

## VI

# Pythagoras and the Soul

(a) *Iipse dixit*

The ancient historians of philosophy distinguished between the Ionian and the Italian tradition in Presocratic thought. Something of the early Ionian achievement has been sketched in the preceding chapters; and I turn now to Italy. Although the Italian ‘school’ was founded by *émigrés* from Ionia, it quickly took on a character of its own: if the Ionians followed up Thales’ cosmological speculations, the Italians, I judge, had more sympathy for his inquiry into psychology and the nature of man. But that estimate of the scope of early Italian thought is controversial; and before I look more closely at the Italian doctrines, I must indulge in a brief historical excursus.

The prince of the Italian school was Pythagoras, who flourished in the last quarter of the sixth century, a younger contemporary of Anaximenes.<sup>1</sup> The Pythagorean doxography is of unrivalled richness. We are told more about Pythagoras than about any other Presocratic thinker: and Pythagoras is one of the few Presocratics whose name has become a household—or at least a schoolroom—word.

Pythagoras himself had the wisdom to write nothing.<sup>2</sup> His numerous sectarians, eager to repair his omission, generously ascribed their own views to their master, or even wrote works in his name.<sup>3</sup> Those pious offerings portray an impressive figure: Pythagoras, discoverer and eponym of a celebrated theorem, was a brilliant mathematician; by applying his mathematical knowledge, he made great progress in astronomy and harmonics, those sister sirens who together compose the music of the spheres; and finally, seeing mathematics and number at the bottom of the master sciences, he concocted an elaborate physical and metaphysical system and propounded a formal, arithmological cosmogony.<sup>4</sup> Pythagoras was a Greek Newton; and if his intellectual bonnet hummed at times with an embarrassing swarm of mystico-religious bees, we might reflect that Sir Isaac Newton devoted the best years of his life to the interpretation of the number-symbolism of the book of *Revelations*.

If Greek science began in Miletus, it grew up in Italy under the tutelage of Pythagoras; and it was brought to maturity by Pythagoras’ school, whose members, bound in fellowship by custom and ritual, secured the posthumous influence of their master’s voice.

What are we to make of this pleasing picture of a Newtonian Pythagoras? It is, alas, mere fantasy: the shears of scholarship soon strip Pythagoras of his philosophical fleece.<sup>5</sup> The evidence for Pythagoras’ life and achievements is late. In this he is not extraordinary; but he does suffer from two peculiar disadvantages: first, the survival of Pythagoreanism as a living force, with a strong sense of its own tradition, guaranteed anachronistic ascription of views and discoveries to the founder; second, our sources for the Newtonian Pythagoras are not the careful doxographers of the Lyceum, but later, feebler and more partial men, men of the stamp of Iamblichus and Porphyry.<sup>6</sup>

Scholarly huffing and puffing has blown this chaff from the heap of history; and it has left few grains on the floor. There were two important episodes in the early history of Pythagoreanism. Plato and his followers were to some extent influenced by Pythagorean speculations in science and metaphysics. Their interest led to a syncretism of Platonism and Pythagoreanism, in which a sophisticated Platonic metaphysics was grafted on to a more primitive stock. The syncretic view, which can be traced back to Plato's nephew Speusippus, dominated the later philosophical tradition, and came to be regarded as Pythagoreanism pure and simple. Pythagoras the systematic metaphysician does not antedate Speusippus. We know from Aristotle, who was unimpressed by the Platonizing account, a certain amount about Pythagorean doctrine before it was Platonized.

The other episode occurred about a century earlier: Iamblichus, here drawing on Aristotle, reports the existence of two rival sects of Pythagoreans, the *mathematici* and the *acousmatici*; the schism is tied to the name of Hippasus of Metapontum, and may thus be dated to the middle of the fifth century.<sup>7</sup> The *mathematici*, scientifically-minded Pythagoreans, naturally claimed to be the genuine followers of Pythagoras; and some scholars accept the claim and mark Pythagoras himself as a *mathematicus*. The evidence does not support this view. Pythagoreanism was not a peculiarly scientific sect until the second half of the fifth century: Pythagoras the *mathematicus* is a fiction.

Metaphysical Pythagoreanism is largely a fourth-century product; scientific Pythagoreanism is not found before the fifth century: there remain the *acousmatici*, devotees of the Pythagorean *acousmata* or *sumbola*. The surviving lists of *acousmata* go back in nucleus to the time of Pythagoras himself; they consist of a number of aphorisms (What are the Isles of the Blest?—The Sun and the Moon; What is wisest of all?—Number), and a large mass of rules and prohibitions of a detailed ritualistic nature: the celebrated injunction to abstain from the eating of beans is a typical *acousma*. Some of the *acousmata* are tricked out with reasons; and I shall have something to say about Pythagorean ethics in a later chapter. But by and large there is nothing in the *acousmata* to captivate the philosophic mind.<sup>8</sup>

The Newtonian Pythagoras is thus displaced by a figure more reminiscent of Joseph Smith: ahierophant; something of a charlatan; the leader of a sect, united by prescriptions and taboos—a religious society, not a scientific guild, which dabbled in South Italian politics but did not contribute to the history of Greek philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

If that were all we could say, Pythagoras might justly be banished from the philosophy books. But Joseph Smith is, like Isaac Newton, an exaggeration. The early sources leave no doubt that Pythagoras had intellectual as well as political and religious pretensions: Heraclitus railed at his polymathy (**21 B 40; B 129**); Ion of Chios praised his wisdom (**36 B 4**); to Herodotus he seemed 'not the weakest wise man among the Greeks' (IV.95=**14 A 2**). The philosophical system later erected in his name was not designed by him; but it does not follow that he had no philosophical ideas: we do not know anything he believed, but we do not know that he did not believe anything.

Our ignorance is not total; one ray of light shines through the clouds, and there is one doctrine, or set of doctrines, that we can ascribe with some confidence to Pythagoras. Aristotle's pupil Dicaearchus gives the following report:

What [Pythagoras] used to teach his associates, no one can tell with certainty; for they observed no ordinary silence. His most universally celebrated opinions, however, were that the soul is immortal; then that it migrates into other sorts of living creature; and in addition that after certain periods what has happened once happens again, and nothing is absolutely new; and that one should consider all animate things as akin. For Pythagoras seems to have been the first to have brought these doctrines into Greece (**84:14 A 8a**).<sup>10</sup>

The doctrine of metempsychosis,<sup>11</sup> or the transmigration of souls, is on any account characteristic of Pythagoreanism; on Dicaearchus' account, to which I assent, it is the chief constituent of that small body of theory which we are justified in ascribing to Pythagoras. And it is enough, as I shall attempt to show, to secure a place for Pythagoras among the philosophers.

(b) *The progress of the soul*

Dicaearchus wrote two centuries after Pythagoras: what earlier evidence is there for metempsychosis as a Pythagorean doctrine?

Aristotle, a serious student of Pythagoreanism, refers to metempsychosis as a Pythagorean 'myth' (*An* 407b20=**58 B 39**). Plato more than once advances transmigratory theories; but though we may guess that he was adopting Pythagorean thoughts, he never expressly says that he is.<sup>12</sup> Half a century earlier, Herodotus penned a tantalizing paragraph:

The Egyptians were also the first to advance the theory that the soul of man is immortal, and that when the body perishes it enters into (*eisduesthai*) another living creature which comes into being at that moment; and when it has gone round all the land animals and all the sea animals and all the birds, it enters again into the body of a man who is coming into being; and this circumambulation goes on for three thousand years. Some of the Greeks adopted this theory—some earlier, some later—as though it were their own; I know their names, but I do not write them down (**85: II. 123=14 A 1**).

Herodotus is wrong about the Egyptian origins of metempsychosis; and he is wickedly teasing in concealing the names of its Greek advocates. Yet we can hardly fail to believe that among the 'earlier' thinkers the most celebrated was Pythagoras.<sup>13</sup>

Herodotus' 'later' men will have included Empedocles, who flourished in the earlier part of the fifth century (see below, p. 306); and it is in the fragments of Empedocles' *Katharmoi* or *Purifications* that we find the fullest account of metempsychosis. Empedocles himself says:

For already have I once been a boy, and a girl,

and a bush, and a fish that jumps from the sea as it swims (**86:31 B 117=34Z**).<sup>14</sup>

Empedocles had thus undergone both animal and vegetable incarnations (cf. **B 127=16 Z**); and he indicates more than one appearance in human form (**B 146=17 Z**). A long fragment tells of a cycle of transmigrations, lasting 30,000 seasons, imposed by Necessity on spirits who ‘sully their dear limbs with bloodshed’ (**B 115=3 Z**). The cycle was by and large woeful (see **B 115–127**); and Empedocles drew the salutary moral that one should avoid bloodshed and stick to a vegetarian diet (**B 135–141**).

It is often asserted that Empedocles ascribes a transmigratory doctrine to Pythagoras; but the fragment in question (**B 129=28 Z**) attributes, to an unnamed ‘man of extraordinary knowledge’, the ability to ‘see with ease each and every thing that happens in ten and in twenty human lifetimes’: the connexions with transmigration and with Pythagoras are alike dubious.<sup>15</sup> Again, the ancient assertions that Empedocles was himself a Pythagorean are of little worth. The most we can say is that Empedocles’ environment was Pythagorean: he came from Acragas in Sicily; and it was in Sicily and South Italy that Pythagoras spent most of his life, and that his doctrines especially flourished. In 476 BC, when Empedocles was a boy, Pindar addressed his second *Olympian* ode to Theron, the ruler of Acragas, and in the poem depicted the delights of transmigration as to an audience familiar with and enamoured of the doctrine.

A final witness takes us back to Pythagoras himself:

and about [Pythagoras’] having been different men at different times, Xenophanes bears witness in an elegy that begins:

Now I shall set out another account, and  
show another way.

and what he says goes like this:

And once they say he passed a dog that was being whipped;  
and he took pity on it and uttered this word:  
‘Stop—don’t beat it. For it is the *psuchê* of a friend of mine—  
I recognized him by his voice (**87: Diogenes Laertius, VIII. 36=**  
**21 B 7**).

Xenophanes’ story is a jest, not a piece of doxography; but the jest has no point if its butt was not a transmigratorist.<sup>16</sup>

Numerous questions arise about the content of Pythagoras’ theory: Do all creatures, or all men, or only a favoured few, undergo transmigration? Are all living things potential recipients of human souls? Is transmigration cyclical? and is there a fixed hierarchy of incarnations? Are there gaps between incarnations? and do these involve some sort of Judgment Day? Is metempsychosis tied to a moral theory, or to a way of life, or to a theology?

To most of those questions we can only conjecture answers; and it is, I think, likely enough that different thinkers held different views. I shall return in a later chapter to the question of the connexion between metempsychosis and morals; for the rest it is enough

to say that, whatever their anthropological interest, such peripheral questions have little philosophical bearing. It is the hard centre of the theory which gives it philosophical importance; and that centre consists simply in the contention that, at death, a man's soul may leave his body and animate another.<sup>17</sup>

There is nothing strikingly novel in the view that we somehow survive our earthly deaths; and the view was widespread in Greece from the dawn of history. Nor was there anything new in the supposition that the soul of my grandam might haply inhabit a bird: 'theriomorphism' is a commonplace in Greek mythology. The gods, with tedious frequency, dress themselves in bestial garments; and Circe turned Odysseus' crew to swine.<sup>18</sup> The novelty in Pythagoras' doctrine (if novelty it was<sup>19</sup>) consisted in its conjunction of those two old superstitions: men survive death by virtue of their *psuchê*'s taking on a new form. Survival and transmogrification add up to metempsychosis.

What sort of a *psuchê* does the doctrine of metempsychosis presuppose? I shall advert later to some of the things which the Pythagoreans and Empedocles said, or implied, about the human *psuchê*; here it is only necessary to observe the central fact about metempsychosis: that it proclaims a *personal* survival of bodily death. Pythagoras, in Xenophanes' story, recognized the dog as his friend; Empedocles, on his own account, had himself been a boy, a girl, a bush and a dolphin; when my *psuchê* moves, I move with it, and if my *psuchê* is incarnate in *a*, then I am *a*. Now the transmigration of my liver, or the transplantation of my heart, is of no personal concern to me: my entrails do not constitute myself. If transmigration of the *psuchê* is to do its Pythagorean duty, that can only be because the *psuchê*, unlike the entrails, is intimately connected with the self. John Locke put this very clearly: if soul does not carry self or consciousness, then a man will not be Nestor or Thersites 'though it were never so true, that the same Spirit that informed *Nestor's* or *Thersites's* Body, were numerically the same that now informs his. For this would no more make him the same Person with *Nestor*, than if some of the Particles of Matter, that were once a part of *Nestor*, were now a part of this Man, the same immaterial Substance without the same consciousness, no more making the same Person by being united to any Body, than the same Particle of Matter without consciousness united to any Body, makes the same Person' (*Essay* II. xxvii. 14).

The early history of the notion of *psuchê* is obscure, the texts bearing on it sparse. I do not claim either that Pythagoras had a clearly articulated concept of *psuchê*, or that there was a single and uniform notion of *psuchê* common to the early Greek philosophers. But for all that, the essence of the business is neither dark nor debatable: metempsychosis anchored a personal survival; and the mode of survival was a transmigration of the *psuchê*. Those two facts suffice to show that Pythagoras' *psuchê* was the seat of personality.<sup>20</sup>

Thus the Pythagorean *psuchê* is more than Thales' animator: it is the seat of consciousness and of personality; a man's *psuchê* is whatever makes him the person he is, whatever is responsible for his particular self and personality. Metempsychosis is the doctrine of the transcorporation of the self; and the *psuchê* is the self. It is this which gives Pythagoras' theory a potential philosophical interest; for ever since Locke's discussion of the case of the Prince and the Cobbler, transmigratory fantasies have been a stock element in the discussion of personal identity.

(c) *Metempsychosis, mysticism and logic*

It may be thought fanciful to connect the obscure superstitions of Pythagoras with modern studies on personal identity: 'In Pythagoras' time', it will be said, 'no one knew or cared about the problems of personal identity; and Pythagoras himself was promulgating an eschatological dogma, not propounding a philosophical thesis.' A piece of Epicharmus will refute that sceptical suggestion: a debtor has been hauled to court for failing to pay his creditor; here is his defence:

DEBTOR. If you like to add a pebble to an odd number—or to an even one if you like—or if you take one away that is there, do you think it is still the same number?

CREDITOR. Of course not.

D. And if you like to add some further length to a yard-measure, or to cut something off from what's already there, will that measure still remain?

C. No.

D. Well, consider men in this way too—for one is growing, one declining, and all are changing all the time. And what changes by nature, and never remains in the same state, will be something different from what changed; and by the same argument you and I are different yesterday, and different now, and will be different again—and we are never the same (**88:23 B 2**).

Thus the defendant in court is not the same person as the borrower of the cash; and it is consequently quite unjust for him to be dunned for money which *he* never borrowed.<sup>21</sup>

This *jeu d'esprit* contains several remarkable features. It discusses personal identity in a legal and moral context; and, as Locke observed, 'person' is primarily 'a Forensick Term appropriating Actions and their Merit' (*Essay* II. xxvii. 26). Second, Epicharmus' debtor clearly takes continuity of consciousness as irrelevant to his case: he is not denying that he has memories of incurring the debt, only that he himself was the man who incurred it. Again, bodily identity is taken as a necessary condition for personal identity: it is the debtor's physical alterations which absolve him from his debt. And finally, the conditions for bodily identity are very strict: any physical change, any increase or decrease in size, disrupts identity.

All that would stand further investigation; but my purpose in quoting Epicharmus is to prove that the problem of personal identity was not alien to Pythagorean critics in the early fifth century. Epicharmus' debtor presents a 'theory' of personal identity that stands at the opposite pole to that implicit in metempsychosis; Epicharmus, if not a Pythagorean himself, was certainly aware of the philosophy preached in his homeland; and I suppose that his play is evidence of a lively debate on matters of personal identity in early Pythagorean circles.

Was the debate a matter of assertion and counter-assertion? or did the Pythagoreans employ argument? Was metempsychosis a rational theory or a religious dogma?

It has been held that 'a doctrine like that of metempsychosis, which transcends normal human ways of knowing, can find a guarantee only in supernatural experience, in the world of the divine or quasi-divine';<sup>22</sup> and the multitude of miraculous stories told of Pythagoras were narrated, according to Aristotle, in an attempt to supply that transcendental guarantee (fr. 191 R<sup>3</sup>=**14 A 7**). But if Pythagoras did display a golden

thigh, that would hardly constitute a reason for accepting his doctrine of transmigration. Supernatural experience or an unnatural constitution are not to the point.

It is also false that ‘the prophet [of transmigration] must be able to refer to his own example’.<sup>23</sup> *any* example will constitute evidence for the thesis; and there is nothing logically superior about Pythagoras’ own case. Nonetheless, it is very likely that Pythagoras did refer to his own case; and it is probable that he based his theory on his own experience. Antiquity provides several lists of Pythagoras’ incarnations; though they vary in detail they collectively represent an old, and I think an authentic, tradition. Here is the version given by Heraclides Ponticus, a pupil of Plato’s who was noted for his interest in the occult (and also for his historical imagination):

Heraclides Ponticus says that [Pythagoras] says about himself that he was once Aithalides, and was deemed a son of Hermes; and that Hermes told him to choose whatever he wanted except immortality, and so he asked that both alive and dead he should remember what happened. So in his life he remembered everything, and when he died he retained the same memory. Some time later he passed into Euphorbus, and was wounded by Menelaus. (And Euphorbus used to say that he had once been Aithalides,...) And when Euphorbus died, his soul passed into Hermotimus.... And when Hermotimus died, he became Pyrrhus the Delian diver; and again he remembered everything—how he had been first Aithalides, then Euphorbus, then Hermotimus, then Pyrrhus. And when Pyrrhus died, he became Pythagoras, and remembered everything that has been said (**89**: fr. 89 W=Diogenes Laertius, VIII.4–5=**14 A 8**).

Pythagoras thus claimed a series of incarnations for himself; and he supported his claim by his *mémoires d’outre-tombe*.

Heraclides’ insistence on Pythagoras’ memories is no accidental embellishment of his story. The later Pythagoreans were devoted to mnemonics: ‘a Pythagorean does not get out of bed before he has recalled the previous day’s happenings’, and he makes use of a detailed recipe for reminiscence (Iamblichus, **58 D 1**, §165). It is plausible to connect this practice with the theory of metempsychosis: an acute memory will break the bonds of time, and give a Pythagorean vastly increased knowledge, both of the world and also of his own early biography.<sup>24</sup>

Nor, of course, is memory alien to the problems of personal identity; but ‘memory’ is a term with more than one application, and it is important to single out the appropriate one. Pythagoras is relying on what might be called ‘experiential’ memory. ‘Experiential’ memory is typically expressed by way of the formula ‘*a* remembers  $\phi$  ing’; and the object of such memory is an experience, and an experience of the rememberer’s. I may remember *that* I had a certain experience without having any ‘experiential’ memory: I remember *that* I lived in Colyton during 1943, but I cannot remember living there; I remember *that* I visited the Festival of Britain in 1951, but I remember little or nothing of the visit. I am inclined to think that experiential memory is a fundamental sort of remembering; and that it necessarily involves mental visualizings. (If that is so, then the much-despised empiricist account of memory may be less

disreputable than it seems.) But those are obscure and difficult issues; and the present argument is independent of them.

John Locke's account of personal identity is properly expressed in terms of 'experiential' memory; it amounts, I think, to a conjunction of the following two theses:

(M1) If  $a$  is the same person as  $b$ , and  $b$   $\phi$ ed at time  $t$  and place  $p$ , then  $a$  can remember  $\phi$ ing at  $t p$ .

(M2) If  $a$  can remember  $\phi$ ing at  $t p$ , and  $b$   $\phi$ ed at  $t p$ , then  $a$  is the same person as  $b$ .

Of these two theses, (M1) seems open to immediate counter-example: the examiner who conscientiously forgets the questions he has set does not lose responsibility for setting them; the criminal may plead amnesia as a mitigating factor, but he cannot advance it as a proof of innocence; and in general we forget many of our past actions without forfeiting our identity with their agent. Locke was well aware that such an objection would be raised against him; and he anticipated it by a characteristically blunt negation (*Essay* II. xxvii. 22). I shall not attempt to say anything in his defence.

(M2), on the other hand, is immediately plausible. Indeed, if we take the notion of place narrowly, so that at most one person can be at  $p$  at any given moment, and if we construe 'remember' in a veridical sense, then (M2) is a necessary truth; for if  $a$  remembers  $\phi$ ing, then  $a$   $\phi$ ed; and if  $a$   $\phi$ ed and  $b$  is the  $\phi$ er, then  $a$  is identical with  $b$ . And it is (M2) which Pythagoras requires. The argument which Heraclides implicitly ascribes to him is simple enough:

- (1) Pythagoras remembers being killed by Menelaus at Troy at noon on 1 April 1084 BC.
- (2) Euphorbus was killed by Menelaus at Troy at noon on 1 April 1084 BC.

Hence:

(3) Pythagoras is identical with Euphorbus.

The argument is valid; and its validity rests on (M2).

Any Lockean who is committed to (M2) is committed, not of course to Pythagoreanism, but to the possibility of Pythagoreanism. And Locke himself, though he has ironical words for one account of metempsychosis (*Essay* II. xxvii. 6), explicitly allows as much: '*personal Identity* consists...in the Identity of *consciousness*, wherein, if *Socrates* and the present Mayor of *Quinborough* agree, they are the same Person' (ibid., 19). According to Locke, we are simply ignorant as to 'whether it has pleased God, that no one such Spirit shall ever be united to any but one such Body' (ibid., 27).

Yet even if Pythagoras' argument is valid, and has the blessing of John Locke, no one, I suppose, will be very impressed by it: premiss (2) we may pass (it is easily replaced by historically more acceptable propositions); but premiss (1) invites challenge: Pythagoras no doubt *says* he remembers being killed—but *does* he? People's memories often play them up; the Trojan War took place a long time ago; and it is, in any case, a touch unusual to remember being killed. Moreover, the Greeks had 'often seen wise men dying in verbal pretence—then, when they come home again, they get the greater honour' (Sophocles, *Electra* 62–4). Perhaps Pythagoras was another of those charlatans?



Pythagoras was well prepared for such appalling scepticism; and he provided an answer to it:

They say that, while staying at Argos, he saw a shield from the spoils of Troy nailed up, and burst into tears. When the Argives asked him the reason for his emotion, he said that he himself had borne that shield in Troy when he was Euphorbus; they did not believe him, and judged him to be mad, but he said he would find a true sign that this was the case; for on the inside of the shield was written in archaic lettering EUPHORBUS'S. Because of the extraordinary nature of the claim, they all urged him to take down the offering; and the inscription was found on it (90: Diodorus, X. 6.2).

Later Pythagoreans dismissed the story as a vulgarization; and modern scholars agree that it is a confection dreamed up by a fourth-century fabulist. I cannot prove that it is an old tale; yet I hope that it is. For though it may be false, it is certainly *ben trovato*: logically, it is precisely what Pythagoras needs. For of the several ways of defending a disputed memory claim, one is the exhibition of present and indisputable knowledge which can plausibly be derived from the experiences allegedly remembered.

If you show scepticism at my reminiscences of lunching royally in the *Tour d'Argent*, I may describe to you the menu, the decoration and the staff of the restaurant, and show myself capable of recognizing photographs of it. Similarly, but more cogently, by recognizing Euphorbus' shield, Pythagoras exhibited knowledge that could well be explained on the hypothesis that he had indeed fought at Troy. Of course, such facts do not *demonstrate* the truth of memory claims, in the sense that they are logically incompatible with their falsehood. But that is not to the point: the feats provide evidence—more or less good evidence—for the truth of the claims; and evidence is what Pythagoras is asked to supply. If Pythagoras did indeed pick Euphorbus' shield, the Argives will have suspected him of cheating; and if they were convinced that no cheating occurred, they may have shrugged their shoulders and spoken of chance or coincidence. Pythagoras' action does not prove his claim, still less his theory (what action can prove anything?); but it does provide some evidence—and, I suggest, fairly good evidence—for the truth of what he asserts.

That completes the account of metempsychosis. The whole matter is put briefly and neatly in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; Pythagoras speaks:

For sou les are free from death. Howbeet, they leaving evermore  
 Theyr former dwellings, are receyvd and live ageine in new.  
 For I myself (ryght well in mynd I beare it too be trew)  
 Was in the tyme of Trojan warre *Euphorbus*, *Panthewes* sonne,  
 Quyght through whose hart the deathfull speare of *Menelay* did  
 ronne.  
 I late ago in Junos Church at Argos did behold  
 And knew the target which I in my left hand there did hold.  
 (91: XV. 158–64; trans. Golding)

Metempsychosis is no rough dogma: it is a rational theory, capable of rigorous statement and implying a respectable account of the nature of personal identity; and it was advocated by Pythagoras on solid empirical grounds. We are far from mystery-mongering.

(d) *Selves and bodies*

Epicharmus' debtor still has his appeal: are there not cogent and widely accepted objections to a Lockean account of personal identity? Has it not been shown that bodily identity is a necessary condition of personal identity? And can we not thence infer the impossibility of metempsychosis?

Some philosophers may object to metempsychosis and side with Epicharmus' debtor because they do not feel happy with the prospect of disembodiment: *psuchai*, they suspect, cannot exist apart from a physical body. Now metempsychosis does not, in logic, require disembodiment; and I doubt if the theory was regularly associated with the survival of disembodied *psuchai*.

You might think that metempsychosis involved at least momentary disembodiment, on the strength of the following argument: 'It is a necessary truth that if the *psuchê* which animates *a* at  $t_1$  is the same as the *psuchê* which later animates *b* at  $t_2$ , then *a* is the same person as *b*. Suppose, then, that *a* dies at  $t_3$ , a moment falling between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ . Well, *b* must have some birthday,  $t_4$ , between  $t_3$  and  $t_2$ . But  $t_4$  cannot be identical with  $t_3$  (for then the *psuchê* would inhabit two distinct bodies at the same time); nor can  $t_4$  be contiguous with  $t_3$  (for no two instants of time are contiguous). Hence there must be a gap between  $t_3$ , and  $t_4$  during which the *psuchê* is disembodied.'<sup>25</sup>

I reject the argument for two reasons: we have no cause to assign a birthday to *b* or to suppose the existence of a birthdate  $t_4$ ; and even if there is a gap between  $t_3$  and the alleged  $t_4$ , we need not suppose that the *psuchê* exists during that gap. (I shall have more to say on the former of these objections when I discuss Zeno: below, pp. 270–1).

The argument from birthdays fails; and I can think of no other feature of metempsychosis that might appear to commit Pythagoras to disembodiment. Nor does anything commit him to dualism: he need not suppose that bodies are made of 'matter' and *psuchai* of that completely different substance, 'spirit'. Metempsychosis is transcorporation of the *psuchê*: that implies nothing about the status of the *psuchê*'s constituent stuff.

If I am right so far, the philosophical opponent of transmigration must do more than deny the hypothesis of an immaterial, spiritual substance; and more than reject the possibility of disembodied persons. He must, in effect, maintain that the *psuchê* and the body are identical; for only if *a*'s *psuchê* actually is *a*'s body does metempsychosis become impossible; only if I am the person I am by virtue of having the body I have, can I be prevented, by logic, from changing bodies.

I know of only one serious *a priori* argument which purports to prove the identity of *psuchê* and body. It is the duplication argument, and it runs like this.

Suppose that, on the day after Pythagoras made his startling identification of Euphorbus' shield, Xenophanes visited Argos. On being told the hot news of Pythagoras' identity, he claimed that not Pythagoras but he was Euphorbus: *he* could

remember being killed by Menelaus; and what is more, *he* could pick out the shield to prove it. And suppose further that Xenophanes successfully picked out Euphorbus' shield, and indeed succeeded in duplicating *every* feat that Pythagoras had performed. There are now two candidates for identity with Euphorbus: each can marshal exactly the same facts in his favour as the other can; yet both cannot be Euphorbus, for then they would be identical with one another, and one candidate not two. Hence to identify either with Euphorbus is strictly unreasonable. And since anyone with Pythagorean pretensions must always be prepared to face a rival Xenophanes, it can never be reasonable to accept any Pythagorean claim. The theory of metempsychosis is consequently vain.

The duplication argument is impressive; but it has its chinks. First, observe that it does not yield the conclusion that neither Pythagoras nor Xenophanes is Euphorbus: it concludes only that we can have no reason for preferring either candidate to the other. If that conclusion is correct, it indicates that the doctrine of metempsychosis is in a certain sense empty; but it does not show that Pythagoras was wrong.

Second, notice that the argument applies in all cases of 'experiential' memory. I remember sitting in seat K 5 of the Playhouse last night; and if you care to doubt my word I can produce, perhaps, a ticket stub and a sworn affidavit from a *soi-disant* occupant of seat K 6. Now it is perfectly possible that a *Doppelgänger* should appear and claim that *he* remembers occupying seat K 5; and that he should produce a ticket stub as informative as mine, and a sworn statement from an alleged neighbour. Moreover, any further efforts I may make to support my claim will immediately be imitated by my *Doppelgänger*. Thus there are two rival claimants to one seat: neither of us produces any evidence not immediately matched by the other; and though it does not follow that neither of us occupied the seat, it does follow that for you to believe one of us rather than the other is strictly unreasonable.

I and my *Doppelgänger* are in all relevant respects analogous to Pythagoras and Xenophanes: *any* memory claim can be disputed; *any* evidence can be matched; *any* reminiscent raconteur may find his duplicate, reminiscing with equal plausibility and recounting with equal sincerity. Duplication is not restricted to metempsychotic memories: it applies impartially to all.

But what does the possibility of duplication prove? If my *Doppelgänger* actually arrives and mimics my claims in that monstrous way, then you will be right to credit neither of us. Similarly, if Xenophanes had actually turned up at Argos and mimicked Pythagoras, the Argives would have done well to retreat into a bewildered scepticism. But it does not follow from this that the mere possibility of such a *Doppelgänger* is evidence against my claim to have sat in seat K 5, or that the mere possibility of Xenophanes' appearance is evidence against Pythagoras. Schematically, the case looks like this: a set of propositions,  $P_1$ , counts as reasonable evidence for a claim  $C_1$  and a rival set,  $P_2$ , counts as reasonable evidence for an incompatible claim,  $C_2$ .  $P_1$  and  $P_2$  are logically compossible. If both  $P_1$  and  $P_2$  are known to be true, then it is unreasonable both to believe  $C_1$  and to believe  $C_2$ . But it is absurd to infer that if  $P_1$  is known to be true, then it is unreasonable to believe  $C_1$  because  $P_2$  is compatible with  $P_1$ .

These considerations evidently need deeper probing; but they seem to me enough to throw doubt upon the strength of the duplication argument, at least as a refutation of the possibility of metempsychosis. C.S. Peirce once asserted that 'Pythagoras was certainly

a wonderful man. We have no right, at all, to say that supernal powers had not put a physical mark upon him as extraordinary as his personality'; indeed, we have for this 'far stronger testimony than we have for the resurrection of Jesus'. Peirce was speaking of Pythagoras' golden thigh; but his remarks apply equally to Pythagoras' incarnations. Peirce's credulity is charming; and his comparison is apt: if we reject Pythagoras' claim, it must be on the same grounds that we reject the miraculous stories of the early Christians. The materialist enemies of John Locke cannot shoot Pythagoras down with *a priori* arrows; if their failure leaves us with a disagreeable feeling, we may hope that the notorious shafts of Hume will drop him along with other miracle-mongers. But however that may be, it seems to me that the doctrine of metempsychosis does indeed have 'a rigour and a speculative power that is the mark...of a bold and original thinker'.<sup>26</sup>

(e) *Intimations of immortality*

According to Dicaearchus, Pythagoras taught the immortality of the *psuchê* (above, text **84**).<sup>27</sup> Metempsychosis does not in itself entail immortality: a feline *psuchê* enjoys nine transmigrations but no more. And we may ask how Pythagoras and his followers justified their immortal pretensions. We may ask; but we receive no answer. And other Presocratic psychologies are no more informative. According to Diogenes,

Some say—among them Choirilus the poet—that [Thales] was also the first to hold that *psuchai* are immortal (**92**:I. 24=**11 A 1**; cf. Suda, **A 2**);

but the report does not inspire much confidence, and no trace of an argument survives. Heraclitus may have subscribed to the doctrine of immortality; but again, no argument, and no clear assertion, survives. And other early thinkers did not greatly bother their heads about their *psuchai*.

There is one bright exception to that generalization. Alcmeon of Croton, an eminent physician and an amateur of philosophy, both believed in and argued for psychic immortality; and his argument so impressed Plato that he adopted it for his own.

Alcmeon probably worked at the beginning of the fifth century, a younger contemporary of Pythagoras. According to Diogenes, 'most of what he says concerns medicine, but he sometimes treats of natural philosophy' (VIII. 83=**24 A 1**). His philosophical interests included astronomy (e.g., Aëtius, **A 4**); and he offered some metaphysical reflexions which seemed vaguely Pythagorean in tone to Aristotle (*Met* 986a27–34=**A 3**). He also touched upon epistemological matters (see below, pp. 136, 149). But his main interest appears to have lain in what may loosely be called the philosophy of man—and in particular, in human psychology. It is here that his argument for the immortality of the *psuchê* belongs.

We know the argument by report, not by quotation; but before turning to the reports it will be well to quote one of the few fragments of Alcmeon's own writings:

Men perish for this reason, that they cannot attach the beginning to the end (**93**: **B 2**).

There have been many attempts to elucidate this enigmatic apophthegm, but none is particularly satisfactory.<sup>28</sup> Whatever the fragment may mean, it shows that Alcmeon made a distinction between a man and his *psuchê*. Men are mortal, perishing things; but *psuchai*, as the argument we are to examine pretends, are immortal and deathless. Now it is tempting to argue thus: 'If men are mortal and Socrates is a man, then Socrates is mortal. But men, according to **B2**, perish; so Socrates will perish, and the immortality of his *psuchê* will not secure his own survival. Alcmeon and the Pythagoreans part company: for Alcmeon, psychic immortality is not personal immortality; my soul may go marching on, but I shall not.' To avoid that conclusion we must divorce the notions of *man* and *person*, and maintain, with Locke, that the term 'man' connotes a being of a certain form and physical constitution: to be a man is to be an animal of a determinate type. Persons, then, are not necessarily men: Socrates may cease to be a man without ceasing to be. Plato probably took Alcmeon to be arguing for personal immortality; for when he adopts Alcmeon's reasoning, he does so in the conviction that it supports a doctrine of individual immortality. Again, the Pythagorean doctrine of metempsychosis, with which Alcmeon was indubitably acquainted, closely associated psychic and personal survival, and thus implicitly distinguished between persons and men. Finally, the Lockean distinction between person and man, which some modern philosophers find outlandish and absurd, was familiar to every Greek schoolboy: when Odysseus' companions were turned into swine by Circe they ceased to be men, but did not lose their personal identity. Circe did not kill Odysseus' crew: she transmogrified them.

I thus suppose that according to Alcmeon men die but people do not: the survival of the *psuchê* does not guarantee 'human' survival; but it does hold out the promise of personal survival. Alcmeon's argument may indeed have been intended to give philosophical respectability and rational support to the plain assertions of the Pythagoreans.

I turn to Alcmeon's argument. There are five reports to be mentioned. First, Aristotle:

Alcmeon...says that [the *psuchê*] is immortal because it is like the immortals; and that this holds of it in virtue of the fact that it is always moving. For all divine things are always moving continuously—moon, sun, the stars, and the whole heavens (**94: An 405a29–b1=A 12**).

Second, a fragment of Boethus:

Looking at this [sc. the similarity of our *psuchê* to god], the philosopher from Croton said that, being immortal, it actually shuns by nature every form of rest, like the divine bodies (**95: Eusebius, PE XI. 28. 9**).

Third, Diogenes:

He says that the *psuchê* is immortal, and that it moves continuously like the sun (**96: VIII. 83=A 1**).

Fourth, Aëtius:

Alcmeon supposes [*the psuchê*] to be a substance self-moved in eternal motion, and for that reason immortal and similar to the divine things (97: A 12).

The fifth text does not name Alcmeon; it is the section of the *Phaedrus* in which Plato transcribes and adapts Alcmeon's argument. I quote the beginning and the end of the passage:

Every *psuchê* is immortal. For what is ever-moving is immortal. And what moves something else and is moved by something else, having a respite from movement has a respite from life; thus only that which moves itself, in so far as it does not abandon itself, never stops moving.... Every body whose movement comes from without is inanimate (*apsuchos*) and every body whose movement comes from within is animate (*empsychos*), this being the nature of an animator (*psuchê*). And if this is so, and if what moves itself is nothing other than an animator, then from necessity animators will be both ungenerated and immortal (98: *Phaedrus* 245C–246A).

Plato's text is disputed at crucial points;<sup>29</sup> and the structure of his argument is controversial: he appears to have grafted Alcmeon's reasoning onto a distinct set of considerations (they appear in the passage I have omitted), and the grafting is uncharacteristically crude. Moreover, we cannot be sure how far Plato is embellishing Alcmeon, and how far he is simply following him.<sup>30</sup> We must, therefore, rely primarily on Aristotle and the doxographers for the reconstruction of Alcmeon's argument.

Those reports ascribe three propositions to Alcmeon:

- (1) *Psuchai* are always moving.
- (2) *Psuchai* are like the divine heavenly bodies.
- (3) *Psuchai* are immortal.

Diogenes lets the three propositions stand without any clear inferential linking. Boethus appears to present an argument from (3) to (1). Aristotle and Aëtius, more plausibly, make an argument from (1) to (3).

According to Aristotle, Alcmeon inferred (2) from (1), and (3) from (2). His argument is thus a hideously feeble analogy: *psuchai* are like the heavenly bodies in one respect—they move continuously; hence they are like the heavenly bodies in another respect—they are immortal. As well infer that *psuchai* are flat discs—for the sun is so shaped (Aëtius, A 4).

According to Aëtius, Alcmeon inferred (2) from (1), and also inferred (3) from (1). (3) does not require the analogical mediation of (2): it follows directly from (1). Plato supports Aëtius here; and I am inclined to accept his report. Alcmeon, I suppose, originally said something like this: 'Animators, like the divine denizens of the heavens, move continuously; hence, like those divinities, they are immortal.' Aristotle misread the illustrative comparison with the heavenly bodies as an analogical premiss; but Aëtius preserves the true deductive character of the argument. To make the argument

fully explicit we need to add a further premiss: (4) Anything that always moves is immortal. From (1) and (4), (3) follows.

Premiss (4) is a necessary truth. According to Aëtius, Alcmeon's *psuchai* were 'self-moving',<sup>31</sup> and 'self-motion' occurs in Plato's version of the argument. Some scholars opine that the introduction of that notion into the argument was the work of Plato; but there is no reason to deny the notion to Alcmeon: the belief that living things—men, animals, and heavenly bodies—are 'self-moving', in the sense that they move without being impelled from outside, is not a deeply philosophical opinion. Since anything that has the power to cause motion is alive (above, p. 7), any self-mover is alive. Hence anything that is moving itself at  $t$  is alive at  $t$ ; and anything in continuous self-motion is eternally alive. And to assert that is to assert (4).

There is more difficulty in premiss (1): in what way can *psuchai* move? Why should we suppose that they *do* move? And why should we agree that they *always* move?

There is a temptation to connect the animator's motion with its cognitive function: it might be suggested, in a Cartesian vein, that animators cogitate, and that cogitation is a species of 'motion', in a relaxed sense of that term. Then Alcmeon's premiss that *psuchai* always move will parallel the notorious Cartesian thesis that the soul always thinks.

The suggestion is attractive; but I fear we must be content with a far cruder account of psychic locomotion. In one of the more bizarre portions of that most bizarre work, the *Timaeus*, Plato explains how the minor gods in their creation of men 'imitated the shape of the universe, which is round, and confined the two divine revolutions in a spherical body, which we now call the head, and which is the most divine part of us and rules over everything in us' (44D). The 'two divine revolutions' are the whirling circles of the Same and the Other, which constitute our *psuchê*. The human skull is thus an orrery, representing the heavens; and the soul, revolving within it, mimics the revolutions of the heavenly bodies. That strange conception is full of obscurities which I am happy to ignore; it is enough to say that so many of its features are reminiscent of Alcmeon that the whole theory, in outline at least, may plausibly be ascribed to him. In the *Timaeus*, as in the *Phaedrus*, Plato draws on Alcmeon. As far as premiss (1) of Alcmeon's argument is concerned, the moral is this: the movements of the *psuchê* are, quite literally, locomotions—circular revolutions in the space of the skull.

Why should Alcmeon have felt drawn by so strange an hypothesis? According to Aristotle, 'some say that an animator is first and foremost what gives motion. And, believing that what is not itself in motion cannot move anything else, they supposed the animator to be something moving' (*An* 403b28–31). What moves other things must itself move; hence the animator, being a motor, is in motion. The argument did not appeal to Aristotle; but it is, I think, a particular application of the Synonymy Principle of causation (above p. 88); and that principle can be found in Aristotle's own works. 'Causation is by synonyms': who breeds fat oxen must himself be fat. The fire warms me only if it is itself warm; ice cools gin because ice itself is cold; this ink, which is black, renders this paper black; sweet-smelling lavender makes the sheets smell sweet. In general: if  $a$  brings it about that  $b$  is  $\phi$ , then  $a$  is  $\phi$ .

The principle is supported by numerous examples; and it helps to explain the occult property of causality: causes produce changes in the objects they effect by transferring or imparting something to those objects; when the fire makes me warm, it bestows heat

upon me; and the lavender, we say, gives the sheets their sweetness. Now since I cannot give you what I do not myself possess, causes must themselves be endowed with the properties they impart. This emerges plainly from a passage in which Descartes employs a particular instance of the principle: 'Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect. For, pray, whence can the effect derive its reality if not from its cause? And in what way can this cause communicate this reality to it, unless it possesses it itself?' (*Meditation III*).

If some examples commend the principle, many more stand against it; and it is not difficult to see that the principle both is false in itself and conveys a misleading notion of the causal process. Berkeley was characteristically abrupt: 'Nihil dat quod non habet or the effect is contained in y<sup>o</sup> Cause is an axiom I do not Understand or believe to be true' (*Philosophical Commentaries A* § 780). And indeed it is easier to show the inadequacy of the principle than to explain its popularity and longevity.

The origin of the principle is, I think, unknown: it is found, as I have said, in Aristotle, and it is traceable in Plato's *Phaedo*; I do not doubt that it is Presocratic, and I see no reason to question Aristotle's implication that it lay behind Alcmeon's argument for the immortality of the *psuchê*: a *psuchê* causes locomotion; therefore it must itself move.

If animators must move, why need they be moving continuously? Why is sporadic or temporary motion not sufficient? After all, the bodies they move do not move continuously or for ever. The *Phaedrus* suggests alternative answers to this question. First, Plato observes that 'that which moves itself, in so far as it does not abandon itself, never stops moving' (245C). The point is obscure to me; perhaps Plato means this: 'Self-movers are autonomous agents, whose movement is not dependent upon external forces; consequently the moved thing, being always attached to—since it is identical with—an autonomous motor, will always move.' That is an unconvincing argument: the heavenly motions in my head may, I suppose, be autonomous in the sense that no external mover causes my cerebral motor to move; but it does not follow that my *psuchê* is entirely indifferent to the outside world, or that my psychic revolutions will survive a sharp crack on the skull.

A passage from the end of Plato's argument suggests a different type of explanation for the eternity of psychic motion. It is, Plato says, 'the nature of an animator' to move the body; 'what moves itself is nothing other than an animator'; so that 'from necessity' animators are immortal. These phrases hint at the following argument: 'An animator is, by definition, a motor; motors, of necessity, themselves move. Hence of necessity animators move. Hence an animator cannot at any time not be moving. Hence animators are always moving. 'Psychic motion, in short, is a matter of logical necessity; and evidently what happens of necessity happens always.

Alcmeon's argument for the immortality of the *psuchê* can now be set out fairly explicitly. It runs, I suggest, thus: 'I am animate, and hence, trivially, contain an animator. My animator is, by definition, a motor; for it is, *inter alia*, whatever is the source of my various locomotive efforts. The analysis of causation shows that of necessity motors move. Thus my animator moves of necessity; and hence it moves always and continuously. Now anything in autonomous movement is alive, so that



anything always in motion is always alive, and thus immortal. *Ergo*, my animator is immortal.’

That is a complex and a sophisticated argument. Indeed, in certain respects it bears comparison with St Anselm’s notorious Ontological Argument: both proofs start from a definition, and both end with an eternal existent. Both proofs are unsound; and Alcmeon’s is both less perplexing and less philosophically fecund than Anselm’s. But I shall leave criticism of Alcmeon to the reader, and end this chapter on a note of mild commendation: I do not know of any argument for the immortality of the soul one half so clever as Alcmeon’s, the very first argument in the field.