

1. Early Pythagoreans: Themistoclea, Theano, Arignote, Myia, and Damo

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Pythagoreanism represented an active and popular school of philosophy from the end of the 6th century B.C. through the 2nd or 3rd centuries A.D. The original or “early” Pythagoreans included the immediate members of his family and other successors who headed Pythagorean societies or cults in parts of Greece and southern Italy. Early Pythagoreans are to be distinguished from “late” Pythagoreans of the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C. and from the “neo Pythagoreans” of the 1st century B.C. through perhaps the 3rd century A.D. The early Pythagoreans included Themistoclea, Theano, Arignote, Myia and Damo. With the possible exception of Themistoclea, these women were members of Pythagoras’ family. Late Pythagoreans, including Phintys, Aesara of Lucania, Perictione, (possibly) Perictione II, and Theano II can better be described as philosophers in the Pythagorean tradition. They probably lived *circa* 4th-2nd centuries B.C.¹

I. THEMISTOCLEA, ARIGNOTE, AND DAMO

The ancient sources indicate that women were active in early Pythagorean societies and may have played a central role in the development of early Pythagorean philosophy. Diogenes Laertius² reports that:

Aristonexus asserts that Pythagoras derived the greater part of his ethical doctrines from Themistoclea, the priestess at Delphi.

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Early Pythagoreans viewed the cosmos or universe as orderly and harmonious. Everything bears a particular mathematical relationship to everything else. Harmony and order exist when things are in their proper relationship to each other. This relationship can be expressed as a mathematical proportion. One of the “sacred discourses” is attributed to Pythagoras’ daughter, Arignote.³ According to Arignote:⁴

... the eternal essence of number is the most providential cause of the whole heaven, earth and the region in between. Likewise it is the root of the continued existence of the gods and daimones, as well as that of divine men.

Arignote’s comment is consistent with one attributed to her mother, Theano of Crotona in that all that exists, all that is real can be distinguished from other things through enumeration. The eternal essence of number is also directly related to the harmonious coexistence of different things. This harmony can be expressed as a mathematical relationship. In these two ways, number is the cause of all things: without it we could not enumerate, delineate, and distinguish among things, and it expresses the orderly relationships among things.

II. THEANO OF CROTONA

Theano was the daughter of Brontinus, a Crotona orphic and aristocrat. She first became the pupil of Pythagoras of Samos, and later his wife. In a document attributed to a larger work by her, *On Piety*,⁵ she alludes to the metaphysical concepts of imitation and participation. The text is translated by Vicki Lynn Harper:⁶

I have learned that many of the Greeks believe Pythagoras said all things are generated from number. The very assertion poses a difficulty: How can things which do not exist even be conceived to generate? But he did not say that all things come to be from number; rather, in accordance with number – on the grounds that order in the primary sense is in number and it is by participation in order that a first and a second

and the rest sequentially are assigned to things which are counted.

Theano is saying that when we ask what is the nature of an object, we can reply either by drawing an analogy between that object and something else, or we can define the object. According to her, Pythagoras meant to express an analogy between things and numbers. This is the concept of imitation: things are like numbers. By its participation in the universe of order and harmony, an object, whether corporeal or not, can be sequenced with all other objects and can be counted. Things can be counted in accordance with number, the primary sense of which is ordering.

The document attributed to Theano of Crotona appears to have been unknown to Aristotle who said that the Pythagoreans:⁷

... construct natural bodies out of numbers, things that have lightness and weight out of things that have not weight or lightness...

If we read Theano's "things" to mean "corporeal, or physical objects," as I think we must, given her use of the term "generate," she is claiming only that corporeal things do not come into existence from number itself because number is non-corporeal. Rather, it is number that enables us to distinguish one thing from another. By enumerating things as first, second, etc., we tacitly claim to be able to specify the physical parameters of the thing: it begins here, it ends there, and between the beginning and the end is one object. Thus in enumerating we also delineate objects. We can tell that something is an object because we can count it.

An apothegem attributed to Theano concerns two well-known Pythagorean doctrines: the immortality of souls, and the transmigration of souls. Theano confirms that the Pythagoreans believed in "divine justice" in the afterlife and in the transmigration of souls after death into a new body which was not necessarily human. From this apothegem, we get a picture of a process of transmigration through which harmony can be restored to the universe when a person has disrupted that harmony by violating the moral law during their lifetime. Theano connects morality with cosmology by showing why there should be no doubt about the immortality of the soul:⁸

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If the soul is not immortal, then life is truly a feast for evil-doers who die after having lived their lives so iniquitously.

In a principled, harmonious universe, everything has its own place and performs its own functions according to some law: the laws of physics, of logic, or of morality and religion. Evil or immoral actions are contrary to law, and contribute to disorder and discord. According to Theano, if the soul is not immortal, then those who contribute to disorder not only get a kind of free ride throughout life at the expense of those whom they have wronged, but they also disrupt the orderliness of the universe. If balance and harmony in the universe is to be restored, souls must be immortal. Then the immoral can restore order by accepting the punishment of being reborn as something less than a human being and by living that later life as required by the moral law.

Stobaeus quotes several apothegms by Theano which reveal Pythagorean attitudes toward women. A wife's sexual activity is to be restricted to pleasing her husband – she is not to have other lovers. In the context of marriage, chastity and virtue are not identified with abstinence. When Theano was asked how many days following sexual intercourse are required for a woman to once again be considered “pure,” her reply was that if the activity was with the woman's own husband, she remains pure, but if it was with someone else, she can never again become pure.⁹ When asked what duties are incumbent upon a married woman, her response is “to please her husband.”¹⁰ Theano viewed romantic love as nothing more than “the natural inclination of an empty soul.”¹¹ These quotes can perhaps best be understood in the light of the writings of the later Pythagorean philosophers, Phintys, Theano II, Perictione, Aesara of Lucania and Perictione II. From their writings we see that Pythagorean doctrines are to be applied to personal and to family life. Women, whose special virtue is temperance, bear the responsibility for maintaining law and justice (or harmony) within the home. According to Aesara of Lucania¹² the home is a microcosm of the state. Consequently women bear a large responsibility for creating the conditions under which harmony and order, and law and justice can exist in the state. A woman who doesn't understand this is likely to contribute to

disorder, discord, and chaos. When we read Theano's apothegms in this context, we can better appreciate the force of her comment:¹³

Better to be on a runaway horse than to be a woman who does not reflect.

III. MYIA

Myia is mentioned as one of the daughters of Theano and Pythagoras.¹⁴ She was married to an athlete, Milo (sometimes referred to as Milon, Mylon, or even Meno) who came from her mother's native Crotona. It was in her home that Pythagoras was burned to death. Like the other women Pythagoreans, she writes about the application of the principle of *harmonia* in the daily life of a woman. Her letter to Phyllis discusses the importance of filling the needs of a newborn infant in accordance with that principle. Her point seems to be that a newborn naturally desires that which is appropriate to its needs, and what it needs is moderation: neither too little nor too much food, clothing, heat, cold, fresh air, etc. What is interesting about her letter is the suggestion that the newborn naturally desires moderation in everything, and that it benefits most from moderation. For these reasons, the new mother must select a nurse that is temperate, also. The nurse must not be given to excesses of sleep or drink, and must moderate her husband's sexual appetite (presumably because pregnancy will prevent lactation). She must "do all things well at the appropriate time." She must be attuned to the well-being of the child, and temper her own needs so that her nurturing of the newborn will contribute to its being well-raised.

*Text of Myia's letter to Phyllis*¹⁵

Myia to Phyllis: Greetings. Because you have become a mother, I offer you this advice. Choose a nurse that is well-disposed and clean, one that is modest and not given to excessive sleep or drink. Such a woman will be best able to judge how to bring up your children in a manner appropriate

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to their free-born station – provided, of course, that she has enough milk to nourish a child, and is not easily overcome by her husband’s entreaties to share his bed. A nurse has a great part in this which is first and prefatory to a child’s whole life, i.e., nurturing with a view to raising the child well. For she will do all things well at the appropriate time. Let her offer the nipple and breast and nourishment, not on the spur of the moment, but according to due consideration. Thus will she guide the baby to health. She should not give in whenever she herself wishes to sleep, but when the newborn desires to rest; she will be no small comfort to the child. Let her not be irascible or loquacious or indiscriminate in the taking of food, but orderly and temperate and – if at all possible – not foreign but Greek. It is best to put the newborn to sleep when it has been suitably filled with milk, for then rest is sweet to the young, and such nourishment is easy to digest. If there is any other nourishment, one must give food that is as plain as possible. Hold off altogether from wine, because of its strong effect, or add it sparingly in a mixture to the evening milk. Don’t continually give the child baths. A practice of infrequent baths, at a mild temperature, is better. In addition, the air should have a suitable balance of heat and cold, and the house should not be too drafty or too closed in. The water should be neither hard nor soft, and the bed-clothes should be not rough but falling agreeably on the skin. In all these things nature yearns for what is fitting, not what is extravagant. These are the things it seems useful to write to you for the present: my hopes based on nursing according to plan. With the help of god, we shall provide feasible and fitting reminders concerning the child’s upbringing again at a later time.

The reader may be impressed, as I was, at the extent to which this advice of temperance is carried out by Myia herself: she ends the letter with the statement that “these are the things it seems useful to write to you for the present...” There is moderation even in the giving of advice, for she promises more later on, when it will be “fitting” to remind Phyllis of other details of harmonious childrearing! This closing statement summarizes what it is that the

Pythagorean women see themselves *really* doing through their letters and texts. There is something task-oriented about Myia's letter, and those of Theano II, as well as the fragments by Perictione I and Phytis. It is their task as women philosophers to teach to other women that which women need to know if they are to live their lives harmoniously and, as Aesara of Lucania suggests, create justice and harmony in their souls and in their homes. Likewise, it is the task of men philosophers to teach to other men that which men need to know if they are to live their lives harmoniously, creating justice and harmony in their souls and in the state. This task orientation in part explains, and in part merely describes the reasons for the "realistic" approach to moral philosophy that the women take, as well as the "ideal" approach to it that men take. They take different approaches because their tasks are different. Their tasks are different because the natures of men and women differ.

NOTES

1. See Ch. 4, Authenticating the Fragments and Letters.
2. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, R.D. Hicks, transl. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942. V, 341.
3. Armand Delatte, *Études sur la littérature Pythagoricienne*, Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, 217, Paris, 1915.
4. Peter Gorman, *Pythagoras, A Life*, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 90.
5. Thesleff, Holger, "Pythagorean Texts of the Hellenistic Period," *Acta Academiae Aboensis, Humaniora*, Ser. A. Vol. 30, 1, p. 125 (1965) Stob., 1.10.13, 125 Wa.
6. Harper adopts the reading $\gamma\epsilon\nu\upsilon\alpha\nu. \delta \delta\epsilon$ (Heeren), following Thesleff.
7. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1090a22.
8. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, IV.7.
9. Stobaeus, *Eclogae Physicae Dialecticae et Ethicae* (Hense) IV, 586.
10. *Op. cit.*, 587.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Various spelled "Aisara" and "Aresas," the latter sometimes confused with a male of that name who was not the same as our Aesara.
13. Stobaeus (Meineke) *Florilegium*, 268.
14. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, IV, 19., *Suda Lexicon*, s.v. "Myia," "Theano." Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras*, 30 and 36.
15. Thesleff, *op. cit.*, 123-4; Hercher, *Epistolographi Graeci*, 608. Translated by Vicki Lynn Harper.