

Samuel Galson (Princeton University)

Unfolding Pythagoras: Leibniz, Myth and Mathesis

In an allegorical fragment, Leibniz imagines the Republic of Letters as a colony founded in “l’autre monde” by “un certain aventurier Grec de nation, nommé Pythagore”. The major export of the colony is “immortalité”. But nowadays, Leibniz complains, this vital product degrades in transit and is left mouldering in European storehouses.

This fragment serves as a starting point for an exploration of Leibniz’ lifelong engagement with Pythagoras. Leibniz associated many strains of his thought with Pythagoras, especially the investigation of symbolic systems (mathesis), the system of pre-established harmony, and the monadology. I will argue that it was not only the content, but also the integral yet compartmentalized *form* of what Leibniz inherited as “Pythagorean knowledge” that made the Greek explorer such a compelling figure for him. Leibniz’ meditations on Pythagoreanism combined multiple perspectives in order to dwell on the theory and practice of combination itself.

A detailed examination of Leibniz’ discussion of the doctrine of immortality will help to substantiate my general claims. Pythagoras returns again and again for Leibniz when the issue of the afterlife arises, both as the originator of the doctrine of immortality, and its debaser. Leibniz holds that Pythagoras discovered an esoteric doctrine of immortality based on mathematical principles, but in order to communicate with a wider audience he “enveloped” it in the myth of metempsychosis. For Leibniz, the soul never lacks a body and therefore the true doctrine is one of “transformation”, not metempsychosis. The laws of the soul-body relation, however, also govern the way in which the concept of transformation is enfolded in the exoteric myth. Central to both the esoteric doctrine and its manner of unfolding is the mathematical concept of “expression”. With this concept, Leibniz grasped the unity-in-multiplicity of Pythagorean knowledge as the source of its power.

Biography:

Samuel Galson, from the Department of Classics and the Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program in the Humanities at Princeton University, is currently engaged on a dissertation about the reception of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in Early Modern science. He is also preparing articles on Ludvig Holberg and on the cultural history of Greek sunlight.