

Ancient Egypt's Theory of Everything

Part 1

The Weighing of the Heart

About Ancient Egyptian Religion:

The Egyptians believed that they were judged after death to determine whether they would assume a place in eternity or become consumed by their own greedy appetites. Their iconography illustrated this theme as a pictorial story, known as the Weighing of the Heart. The portion of the papyrus shown below is representative of many similar others. It is about Hunifer who passes the test before the resurrected Osiris who presides over the underworld. Osiris is not shown in this clip from a larger scroll.



Successive moments in the Egyptian funerary rite called the Weighing of the Heart are shown. It takes place in the Hall of Two Truths, where Osiris sits in judgment of the dead. In the first scene, the deceased, Hunifer, is led to the scales by Anubis, the mummification god who has the head of a jackal. He carries an ankh, the symbol of eternal life, in his left hand. In the next scene Anubis is shown weighing Hunifer's heart against the feather of Maat, the Goddess who represents the Cosmic Order. Note that Maat, with the feather upon the head, also acts as the fulcrum of the balance. Awaiting the outcome is Ammit, the demon devourer of the dead. The moon god Thoth, the ibis-headed scribe who invented language, records the result. If Thoth, the consort of Maat, can record that the two pans balance, he will say to Osiris that "his heart is true and just." Hunifer is then free to go where he pleases, being accepted as justified by the gods and taking his place among them. If he fails the test, his heart being heavier than the feather of Maat, he will be fed to the demon Ammit, who is part crocodile, part lion, and part hippopotamus, representing our bestial evolutionary roots.

The Ennead of the Pyramid Texts and the Myth of Osiris and Isis:

The same theme permeates the history of Egyptian religion with roots going back to pre-dynastic Egypt over 5,000 years ago. But first a brief review beginning with the Pyramid Texts, which are the earliest known religious writings in the world, inscribed on nine tombs in the vast necropolis of Memphis at Sakkarra. (See *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology*, Joseph Campbell, Penguin Books, 1976.) Two accounts of creation by the sun god Atum (of Heliopolis) are given, both lacking psychological depth, but they are certainly older than the texts themselves. The accounts describe the creation of the divine Ennead beginning with Atum and thence the twins Shu and Tefnut who were male and female. From them came the heaven goddess Nut and her spouse the Earth-god Geb, who gave issue to the opposed husband-wife twins Osiris-Isis and Seth-Nephthys. These nine constitute the Ennead.

Despite her association with the evil Seth, Nephthys, known as the “Lady of the Mansion,” was saved from negative associations through her close relationship with her good sister Isis. Nephthys was regarded as protector of the dead. In later tradition Anubis is regarded as the son of Nephthys through a union with Osiris.

The evil Seth had conspired on two occasions to kill his righteous brother Osiris. On both occasions Osiris was rescued by his loving wife Isis. The first time Seth conspired to nail Osiris in a coffin which he set adrift on the Nile. Isis in her grief discovered that his casket had floated all the way to Phoenicia. She found it inside the trunk of a tamarisk tree which had grown up around it. Because of the unusual fragrance of the tree it had been fashioned into a column in the palace of Queen Astarte, where Isis pleaded for the return of her dead husband's coffin inside it. On the return sea journey, as she restored him to life, they begat Horus.

The second time Seth discovered where Isis had hidden Osiris amid the bull rushes of the Nile delta. This time he cut his brother into 14 pieces and scattered them in the river. This presented Isis with a greater challenge but she had the help of her young son Horus as well as Nephthys, Anubis and Thoth. They recovered all of the pieces except for his genital member which had been swallowed by a fish. After reassembling Osiris, she wrapped him in linen bandages and revived him to reside as Lord of the Underworld where he sits in judgment of the dead in the Hall of Two Truths. Anubis is associated with this first mummification resulting in resurrection. It sounds a fantastic story but there is more to it than the tale itself.

The Supreme Creator God Ptah:

A stone tablet was found washed up on a beach and reached the British Museum from Egypt in 1805. Catalogued as Stella #797, it was finally correctly translated by James Henry Breasted (in a paper “The Philosophy of a Memphite Priest.”) The tablet was a record of early beliefs dating back to pre-dynastic Egypt over 5100 years ago. It is worth quoting a few passages from it, since it has philosophical and psychological significance in the modern idiom, as we shall see later. It concerns a supreme creator god Ptah as a spiritual entity behind the sun god Atum and his ennead.

“Mighty and great is Ptah, who rendered power to the gods and their kas: through his heart, by which Horus became Ptah; and through his tongue, by which Thoth became Ptah.

To paraphrase Joseph Campbell, the moon god Thoth is symbolic of the creative word that is identified with the tongue of Ptah. Thoth also greets the solar power of Atum in its rising, namely Horus, who is the living son and resurrection of the creative power of Osiris. Horus is here identified with the heart of Ptah. The gods thus represent functioning members of the totality of Ptah, who dwells in them as their eternal vital force, namely their ka.

“Thus the heart and tongue won mastery over all the members, in as much as he is in every body and every mouth of all gods, all men, all beasts, all crawling things, and whatever lives, since he thinks and commands everything as he wills.”...

“When the eye sees, the ears hear, and the nose breathes, they report to the heart. It is the heart that brings forth every issue, and the tongue that repeats the thought of the heart. Thus were fashioned all the gods: even Atum and his Ennead.

“Every divine word has come into existence through the heart’s thought and tongue’s command...”

“Thus it was—by such speech—that the kas were created and the maid servants of the kas.

“It is these that make all sustenance, all food; all that is liked and all that is loathed.

“Thus it was he who gave life to the peaceful and death to the transgressor.

“Thus it was he who made every work, every craft...”

In commenting on the text, Eduard Meyer (in his History of Antiquity) wrote “... *The myths can no longer be taken simply in their literal sense. They have to be understood as a rendition of deeper thoughts, striving to comprehend the world spiritually, as a unit.*”

Joseph Campbell notes that whereas cosmic speculations have been rendered in verbal terms in later ages, the normal medium of archaic thought was in visual terms. He writes “...*it is surely curious to consider that, although no scholar worth his mortarboard would be likely to eat the menu instead of the dinner, mistaking the printed word for its reference, elementary lapses of this sort are normal in works of learning treating of the ancient gods. ...*”

A Third Account of Creation:

There is a third account of creation, the earliest texts of which date to the Middle Kingdom although the account itself could be older and the myth evolved over time. It is associated with Hermopolis Magna between Cairo and Luxor and concerns four male-female pairs of primeval deities known as the Ogdoad, in contrast to the four generations of the Ennead. As is often the case the account is embedded in their iconography, language and ritual. Although popular versions of the origin of creation emerged and changed over time, the group of deities describes aspects of a primordial state antecedent to the Ennead, but not as a linear sequence in space and time. The deities represented darkness, formlessness, eternity, and hidden-ness (or in the earliest version twilight). As such they were not generally invested with personalities as independent supernatural beings.

Egyptian texts make it clear that they regarded creation not just as a single event at the beginning of the universe, but as a phenomenon which constantly recurs with each new day or season and which is intimately connected with the prolonging of life beyond death. The deity most regularly associated with creation, at least for the general populace, was therefore the sun-god whose daily appearance and journey through the sky into night epitomized the cyclical nature of the creator. (See J.R. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt: the philosophy of ancient Egyptian creation accounts* (New Haven, 1988)

The Three Accounts as Representing the Cosmic Order at Work:

The three accounts of creation were viewed as compatible. This is especially so if they are now interpreted in the context of representing the cosmic order at work. A dark, formless, eternal and hidden (or twilight) antecedent state from which the One becomes Many corresponds to the timeless and formless Void as a boundless Unity. The Void is a master memory bank or “primordial” sensorium spanning and integrating the whole of time and space. The multiplicity of creative Forms are recalled from this undifferentiated whole as a cyclic succession of meaningfully integrated forms in a way that is fully consistent with the modern empirical evidence. In the Void the Many forms of the universe are spatially indeterminate as One; you might say hidden. They are in the quantum

mode. And the experience of the Void could be called a kind of eternal twilight given the difficulty of translating hieroglyphs accurately into English. A Taoist poet called it a vast and shining sea of mist. There is probably also a connection to what the early Greek philosopher Anaximander called "the boundless." There are references to the Void in all traditions, especially in the East. There is really no describing the awesome experience of undifferentiated wholeness.

Did the ancient priests or kings have direct cosmic insights involving the Void? Is it just coincidence that they refer to a primordial state as One that is an eternal (timeless), formless, twilight, hidden unity behind what we normally know as phenomenal experience?

Whatever the case the Ennead was a popular account of how multiplicity proliferated and came into being in human terms from a primeval unity compatible with the account of Hermopolis Magna of the Middle Kingdom. Then we have Ptah, the supreme creator God of Memphis that the ancient Stella # 797 speaks of. *"Thus the heart and tongue won mastery over all the members, in as much as he is in every body and every mouth of all gods, all men, all beasts, all crawling things, and whatever lives, since he thinks and commands everything as he wills."*... Ptah as described in this passage generally corresponds to later concepts of God as both immanent and transcendent.

The creative process is cyclic in nature, much as the Egyptians envisaged it. Did an ancient priest or king have a cosmic insight that brought him to Ptah, manifest as a supreme unity via the Void? What inspired such immense undertakings as the pyramids? What sustained a stable culture for nearly three thousand years? It is not easy to understand in these unstable times that we live in now. Was it just idle conjecture? Was it just superstitious belief? Or was there some profound substance to it that could only be expressed in extraordinary works. Were the great pyramids of Giza monuments to the cosmic order? Were they a message postmarked for several thousand years in the future?

The Weighing of the Heart and a Theory of Everything:

With this background in mind let us return to the illustration above. The goddess representing the cosmic order, known as Maat, is a central figure. As such she is the natural patterning of Ptah's Will at work, in whatever way that Will may find expression in phenomenal experience.

There are obvious indications in the picture of humanity's animal ancestry. The gods were associated with animal spirits or characteristics associated with them. The Egyptians were intimately concerned with the natural order as a transcendent reality that is also imminent. This is directly apparent. And Ammit, the demon devourer of the dead, represents our bestial roots, whether explicitly rationalized as such in these verbal terms at the time or not. Ammit is a collection of beasts that represent distinct stages in our evolution. The crocodile is the reptilian stage. The hippo is the lower mammalian stage, and the lion is the higher mammalian stage. These three stages are structured into our nervous systems. The reptilian and lower mammalian stages are associated with two distinct gyri's that together constitute the primitive Limbic cortex of our modern brain. This cortex is associated with emotional patterns. The higher mammalian stage is associated with our neocortex or new brain, to which we owe our intellectual capacity. It is like a TV screen onto which emotional patterns can be projected in conscious awareness, where we can deal with them appropriately.

The Egyptians did not philosophize or rationalize in the way that we do. Animism was imported from earlier times into a concentrated and highly developed civilization. Tribal peoples of earlier times were forced to congregate in river valleys after the last ice age. Over the next several thousand years following the ice age, vertical air currents rising at the equator and descending about latitude 30 (Hadley Cells) created broad bands of desert around the planet, north and south of the equator. The Nile valley was very convenient, being nestled between high cliffs that sliced across the advancing Sahara.

Collective organization required systems of writing and mathematics. Yet the ancient peoples remained more intuitive while we have become preoccupied with reason, cause and effect. Our minds are cluttered with the historical accumulation of knowledge and theories. Their perceptions were much more direct. And they displayed profound intuitive insights in their works, especially in the early dynasties that established a momentum that persisted for so long. The sphinx is perhaps the most direct indication of our animal history, with a human head gazing out of an animal's body.

The point is that the illustration of the Weighing of the Heart is consistent with historically persistent moral themes that have prevailed into the present day, as well as with biological evidence from recent decades about how our nervous system has evolved to work. They had direct intuitive perceptions of a workable Theory of Everything that survived the test of time for nearly three thousand years with only a few relatively minor interruptions before it all declined into the coming of a new age.

The Weighing of the Heart and Our Neural Anatomy:

Examine the illustration again. Maat is the fulcrum of the balance with a feather from her head that also represents the cosmic order in one pan of the balance. The human heart is in the other pan. But according to the ancient Stella *"Every divine word has come into existence through the heart's thought and tongue's command..."* And the moon god Thoth who records the result was the inventor of language. And he was also the consort of Maat so he has a place corresponding to the other pan where the human heart is weighed.

This is a direct indication that there must be a balance between explicit language, including associated human behavior, and the implicit cosmic order. There is a message in the illustration that can only be intuitively perceived. It is a message that is independent from the details of the myth. It is implicit in how the balance works. The message concerns the cosmic order which is also the fulcrum of the balance.

It is a well documented scientific fact that the ancient limbic lobe of our cerebral hemispheres corresponds in structure to features that evolved with the reptiles and lower mammals. Among other things, the limbic cortex has major direct connections to the hypothalamus. These structures are collectively known as a functionally integrated Limbic System. The Limbic System integrates our emotions via the autonomic nervous system.

There are also no direct hierarchical controls of higher brain levels associated with our neo-cortex over this most ancient part of our brain. To the contrary, emotions are reflected into our conscious awareness where the neo-cortex has to deal with them. These two parts of our brain, one ancient, one new, are constrained to live in the same house together. The new part of the cerebral hemispheres has expanded greatly with the higher mammals and especially with humans. We owe our intellectual capacity to it. So our animal history is very much hard wired into our neural anatomy in such a way that emotional energies of ancient origin fuel conscious thought. *"Every divine word has come into existence through the heart's thought and tongue's command..."*.... We implicitly span space and time and integrate history through the normal process of living. (See the website article [Inside Our Three Brains](#) that illustrates the general organization of our nervous system.)

The Two Hemispheres and the Two Pans of the Balance:

Our conscious thought, distinct from consciousness itself, is thus attributed to the hemispheres of our new brain, fueled as it is by patterned emotional energy that is fed back to them. The two hemispheres of our new brain do not work in the same way however, although they both receive

complementary sensory inputs. Only the left hemisphere of right handed people can speak, and vice versa.

The left hemisphere of about 90% of people is concerned with language and the related use of logic and reason, including our science and technology. It formulates the specifics of behavior. It is concerned with explicit skills. Language allows us to deal with experience in abstraction to plan and formulate behavior.

(In the other 10% or so the hemispheres are reversed.)

For the majority the right hemisphere is implicitly concerned with integrating themes, aesthetics, the spiritual sense and the like. It can comprehend language to a fair degree but it cannot express itself directly. It is holistic. It seeks intuitive insight into the way things work as a whole. We must relate to some coherent context that we perceive as a whole in order to function. We need a framework of understanding that we can intuitively derive guidance from. In this sense the right hemisphere provides intuitive guidance to the left hemisphere, such that we strive to find a balance between them. We try to realize a sense of unity in the process of living.

There is thus a direct correspondence between the two hemispheres of the new brain and the two pans of the balance.

A Complete Theory of Everything:

To be a truly complete framework of understanding the right intuitive hemisphere must have insight into the cosmic order as it manifests in phenomenal experience. This sums up the message contained in the Weighing of the Heart.

The right intuitive hemisphere corresponds to the right pan of the balance that contains the feather of Maat representing the cosmic order. The left hemisphere corresponds to the left pan of the balance that contains the human heart. The emotional patterns that fuel our behavior are thus symbolically represented as having to attain balance with the right pan and the cosmic order. The feather indicates that a tolerant lightness of heart is required - a propriety that respects the way the cosmic order works as an evolving process.

A Theory of Everything that Spans and Integrates History:

The fulcrum of the balance is Maat. The cosmic order must be the fulcrum because we have evolved to become human beings according to the way the cosmic order works. We are ourselves expressions of the cosmic order.

This must mean that the three independent but mutually related parts of our brain are themselves a reflection of how the cosmic order works. Our ancient emotional brain, the Limbic System, spans four hundred million years of vertebrate evolution. We feel that in our hearts every time we marvel at the beauty of a sunset or at the majesty of a mountain.

Our language bound left hemisphere responds moment by moment to the transient flux of social circumstance according to how we rationalize our thought and behavior. We recreate ourselves day by day according to how we choose to think and behave. We constantly reformulate our emotional impulses as we see fit and tailor them into behavioral responses to the ongoing flux of circumstance.

Our mute intuitive hemisphere seeks a unified perspective that is timeless, that does not change even while prescribing the process of change. It seeks a holistic insight into the cosmic order. Whatever we may believe in this regards we believe it to be true for all people for all time.

So we are very strange expressions of the comic order. We are emotionally indebted to our ancient animal ancestors, we change moment by moment according to how we make our social commitments, and we seek the eternal cosmic order either in belief or in quest or in some of both. We are part animal, part human, part divine. These three seek a mutually complementary balance.

The history of our evolution is thus implicit in the fulcrum. Our emotional heart is ancient. And how we use language to tailor our emotional responses to our living circumstance determines whether or not we will be fed to the demon devourer of the dead. This is implicitly determined by our degree of mute intuitive insight into how the cosmic order works for this is the contextual framework that we implicitly relate to in our behavior. This was the essence of the message that sustained a largely illiterate civilization for so long.

The illustration spans and integrates our evolutionary history. We can either evolve through positive behavior or devolve into an involutionary spiral. We can either aspire to a creative balance with our natural, social, and spiritual heritage or fall victim to beastly appetites of our past that will consume us. Either we graduate to assume an eternal status among the gods or Ammit will have us.

This is the awe-full judgment in the Hall of Two Truths overseen by the resurrected Osiris.