nature, conceived as a law (*nomos*) of it. Yet, the rituals in question do not get thereby “naturalized” in the sense of losing their religious significance; rather, the number three receives religious significance from its application in cult.

Remarkably, some commentators have suggested that the Pythagoreans took their clue from Orphic poetry in elaborating this interpretation of the number three. According to a verse quoted in the Derveni papyrus (col. 17.12), and the pseudo-Aristotelian *De Mundo* (401^a29), “Zeus is head, Zeus is middle, all things take their being from Zeus.” Plato refers to the same line in the *Laws* (715e7–716a1) when he says “the god, as the ancient *logos* also holds, has the beginning, end, and the middle of all beings.”²³ It is important to note that the verse refers to a key episode in the Orphic theogony. At the beginning of his reign, and in order to secure his power, Zeus swallowed the first principle of generation (either the primeval god Phanes or the

²³ Cf. Burkert 1972a: 467 n. 6; Moreaux 1965: xxx–xxxii.

phallus of Ouranos) and with it all beings that then existed. Zeus then effected a second generation by bringing to light all the constitutive parts of the cosmos and the gods that populate it. It is in this sense that Zeus can be called “beginning, middle, and end” and the source of all becoming. The reference to end (τελευτή) seems to mean that Zeus, with his second creation, gives completeness and final form to things. The reference to middle might evoke Zeus’ centrality. This staggering myth is a reflection on the “One–Many Problem,” that has a central place in Presocratic philosophical speculations: how can all existing things arise from a single *archê* (starting point, first principle), and how can all things be absorbed into that one entity. At the same time, it is a solution, still in the language of mythology, to a problem inherent in succession myths: how can the most important divinity, who rules the cosmos, be a mere scion and not the *archê*? This problem has, once again, clear resonances in Presocratic philosophy. Yet, crucially, these Orphic poems of theogonic content were not merely expressions of abstract theological and philosophical considerations, but were used in the *teletai*, thus reintegrating theogonic narratives into actual ritual practice. Whether or not they are historically connected, the Pythagorean view about the number three as reported by Aristotle and the central episode of the Orphic theogonic narrative show a comparable interconnectedness of theoretical considerations and religious significance.

My second example comes from Philolaus. This is how he describes the first stage of cosmogony:

The first thing to be fitted together—the one, in the center of the sphere—is called the Hearth (*hestia*) (44B7 DK).

The item that has thus come into being is arguably the boldest original constituent of Philolaus' non-geocentric cosmological theory. Modern discussions customarily refer to it periphrastically as “the central fire”; yet, as we can see from this fragment, Philolaus' own preferred term was “hearth” (cf. Arist. fr. 203 = Alex. Aphr. in *Metaph.* 38.20; Aët. 3.11.3, etc.). This appellation is outstandingly rich in signification and we lose a great deal by forgoing it.

First, the Greek proverbial phrase “starting from the hearth” means to begin from a proper starting point (Aristophanes *Wasps* 846; Plato *Euthphr.* 3a7, *Cra.* 401b1, etc.)—already a strong, albeit implicit, argument for starting the cosmogony with the Hearth. Hestia was also the first of the children of Cronus and for this reason the recipient of special honors among humans and gods alike (*Hom. Hymn* 5.31–32; 29.1–4). Second, *hestia* also had strong associations with the middle point: the hearth is at the center of the house (μέσῳ οἴκῳ *Hom. Hymn* 5.30).²⁴ Priority, location in the middle, and fieriness—Philolaus can draw on the religious tradition in establishing all the key features of his otherwise striking innovation. This novel idea is fully motivated by metaphysical and physical considerations and finds its place in the framework of Presocratic cosmological speculations;²⁵ yet, at the same time, it incorporates, and thereby reinterprets, elements of the religious tradition. The Hearth can henceforth function not merely as a key element in a cosmological theory, but also as an archetype of the individual hearths of households and communities, and its generation at the start

²⁴ On the spatial connotations of Hestia, see also Vernant 1983.

²⁵ See Ch. 3 above.

of the cosmogonical process can be conceived as a quasi-aetiological myth for them. Note also, that the priority of *Hestia* was manifested in cult practice according to which the first (and in some sources also the last) libation had to be offered to it/her at communal meals (*Hom. Hymn* 29.6). One can easily imagine that for members of Philolaus' Pythagorean *hetairia*, and for others familiar with his theory, the libation they performed for Hestia at the start of banquets acquired a new layer of significance.

Similarly, by putting the Hearth at the center of his astronomical system, Philolaus immediately conveys the image that the cosmos is one large household populated by relatives—this might very well be related to the Pythagorean idea of the connectedness and friendship linking the main structural features of the cosmos and all living beings in it (cf. Plato *Grg.* 507e6–508a4). Then again, one of the most notable rituals connected with *Hestia* was the *amphidromia*, literally “running-around” the hearth, by which the newborn were introduced into the household—this can easily evoke the image of the heavenly bodies orbiting around the Hearth. Moreover, the *polis* also had its own hearth, a permanent fire in the Prytaneum, “the symbolic center of the government of the city,” in which Hestia could function as the “unmoving emblem of permanence and legitimacy” (Parker 2005: 404). There is moreover reason to think that the Prytaneum was originally the hearth of the monarch (Farnell 1909: 350). If so, it becomes easier to understand why Philolaus also called the Hearth the “tower of Zeus” and “garrison of Zeus” (Huffman 2007: 83). The mythologizing interpretation of major constitutive parts of the physical world and a renewed attribution of religious significance to them, is highly reminiscent of the cosmological Pythagorean *symbola* that call the sea “the tears of Kronos,” the Bears “the hands of Rhea,” the planets “the hounds of Persephone,” the

sun and the moon “the Isles of the Blessed,” and so forth (Arist. fr. 196 R³ = Porph. *VP* 41; cf. also Arist. *Mete.* 345^a14). It is important to emphasize, however, that Philolaus’ Hearth is fully incorporated in a developed physical, cosmological theory, whereas the Pythagorean *symbola* are enigmatic snippets.

Philolaus’ Hearth might also bring us back to the Derveni papyrus in an unexpected way.²⁶ In the longer and better preserved second part of the papyrus, the anonymous author offers an allegorical interpretation of a poem he explicitly attributes to Orpheus: the poem relates the peculiar story we have already mentioned above about Zeus’ seizing royal power, whereas the Derveni author translates this mythical narrative into a Presocratic type cosmogony. The precosmic—that is pre-Zeus—state of the world was characterized by the disorderly motion of all the elements. The cause of the disarray

²⁶ The Presocratic background of the Derveni author’s cosmogony is discussed in detail in Betegh 2004, and in the Introduction and Commentary of Kouremenos et al. 2006, Philolaus however receives almost no attention in these treatments. The only sustained effort to show the relevance of the Derveni papyrus for Pythagoreanism is Burkert 1968: esp. 107–109, followed by Riedweg 2005: 89. Burkert, however, focuses not on the Derveni author’s interpretation, but rather on the Orphic theogony. He aims to show that there are parallels between Phanes, the primeval double-sexed god of the Orphic theogony, and the One and the central fire of the Pythagorean/Philolaic cosmogony in so far as both embody (i) the ultimate origin of all later beings, (ii) the primal co-existence of fundamental pairs of opposites (iii) and the first appearance of light and brightness. I agree with Huffman 2008e: 213–15 that the assumed parallels are rather strained.

was that fire intermingled with the other elements, kept them in unceasing motion, and did not let them combine. When the divine Mind wanted to put things into cosmic order, and allow the formation of distinct objects and stable structures, he collected the excess of fire into one large mass, and placed it in the middle (col. 15.3–5). This agglomeration of fire in the Derveni text is not Philolaus’ hallmark central fire, but the sun. Nonetheless, no other early cosmogony is triggered by the formation of a ball of fire in the center of the would-be cosmos.²⁷

But there is more. In the fragment quoted above, Philolaus states that the Hearth was the first thing “fitted together” (ἀρμωσθην). In Philolaus’ system, this means that the Hearth was the first harmonious combination of the two types of principles, “limiters” and “unlimiteds.” Huffman has very plausibly suggested that the “unlimited” in this case is the elemental stuff of fire, unbounded and formless in and of itself. Huffman at the same time maintains that the “limiter” involved is the determinate and fixed location of the geometrical center (Huffman 1993: 227). However, it is just as plausible, it seems to me, that the determinate size and shape—i.e. its actual spatial limits—must also be among the limiters contributing to the formation of the Hearth.²⁸ If so, not only the

²⁷ There is also some similarity between the way Philolaus 44B17 and PDerv. col. 15.4–5 describes the symmetry relations in terms of the things above and things below the centrally positioned fire.

²⁸ Note that a combination of “limiters” and “unlimiteds” is harmonious not merely in so far as their product shows internal coherence and stability, but also because the emerging entity fits harmoniously into larger structures of which it forms a part. This is how I read, e.g., the end of 44B6 DK.

position, but also the dimensions of the Hearth are important features that allow a functional, harmonious, and stable cosmic order to develop around it. This, in turn, agrees with what the Derveni author says in a key sentence:

If the god had not wished that the things that are now should exist, he would not have made the sun. But he made it of such a sort and of such a size as is explained in the beginning of the account. (col. 25.10–12)

Both cosmogonical narratives thus start with the formation of a ball of fire at the center, and in both systems the position and dimension of this entity are the preconditions of the ensuing generation of a cosmic order. Moreover, in both systems this primal aggregation of fire remains a motor force and a generative power of life on earth.²⁹

Information about the next steps of Philolaus' cosmogony is scarce. Nonetheless, what we do have is noteworthy. A crucial piece of information comes from Aristotle's lost treatise on the Pythagoreans:

The world is one, and time and breath and the void, which always distinguishes the place of each thing, are drawn in from the unlimited (Arist. fr. 201 R³).

As a close parallel with Philolaus' embryological theory proves, breath (*πνοή*) is necessary for the further development of the cosmos in so far as it can counterbalance the heat of the central fire (Huffman 1993: 213). For his part, the Derveni author

²⁹ For Philolaus, cf., e.g., *Simpl. in Phys.* 1354.2; Arist. fr. 204.

identifies the demiurgic divine Mind with elemental air, one aspect of which is breath (*πνεῦμα* col. 18.2); the primary cosmological function of air is precisely to cool and bridle the excessive heat of fire. Thus, in both theories, the crucial step in the cosmogonic narrative, leading to the formation of individual entities, is the interaction between hot fire and the cooling air.

I have suggested that there are some remarkable points of contact between central elements of the cosmogonical theories of Philolaus and the Derveni author.³⁰ These and possible further parallels notwithstanding, there is at least one striking difference, which highlights an intriguing feature of early Pythagoreanism. The main character in the Derveni author's cosmogony is the demiurgic divine Mind: it is Mind who forms the sun, thereby organizing the cosmos in a teleological way, and who purposefully bridles the heat of fire and demarcates individual entities. This is fully in line with the fact that the theory is presented as the true meaning of the Orphic poem that relates Zeus' founding of the world. As opposed to this, Philolaus never says what or who brought it about that limiters and unlimiteds suddenly started to fit together, and he never explains why precisely the particular limiters and unlimiteds that constitute the *Hearth* combined first. This difference might reflect Orphic literature's predilection for mythological narratives about the gods, whereas properly theological considerations are strikingly

³⁰ I develop the parallels between Philolaus and the Derveni author in a separate paper, which is in preparation.

missing from early Pythagorean documents.³¹

By juxtaposing these dispersed pieces of evidence, I have tried suggest that a number of texts coming from Pythagorean and Orphic sources share a general methodology of giving new religious relevance to concepts issuing from and integrated into natural philosophy. Thus, the connection between Orphism and Pythagoreanism might take subtler forms than adherence to metempsychosis and a vegetarian diet. Yet, this is not a unified methodology but can come in many shades and forms. Nor again would it characterize all Orphic or Pythagorean texts or be limited to them. For instance, there is no discernible trace of either in the fragments of Archytas, whose work is otherwise connected in many ways with that of Philolaus. Similarly, it might very well be that the Derveni author is a solitary case within Orphism. On the other hand, this type of reintegration of religious notions into a cosmological framework, once again with different emphases, is characteristic also of Heraclitus and Empedocles. But, crucially, neither of them would accept either Orpheus or Pythagoras as the highest authority in religious or cosmological matters but would want to present themselves as the ultimate source of wisdom. This is where, I think, we have reached the limits of Orphism and Pythagoreanism.

So, in speaking about the relationship between Pythagoreanism and traditional religion, what ultimately matters are the relations between local cults and myths and the

³¹ It is a telling fact that authoritative discussions of the theology of the Presocratics such as Jaeger 1947, Vlastos 1952, or Broadie 1999, say next to nothing on the Pythagoreans. The attempt in Drozdek 2007: Ch. 5 to remedy the situation does not yield convincing results.

Pythagorean precepts and reinterpretations of mythical concepts. There is not any real, deep conflict here. There are additional requirements on a Pythagorean in terms of taboos and rituals but no strong tension or incompatibility. There are re-elaborations and novel layers of significance given to religious ideas but—once again—no antagonism. We don't find either overt criticism of traditional beliefs from the side of Pythagorean natural philosophy, in the fashion of Xenophanes, or an alternative comprehensive mythological account of the gods as in the Orphic theogonies. Pythagoras' privileged relation to Apollo—the exact nature of which has been debated since antiquity—can also be appreciated in this general framework. Pythagoras might well build on already existing local cults of Apollo in Croton, integrate the authority of the pan-Hellenic cult of the Delphic Apollo,³² and finally introduce the promise of the piety, justice, and toil-free existence of the mythical Hyperboreans, by taking up the persona of the Hyperborean Apollo.

³² Cf. Aristoxenus' report (fr. 15) according to which Pythagoras built his ethical doctrines on the teaching of the Delphic priestess Themistoclea. On the relationship between Apollo and Pythagoras, see also the remarks of Rowett in Ch. 5 of this volume.

