

# PYTHAGORAS ON JUSTICE AND LAW

*Ioana SASU-BOLBA\**

## **Abstract**

*Pythagoras, one of the best-known but also controversial ancient Greek philosophers, can be approached from various angles. Known especially through his mathematical formulas, as a philosopher, the very position among legislators is a controversial act and, somehow, one of courage, because his conceptions on justice and laws are weird. Still, like most of his contemporaries, he believed in the natural order of things, claiming, for instance, that the moment people need laws they are no longer fit for freedom. Consequently, the link among democracy, justice and freedom, a link that seems to us only natural, is broken down. In this conflicting situation, a decisive part redounds to education. Education is very important and should start from early childhood, because only in this way the destroyed equilibrium can be remedied.*

**Key Words:** *Ancient Greek philosopher / legislator / justice / law / natural order of things / freedom / democracy / education*

JEL Classification: *[K10]*

**1.1 Pythagoras** is one of the most famous ancient Greek philosophers. He lived from about 570 to 490 BC. He spent his youth on the island of Samos, on the coast of modern Turkey. At the age of forty, he moved to the city of Croton in southern Italy and most of his philosophical activity took place there.

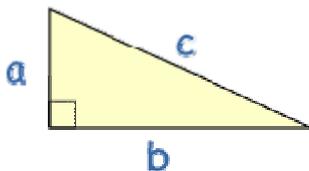
It seems almost unbelievable that a man, subject of so many debates, didn't write anything, nor were his thoughts to be found in the writings of his contemporaries. Still, it became fashionable quite soon to present Pythagoras in an unhistorical fashion as a semi-divine figure, who created all that was true in the Greek philosophical tradition, including many of Plato's and Aristotle's ideas. Edouard Schuré, in his interesting book *Les Grands Initiés* (the hidden history of world religions), includes him among Rama, Krishna, Moise, Platon and Jesus as being at the basis of world religions and esoteric beliefs. Consequently, we come to know his opinions not from himself, but mainly through Plato's and Aristotle's ones. Nowadays, a number of treatises are considered to belong to him and other Pythagoreans in order to support his view.<sup>1</sup> Pythagoras believed that "number rules the universe". However, his theorem that can be written as an equation relating the

---

\* Lecturer, Ph.D., "Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University Bucharest, Faculty of Law Cluj Napoca, Romania.

<sup>1</sup> Apud: [plato.stanford.edu/entries/pythagoras/](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pythagoras/).

lengths of the sides  $a$ ,  $b$  and  $c$ , often called the "Pythagorean equation":  $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ , will be true forever.<sup>2</sup>



The Pythagorean Theorem states that, *in a right triangle, the square of a* ( $a^2$ ) *plus the square of b* ( $b^2$ ) *is equal to the square of c* ( $c^2$ ):

$$a^2 + b^2 = c^2$$

It was also fashionable in Pythagoras' time to believe in *the natural order of things*, to distinguish between what is ordained by nature or by custom. Hence, the search for *objectivism* within which natural phenomena played an important part. But the most significant part of the Pythagorean doctrine is to be found in its *treatment of justice*.

**1.2** Pythagoras had a quite strange conception concerning justice and laws. He said, for instance, that as soon as laws are necessary for men, they are no longer fit for freedom.<sup>3</sup> And also: Educate the children and it won't be necessary to punish the men. Still, he said, without Justice, no realm may prosper.

Pythagoras believed in the *power of numbers*. He calls justice the "equal multiple of itself". This is what is regularly referred to as the *square number*.<sup>4</sup> In the Pythagorean philosophy *retribution* measures the spirit of justice and is not restricted to punishment only. The word *justice* is not used in the ordinary sense. It means the fixing of an *equivalent reparation*. It offers an important view on justice, or the concept of *right*, which appears repeatedly in the philosophy of law.

However, in the Pythagorean School what is notable is the formulation of a *practical ethical regulation of life*, an advancement of ethical principles. We do not know to what an extent ethical principles, their being taken into consideration when discussing law actually makes sense nowadays, but, from the experiences we have undergone, life proves that there are instances when the defendant might make use of them. The offence is very serious, but more ethical than criminal, but should be punished as well. By introducing ethics Pythagoras founded the *objective basis of justice* carried on by Heraclitus.<sup>5</sup> For Plato, justice is ethical principle for human conduct.<sup>6</sup> He is even more precise in accepting ethics in law.

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>3</sup> *Op.cit.*: <https://books.google.ro/books?isbn=1584772557>.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase is transmitted through Aristotle in *Magna Moralia*, I, 1,6. Later on Hegel explains it as: it ever retains a like quality.

<sup>5</sup> The main ideas in this paper are taken from: Fritz Berolzheimer, *The World's Legal Philosophies*, here from: <https://books.google.ro/books?isbn=1584772557>.

<sup>6</sup> Berolzheimer, *op.cit.*, p.12.

Unfortunately, even in ancient times the acceptance of natural law, ever changing, was considered to be without a link with real life because ethics, like law, is an artificial force and acts on social life by a different sanction (punishment).

The Pythagoreans' notion of *justice as equality* has ever since remained woven into all philosophy about justice. The idea goes back even farther. It is enough to mention The Holy Bible: If men strive...<sup>23</sup> And if any mischief follow then thou shalt give life for life,<sup>24</sup> Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.<sup>7</sup> With Pythagoras it is *retaliation*/ revenge that goes: *reward* of good human action (goodness) and *punishment* of bad action (badness). That is to say justice is like a square number: it gives back the same for the same and thus it is the same multiplied by the same.<sup>8</sup>

**1.3** Pythagoras' "laws"<sup>9</sup> are closely related to morals, ethics, but also politics. Here are some of Pythagoras' opinions concerning justice:

1. Do not strive for the chimera of pure **democracy**; perfect equality is only with the dead.

2. Lawmaker!

3. Do not let **statesmen** the time to get used to power and honours!

4. Lawmaker!

Do not put together **faith** and **morals**. The fruit of this inappropriate link can be but monsters.

5. Lawmaker!

Pay attention not to be misled! **Man's rights** are not the same with peoples' rights because men who have become "a people" stop being men.

6. Obey **laws** even if they are not good! Do not submit people if they aren't better than you are.

7. Magistrates!

Be like in Sparta! At the entrance to Court: raise an altar of **Fear**, as fear to be punished frightens people and children.

8. You, Judge!

**Law** is your legitimate wife; divorce her better than make her become lazy and agree with anything.

9. Be not lawmaker or judge of a people that boasts about his enlightened mind.

10. When the **judge** talks, the **priest** be silent!

<sup>7</sup> The Holy Bible, *Exodus 21,23-24*.

<sup>8</sup> Magna Moralia, *op.cit.*

<sup>9</sup> In fact what we call here *laws* are actually opinions expressed by the two philosophers and found as Quotes.

11. Do not expect to be thanked when you do good to people: of all beasts, man is the most ungrateful.
12. What is most shameful for a **leadership** is to spy and sift people.
13. We are all equal! But do not expect that the stupid is the equal of the wise one.
14. Be citizen of the whole world until you find a wise people with right **laws**.
15. **Educate** the children and it won't be necessary to punish the men.
16. As soon as **laws** are necessary for men, they are no longer fit for freedom
17. Magistrates!

Do not follow the parable of the fishermen on the Nile who are throwing mud in the crocodile's eyes to be able to dominate it.

## 2. Conclusions

It seems almost impossible and unfair to draw conclusions from a couple of words only. Still, we may select some aspects which are of interest both during ancient times and nowadays: society and politics, democracy, education and, of course, justice.

As we already mentioned, Pythagoras believed in the *natural order of things*, in nature's power to guide man's behavior, distinguished from human laws. Thus,

1. *Democracy* was a state of things anybody wished, but, unfortunately, it was far from what people thought of it. Although Pythagoras speaks of democracy, he doubted its being successful. The idea that *democracy* meant *equality* was altogether wrong. If democracy does not mean equality, from Pythagoras' viewpoint, *justice* (based on ethical regulations) is *equality* (integer multiplied by itself).

2. He also drew attention about the danger of *leadership*.

3. Man's behavior should be right and is strongly influenced by *education*.

4. Nature offers a model of how people should act. Stress falls on *morality* and *common sense* more than on the necessity of laws. Thus, a practical ethical regulation of life is necessary. At the same time, morals must be distinguished from *faith*.

5. *Justice* and *laws* are necessary, even if they are not exactly useful.

The main idea is that freedom, democracy, morality, equality, etc. are closer to a *state of mind* (mentality) than the possibility of being imposed by society. Consequently, the first step is that of educating children as to become good citizens. The second, to preserve the created atmosphere, to make people understand they should get implied in social and political life.

Our trips into the remote past on various occasions have not by all means only a historical value. We strongly believe that, should we want to build up something lasting in the present, we should also look for inspiration in our past. We state this especially taking into consideration the recent discoveries which prove that civilized human life goes farther back, much farther and different from what was believed before. The very moment we agree that the archeological, genetic proofs show that before our time there have been advanced civilizations which left messages for the future, we believe we should pay attention at least to some remarkable people.

Coming back to Pythagoras, it seems worth mentioning that: the laws of nature mean, when including human behavior, the genetic code of an individual. It has been said that a person just “knows” when doing good or bad (common sense).

Nature, on the other hand, offers the only example of perfection without needing a human reconstructive action. Then why wouldn't it be taken into account?

Taking into consideration ethics and morals in making laws has nothing bad in itself. But our thoughts are drawn to the fact that even laws that are “more visible” are not always observed and enforced. What should be changed?

### **Bibliography:**

1. Aristotel, *Magna Moralia*.
2. <https://books.google.ro/books?isbn=1584772557>.
3. The Holy Bible, Exodus 21,23-24.
4. <https://books.google.ro/books?isbn=1584772557>.