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This book is the English version of a work which appeared two years ago in Portuguese. Its structure and general aim are clearly outlined. I will give a brief sketch of them before moving to more general issues. The volume consists of four chapters. The first two have a methodological character, and deal with the history of modern scholarship on Pythagoreanism and Pythagoreanism as an historiographical category respectively. Chapters three and four have a more specific character, being focused on two fundamental doctrines of Pythagoreanism such as metempsychosis and arithmology. The interplay between these different aspects, that is on the one hand methodology, on the other the discussion of sources, is a main feature of the book. Equally noteworthy are the range of ancient and modern materials examined, the variety of scholarly approaches surveyed, and the original insights provided on different topics.

The author’s main claim is that Pythagoreanism cannot be understood by the conventional means of scientific investigation. Pythagoreanism is a phenomenon sui generis; it requires therefore a methodology which must also be sui generis. First of all, it is a phenomenon which is not limited in time, as Pythagorean tradition never died. Secondly, it is a multi-faceted phenomenon which cannot be...
studied without taking into account its complexity and its contradictions. Last but not least, even the definition of “Pythagoreanism” is a problem: every scholar has more or less his own view of what is “Pythagorean” and what is not, of what belongs to the tradition going back to Pythagoras and his immediate followers and what has been added to it later.

As the author puts it, the uniqueness of Pythagoreanism depends on the fact that this phenomenon is both diachronic and synchronic. It is diachronic because it can be understood only if one deals with the different strata of its tradition. Every stage of Pythagoreanism is a construction (or even a re-construction) whose reliability depends both on the trustfulness of the elements which constitute it and the soundness of the methodological criteria applied. Since the times of August Boeckh, scholars have been analyzing these elements trying to sort out doxographical trees of succession which would enable to grasp fragments of lost texts of Pythagoreanism. This task has been accomplished by studying late authors such as Porphyry and Iamblichus, whose accounts turned out to rely on earlier texts such as those of Aristotle and his followers. But however successful (or unsuccessful) these studies have been, other problems arose from them. The data made available by Quellenforschung showed that Pythagoreanism had always been a multifaceted as well as an extremely controversial movement, and that reconstructing its tradition from Neoplatonism up Aristotle and Plato could not help in explaining its inconsistencies. On the contrary, the more “original” testimonies emerged from Hellenistic and Roman literature the more it became evident that Pythagoreanism was characterized by two apparently incompatible strands of knowledge, i.e. the “mystical” one of acousmata and metempsychosis and the “scientific” one of cosmology and mathematics.

Cornelli suggests therefore to combine this approach with another one, which he calls «synchronic». As he puts it, «to synchronically understand Pythagoreanism is to recognize its place within the categories ordinarily used to describe ancient philosophy», namely: «“pre-Socratic”, “school”, “science”, “religion”, “politics”, or even “philosophy”» (54). But as none of these standard categories is multifaceted enough to apply to Pythagoreanism, an adjustment in methodology becomes necessary. A truly synchronic understanding of Pythagoreanism must be multidisciplinary, in order to overcome the dichotomies between science and magic, writing and orality, Ionians and Italics, to which historiography usually appeals» (55). Such an approach had already been attempted by Walter Burkert, who in his seminal book of 1972 pointed out the necessity to have a treatment of Pythagoreanism as «many-sided as possible». Cornelli follows this path, but goes further. He claims that if Pythagorean wisdom is polymathy, as Heracleitus puts it (fr. 22 B 40 and 129 DK), the study of it must suit its nature, and thus turn into a «methodological polymathy» (54). This leads Cornelli to claim that Pythagoreanism itself must be considered as an historiographical category. It does not fall under the “conventional” categories of Presocratic philosophy such as religion, politics and science, but encompasses them all.

Cornelli’s aim is ambitious: he maintains that one has to understand Pythagoreanism not through already existing categories, but as a category on its own. This «will permit Pythagoreanism to emerge from the mists of its complex history» (54), and in turn enable to get a better understanding of other categories of ancient philosophy. Such a methodology may even be of great impact outside the field of Pythagoreanism, as it will likely have consequences also for the study of the pre-Socratics in general. One may wonder whether such an holistic approach, which aims at eliminating barriers between disciplines, is altogether possible, given the ultra-specialized character of contemporary scholarship. Another problem concerns the subjects of research which characterize Pythagoreanism. These appear to be fundamentally heterogeneous: on the one hand science, on the other religion: can we cope
with such diverse topics using one single approach? Cornelli’s book leaves many questions open: only time will tell if its ideas will be able to convert into reality. One thing is certain: a holistic approach to Pythagoreanism may be difficult if not altogether impossible to attain. But even more so, there is no doubt that such an approach represents a highly wished desideratum in scholarship, where compartmentalization of the different facets of Pythagorean knowledge has become more and more increasing, thus making it difficult to study the context of their origins, development, and interdependency.

But Pythagoreanism is not only an historiographical category. Cornelli goes further this categorization, and tackles key-issues linked to it, namely the definition of Pythagoreanism and the criterion for being Pythagorean. To answer these questions, he focuses on three distinct strands of Pythagorean tradition, namely: way of life as attested in the akousmata and symbola, immortality and transmigration of the soul, and numerology. Cornelli’s idea is that all of these forms of knowledge, though different, go back to “Proto-pythagoreanism”, that is to the most ancient stage of this philosophical movement, and that they remained a distinct feature of Pythagoreanism also in later ages. In two distinct chapters he deals in detail with these topics (chapter 3, on metempsychosis; chapter 4, on numbers), which showcase how varied and multifaceted Pythagoreanism is. Here we learn, among other things, that Pythagoreanism appears to be «both mystical and scientific, because on the one hand, the theory of metempsychosis does not respond only to a soteriological mystique, but also becomes an explanatory element of a reality that is irreducibly interconnected, as well as being the foundation of epistemology in the practice of anamnēsis» (192).

One might think that in Cornelli’s view the definition of Pythagorean identity is a complex one, similar to that of Pythagoreanism as an historiographical category. But this is not the case, as for Cornelli the criterion for being Pythagorean is «membership in a community and a shared bios consisting primarily in observing Pythagorean akousmata and symbola, rather than the acceptance of certain philosophical and scientific theories» (82). This means that if on one hand there is no contradiction between the acousmatic and the mathematical Pythagoreanism, on the other there is no doubt that the acousmatic moment is decisive: not science but way of life and belonging to a Pythagorean koinonia is the ultimate criterion for identifying a Pythagorean.

So we see: the concern of an historiographical Pythagoreanism which encompasses the contrasts and differences of tradition does not impede the author to provide the distinctive feature of what is specifically Pythagorean and what is not. A major achievement of the book lies in the productivity of this ambivalence: very different figures of tradition like Philolaus and Apollonius turn out to be similar as soon as their adherence to a special lifestyle and a community comes to the fore. We can therefore conclude that Cornelli’s Pythagoreanism is not just a “historiographical category”, as it has to do not with the doctrines, but with the lives of its protagonists. It is a category in flesh and blood, which cannot be separated from the charismatic manners and attitudes of the representatives of Pythagoreanism in its different historical stages.

8. In Cornelli’s view, the criteria which are commonly used for defining “what is Pythagorean” are not sufficient: “The criteria commonly used to classify someone as a Pythagorean did not seem to stand up to our methodological test: because one cannot think of the Pythagorean school as something doctrinally homogeneous. Further, neither geographical criteria nor doxographical trees of succession serve as adequate ways to define the category” (84).


10. The issue of Pythagorean koinonia is debated at pages 67-77 of the volume. To define the specific character of Pythagorean “clubs” Cornelli opts for the neutral term koinonia, thus rejecting other definitions such as “sect” (Bohde, Burkert, Riedweg) and “church” (Toynbee, Jaeger). On this and related issues see also G. Cornelli, Sulla vita filosofica in comune: koinonia e filia pitagoriche, in: S. Giombini & F. Marcacci (eds.), Il quinto secolo. Studi di filosofia antica in onore di Livio Rossetti, Aguaplano, Perugia 2010, 415-436.

11. In Cornelli’s view, these two aspects are linked: «However, the possibility of adherence to a particular way of life implies, at least in its inaugural pre-socratic times, the actual existence of a community that is structured around that same way of life» (59). Bruno Centrone (Review of Zhmud, Wissenschaft, Philosophie und Religion im frühen Pythagoreanismus, Elenchos 20 (1999), 441) and Carl Huffman (Two Problems in Pythagoreanism, in P. Curd & D.W. Graham (eds.), The Oxford Handbook to Presocratic Philosophy, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, 301) have similar claims, but they do not connect these two aspects.