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The Early Pythagoreans on Medicine

A survey of the extant sources shows that the formation and development of living beings, their biological functions, the aetiology of health, disease and old age, and the process of sex differentiation are issues of primary importance in early Greek philosophy. This paper focuses on the extant sources (reports about the legendary founder of the Pythagorean sect, *akousmata*, sections from the Pythagorean treatises of Iamblichus and Porphyry) which refer to the contribution of the anonymous disciples of Pythagoras to medicine and other related fields, such as dietetics and biology. I argue that, unlike other Presocratics, they were not motivated by a “proto-scientific” interest in exploring microcosmic structures or healing individuals but by moral and religious beliefs, since they advocated a lifestyle tightly governed by prohibitions and obligations. My aim is to reconstruct their medical doctrines in the light of the scattered pieces of textual evidence, and address the following questions:

1. How was the opposition between “life and death” defined and described by the early Pythagoreans, and to what extent did the study of living beings manage to establish itself as a significant part of their research?
2. What can we assert about the use of empirical data in support of their theories, the role of polarity and analogy in the formulation of their systems, and the impact of moral, political and religious norms on their understanding of microcosmic structures?
3. Did they recognize any relation between the bodily functioning and the workings of the cosmos?
4. To what extent their theories differ from those put forward by other contemporary medical theorists who were active in Croton, such as Alcmaeon and Hippo?

Biography:

Stavros Kouloumentas was born in 1980 in Kalamata (Greece). He earned his BA degree in the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, studying Philosophy and Pedagogy (1999-2003). In the following year (2003-2004), he moved to Cambridge and studied for an MPhil degree in the Faculty of Classics under the supervision of Professor David Sedley. From 2004 to August 2009 he worked on a PhD in Ancient Philosophy which was supervised by Professor Malcolm Schofield and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. His doctoral thesis dealt with the development of a cosmological pattern of early Greek philosophy: the depiction of the cosmos as an orderly system whose structure is comprehensible to humans and its equilibrium can be illustrated by projecting socio-political images and concepts onto a larger scale. A revised version of his doctoral thesis will be published soon. In September 2010 he started to work as a part-time lecturer in the Department of Philology in the University of Patras. In February 2012 he joined the research team of Professor Philip van der Eijk, and is currently writing a monograph on Alcmaeon, a fascinating philosopher-cum-doctor of the sixth century BC.