HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Pythagoras (570-490 B.C.)

Pythagoras was born on the island of Samos, in a milieu of Ionian Greek speakers, but beyond that we know little of his youth. His father was a gem engraver, his education almost certainly privileged, and he was clearly a traveller, reaching Egypt, and perhaps even India, in his search for exotic wisdoms. The decisive move for his life was to Croton, in Southern Italy, in 530 B.C.. By that time, clearly, Pythagoras was a well known teacher, on the way to assuming the divine or magical status that followed him through life, and long after his life. Building on that widespread reputation he founded a religious settlement in Croton, to which he attracted a devoted following. What exactly he taught at that school is hard to say, and involves us in the whole question of the myth and reality of this great figure. (He left behind no writings, and is known to us entirely through references and commentaries reaching us from his own time, through Plato and Aristotle, all the way to the third century A.D.) There are certain key accounts of what Pythagoras had on offer as a teacher: he was a master mathematician—the Pythagorean theorem is part of world school learning—whose interest in that subject migrated directly to the issue of the place of mathematical truth in the order of the cosmos, the harmony dominating both music and the spheres. At the same time the mythography of this individual turned him into a semi-divine figure, offspring of Apollo, a person who 'gleamed' by nature, and whose thigh was made of gold. Support for this personal cult build up, which has lasted to our day, was provided by ancient tales of his virtually monastic community at Croton, in which a strict temperance was considered essential to good thinking, in which certain foods—meat, in any case—were forbidden, and in which mystical insights, thematized by mathematics, were the order of the day.

For as long as man continues to be the ruthless destroyer of lower living beings, he will never know health or peace. For as long as men massacre animals, they will kill each other. Indeed, he who sows the seeds of murder and pain cannot reap joy and love.