

Emidio Spinelli (Università di Roma La Sapienza)

**‘Are Flute-Players better than Philosophers’?
Sextus Empiricus on Music, against Pythagoras**

After providing an accurate analysis of the specific way in which – through the use of different labels – Sextus Empiricus presents statements attributed either *directly* to Pythagoras or *indirectly* to his followers, the present paper focuses more in detail on the attack which Sextus launches against the Pythagorean doctrine in some passages of his *Against the Musicians* (see e.g. *Adv. Math.* VI 8 and 23). According to Sextus, this doctrine assigns to music a power of harmonious persuasion capable of soothing human passions and of bringing about a substantial ethical transformation in man. This power is connected to the use of a specific instrument (the flute) and a particular melody (the so-called “spondean” tune), which in Pythagoras' view – at least according to Sextus' account – would be capable of subduing even “a state of Bacchic frenzy from drunkenness”. Against the backdrop of a more general attack seeking to de-emphasise whatever function may be attributed “by nature” (*physei*) to certain musical tones, the real core of Sextus Empiricus' objection would appear to be levelling a more radical critique: for Pythagoras' stance risks placing flute-players above philosophers. Pythagoras' praise of music and its cathartic function, in other words, would not only entail a kind of yielding to inappropriate and theoretically indefensible irrational elements; it would also (and perhaps most importantly) be depriving philosophy – in a way that goes against the very premises of the Pythagorean thought – of its fundamental role as a thoroughgoing ‘way of life’, namely as a practical exercise, guiding force and means for ethical reform through which one can attain true inner balance and individual happiness.

Biography:

Emidio Spinelli is Associate Professor (‘History of Ancient Philosophy’-“Sapienza”/Università di Roma). Junior Fellow at the “Center for Hellenic Studies”, Research Fellow for the “Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung”, Visiting Scholar at the “Humboldt Universitaet-Berlin”, he is also member of the 'ESF Pool of Reviewers'.