

C. Huffman (edited by), *A History of Pythagoreanism*

Cambridge University Press,
2014, 530 pp., \$ 70.00.

Giulia De Cesaris

Università di Roma La Sapienza
giuliadeckk@hotmail.com

Pythagoreanism has always been, over the centuries, one of the most elusive and ambiguous phenomena of Ancient Greek philosophy. As Domenico Musti says, if the origin of the concept of *Megale Hellas* cannot be directly linked to Pythagoras and his followers, we can undoubtedly be sure about relating the disappearance of Pythagoreanism with the general crisis and decline of Magna Graecia. Why, then, is such a significant and influential reality so difficult to grasp definitely? The volume edited by Carl Huffman explains it perfectly. The title of the book gives us a first hint: Pythagoreanism cannot be considered separately from its history. This means that we cannot give a sufficient account or express a valuable analysis of Pythagoreanism without dealing with the interpretations and the judgments of ancient and contemporary interpreters. Comprehension of Pythagoreanism, in fact, necessarily passes through the reading of late sources and through the understanding of a constantly renewed interest – differently motivated in different eras – in the figure of Pythagoras and in his doctrines.

This explains exactly why this volume has to be regarded as the most complete book about Pythagoreanism published in the last years. Moreover, it also shows why it works both as a very detailed introduction to the argument and as an insightful analysis for already experienced readers. It is an arduous task to do justice to the volume, made up of twenty-one essays, in a short review. Every essay, in fact, deals with a specific chronologically and conceptually well-focused argument and the book as a whole covers the enormous timespan from the sixth century BC to the seventeenth century AD. The risk of being inaccurate is completely warded off: every issue which has ever been associated with Pythagoreanism is covered. This is why

every essay would deserve an appropriate and extensive discussion. In addition, the general approach of the essays is to raise questions rather than giving definitions. This approach, especially if speaking about Pythagoreanism, is the most profitable.

Already in the first chapter – which follows an exhaustive introduction of the essays by Carl A. Huffman –, Geoffrey Lloyd warns us against labels. By presenting the evidence in the early sources, in the fourth century and the in the later sources, and, by doing so, giving an historical account of the most important readings of Pythagoras, the author introduces us to the enigmatic world of Pythagoreanism. Accordingly, right from the start the reader is informed about the necessary caution needed by the subject and about the impossibility for scholars to come to an agreement about the main issues. At the same time, however, he is not left with a disorientating sensation.

Pythagoreanism, in fact, slowly emerges by reading the following chapters. Chapter 2 (by Daniel W. Graham) and 3 (by Malcom Schofield) deal with Philolaus and Archytas, the most famous figures related to Pythagoreanism. The picture is enriched in details by chapter 4 in which Leonid Zhmud suggests the use of the *family resemblance criterion* as the only way to partially consider the overlapping but never homogeneous interests of the Pythagoreans of the sixth, fifth and fourth century BC. Chapter 5 (by Catherine Rowett) examines the political impact of Pythagoreans on the city-states of Southern Italy. The author suggests to look at the tie of friendship and at the principle of common property as the key to Pythagorean's leadership; chapter 6 (by M. Laura Gemelli Marciano) gives a careful account of Pythagorean *akousmata* which are reintegrated in the ritual role of the *polis* and connected to an individual consciousness and receptiveness of

the divine presence in the world, that promotes a profound attitude to reality. Chapters 7 to 9 (in order, by Gábor Betegh, Reviel Netz and Andrew Barker) deal with the main topics commonly related to Pythagoreanism, such as religion and its connection with Orphism, mathematics and harmonics. Chapters 10 to 14 (in order, by John Palmer, Oliver Primavesi, John Dillon, Carl A. Huffman and Stefan Schorn) explore Pythagoreanism applying to the Academic and Peripatetic experiences and to the historical tradition. Pythagoreanism is thus described in its reception by Plato, Aristotle, the Early Academics, Neopythagorean authors, Peripatetics and the historians. This change of perspective enables a new and differentiated comprehension of the phenomenon, stimulating our awareness of the intentions shared by single authors and, eventually, by different traditions. Chapter 15 (by Bruno Centrone) focuses on the pseudo-Pythagorean writings. Under the heterogeneity of the forgeries, probably composed in different periods and places, we can nonetheless recognize – between the numerous contributions – a general tendency towards a reconciliation of Platonic doctrines with Aristotelian patterns. The next chapter (by Jaap-Jan Flinterman) is committed to introducing Pythagoreanism in Rome and in Asia Minor. Taking as a starting point the *renovatio* of Pythagoreanism by means of Nigidius Figulus witnessed by Cicero, the author then moves to Asia Minor and takes into consideration enigmatic figures such as Apollonius of Tyana and Alexander of Abonouteichos, whose deeds can be situated in the borderland between legend and reality. Chapters 17 to 19 (in order, by André Laks, Constantinos Macris and Dominic J. O'Meara) focus their attention on Diogene Laertius' and Porphyry's *Life of Pythagoras* and on Iamblichus' *On Pythagoreanism*, while chapters 20 and 21 (respectively by Andrew

Hicks and Michael J. B. Allen) follow the reception of Pythagoreanism in its itinerary from late antiquity, through the Middle Ages, to the Early Renaissance.

It is precisely in regard of the reception of Pythagoreanism that is possible to make the only critical comment about the present volume. In chapters 12, 15 and 19 in particular, but also in chapters 17-18, beyond the specific topics of the essays, it is possible to get a glimpse of the question of the legitimization of wisdom. Indeed, even if the issue is constantly touched and pervades the pages of the book, it is never explicitly thematized. Notably, the experiences of the Academy and the Lyceum produced a strong awareness of the question of philosophical identity. To be rooted in the groove of tradition – thus implying a clear consciousness of both the personal orientation and of the content of the philosophical belonging – also meant a crucial concern for a *protos heurètes*. Identifying the germs of the successive theoretical addresses in the thought of an ancestor was no careless choice and it obviously caused considerable consequences. For example, in order to validate the skeptical shift of the Academy while remaining within the Platonic tradition, Arcesilaus recognized in Socrates' thought the seeds of his position. Pythagoreanism, as immediately evident by the phenomenon of pseudo-Pythagorean writings, does perform, in this perspective, a leading role. The later authors, strongly committed to a well-defined philosophical identity, make a diffuse use of Pythagoreanism in order to authenticate their own views and the one of their masters, invoking the blessing of Pythagoras. The reason why Pythagoreanism undergoes so many metamorphosis over centuries has in fact to be ascribed also to this tendency: Pythagoreanism assumes different shapes according to the different needs – authoritative

ones too – claimed by different eras and authors. A clearer display of this habit can be traced in Iamblichus' *On Pythagoreanism*; even if the author declares to be committed to the ancient and original Pythagoreanism, the book can be considered a very personal expression of it, accurately and consciously built – as O'Meara shows in his essay in relation to *VP* – through the pages of his writings. Therefore, Iamblichean Pythagoreanism can legitimately encompass in the definition of its identity a huge variety of philosophical contributions and nonetheless present itself as genuine and authentic.

In conclusion, the book is strongly recommended because, similarly to the effect Pythagoreanism has always had on ancient and contemporary interpreters, it intrigues the reader and leaves him with a puzzling, but not unclear, impression, and the desire to know more.