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Plato, Shamanism and Ancient Egypt*

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SHAMANISM AND ANCIENT EGYPT

In considering the relationships between Plato, shamanism and ancient Egypt, I am going to be questioning some deep-seated assumptions held both within Egyptology and in the history of ideas, which also extend to our current understanding of the Western esoteric tradition. I believe these assumptions need to be questioned because the relationships of Plato, shamanism and ancient Egypt to each other are far more intimate and profound than one might at first suppose. By understanding the nature of these relationships, it may become possible to gain further insight not only into Platonism but also into that deep current of thought and spiritual practice known as the Hermetic tradition.

First of all, let me say that by 'shamanism' I mean a form of mysticism and mystical experience, typical of archaic spirituality. While of course shamanism may be approached as a sociological phenomenon of tribal societies, its specifically religious dimension is what concerns me here. Understood in this religious sense, not only is there a great deal in common between shamanism and ancient Egyptian religion, but a shamanic element could be said to be absolutely intrinsic to Egyptian religion, despite its having gone unrecognized within mainstream Egyptology.¹ For example, if we look carefully at the wide-

* This article has already appeared, in expanded form, as a pamphlet published by Abzu Press (Oxford, 2005).

1. For shamanism as the mysticism of archaic spirituality, see Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Collins, 1960), p. 59; and idem, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (1964. Reprint, London: Arkana, 1989), p. 8. Despite one or two pioneering studies, such as those of W. Helck, 'Schamane und Zauberer' in *Mélanges Adolphe Gutbub* (Montpellier: Université de Montpellier, 1984), pp. 103–8 and Terence DuQuesne, 'Anubis e il Ponte' dell' Arcobaleno. Aspetti dello sciamanismo nell'antico Egitto' in *La religione della terra*, ed. Grazia Marchianò (Como: Red Edizioni, 1991) pp. 115–35, Egyptology has either ignored or flatly denied the presence of shamanic elements within Egyptian religious texts and rituals. See, for example, H. W. Fischer-Elfert, *Die Vision von der Statue im Stein* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 1998), pp. 67f and Jan Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, trans. David Lorton (New York: Kegan Paul International, 1995), p. 153.

spread experience of dismemberment in shamanic initiation rituals and then reflect on the Egyptian myth of Osiris's dismemberment and reconstitution, we would be blind not to see the striking parallels between them, and foolish to deny their significance. The same goes for the journey of the soul through the Underworld (the Egyptian *Dwat*) which we meet both in the shamanic literature and in so many ancient Egyptian texts. Likewise, the imagery of the soul's ascent to the sky by, for example, transforming into a bird or climbing a ladder, is both intrinsic to shamanic initiatory rites and also prevalent in sacred texts from all periods of Egyptian history.

When considered with an awareness of the literature of shamanism, it seems quite obvious that the religious texts and rituals of ancient Egypt occupy the same inner territory as that of shamanism. Each of these themes—and there are plenty more examples that could be given—is fundamental to shamanic initiations and has been well documented in studies of shamanism made during the twentieth century.² Because of Egyptology's attachment to the funerary interpretation of ancient Egyptian religious texts, the shamanic current that is the real lifeblood of these texts has largely gone unnoticed, or else—when noticed—it has been categorically denied.

EGYPT AND GREECE

I would also like to make a general point about Plato and ancient Egypt here, although I shall return to this more fully later. There are so many accounts that have come down to us of ancient Greek philosophers visiting Egypt—Thales, Anaximander, Pherecydes, Pythagoras and Plato to name just a few—that it is quite amazing that the connection between ancient Greek philosophy and the wisdom of the Egyptians is so readily dismissed.³ It is standard practice nowadays to

2. See, for example, Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism*; Holger Kalweit, *Dreamtime and Inner Space: The World of the Shaman* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1988); and P. Vitebsky, *The Shaman* (London: Macmillan, 1995).

3. Thus Jonathan Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 15 writes: 'The Greeks themselves later supposed that their own philosophy owed much to the land of the Pharaohs. But although some eastern fertilization can scarcely be denied, the proven parallels are surprisingly few and surprisingly imprecise. What is more, many of the most characteristic and significant features of early Greek thought have no known antecedents in eastern cultures.' A similar attitude is to be found in M. L. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) and in Alan B. Lloyd's extraordinary demolition job of the whole tradition of an ancient Egyptian-Greek philosophical axis in Lloyd, *Herodotus Book II*, vol. 1 (Leiden:

treat these accounts as having dubious validity and as being in all probability fictitious. One even finds scholars who argue that they *must* be fictitious just because so many Greek philosophers were said to have visited Egypt! Certainly, in the eyes of the Greeks, Egypt had a reputation for harbouring a profound wisdom, but if this was the reason why biographers felt obliged to insert a 'fictitious' trip to Egypt in their philosopher's life, is it not then likely that the very same ancient Greek philosophers might have wanted to make a *non-fictitious* visit to Egypt? This is not to say that all Greek philosophers were enamoured with Egypt. We do not read, for example, of Aristotle having studied with the Egyptian priests. So when we do read of certain philosophers having gone to Egypt, it is not necessarily an obligatory episode in a semi-fictitious life.

Those who did feel inclined to go to Egypt would not have found it a particularly difficult journey to arrange, for although there were no Greek colonies in Egypt, there was an important Greek settlement at Naucratis in the Nile Delta. Founded in the seventh century BC only ten miles from the capital, Sais, Naucratis was a large and rich community in which splendid temples were erected to various Greek deities, including Aphrodite, Apollo, Hera and the Dioscuri. It attracted not only merchants but also poets, artists, statesmen and historians, and from time to time political refugees.⁴ It was, however, by no means the only Greek presence in Egypt. Greeks were living in the town of Daphnae, also in the Delta, from the end of the seventh century, and there is evidence of Greeks travelling and trading in Memphis, Abydos, Thebes and Edfu during the sixth century BC.⁵

Greek philosophy is usually thought of as beginning with Thales of Miletus, who flourished during the early sixth century. If we take into consideration the fact that Naucratis was originally a Milesian and Samian foundation, it should not come as such a surprise to find several ancient accounts of Thales having visited Egypt.⁶ We know that there was a strong Egyptian influence exerted on Miletus during the

E. J. Brill, 1975), pp. 14–60. By demanding impossible standards of proof, combined with a contemptuous regard for Egyptian knowledge of astronomy and geometry and a surprising ignorance of the Egyptian spiritual world view, Lloyd is able to dismiss (or simply miss) every indication of a connection between Greek philosophical thought and its Egyptian antecedents.

4. J. Boardman, *The Greeks Overseas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), pp. 148f.

5. Boardman, *ibid.*, pp. 150–55.

6. For these ancient accounts, see G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 76.

early sixth century when Thales flourished.⁷ Miletus was one of the richest cities in Ionia, and its prosperity was built on seaborne trade.⁸ Clearly, travel between Egypt and Miletus would not have been problematic. Ships would have been plying their way to and from Egypt on a regular basis.

The same goes for Samos, the island where Thales' famous pupil Pythagoras was born. The Samians, like the Milesians, were great traders. They were used to travelling long distances by boat, and they too were strongly influenced by Egyptian culture. We hear, for example, of Samian sculptors travelling to Egypt to learn stone-carving techniques.⁹ We know that Pythagoras' father was a gem engraver, using newly learned techniques of working hard stone, a craft in which the Egyptians excelled. It is not only possible but probable that Pythagoras travelled in his youth both to the eastern Mediterranean seaboard and to Egypt, which was the single most important trading partner of Samos at that time.¹⁰ Given his father's profession (which the young Pythagoras would have been expected to follow), there seems little reason to doubt the accounts of Pythagoras' sojourn in Egypt. These accounts, presented to us by Iamblichus, Porphyry and Diogenes Laertius, are based on traditions that reach far back, for we find them corroborated in the testimony of much earlier sources such as Isocrates and Herodotus.¹¹

In order to show how Plato, shamanism and ancient Egypt belong together, it is necessary therefore to take a stand against the two unwarranted prejudices, already referred to, that would have us view them as unconnected: Firstly, the prejudice that ancient Egyptian religion contained no shamanic elements, and secondly that the Greek philosophers who were said to have visited Egypt probably did not, and would not have been influenced by what they learnt there

7. A. G. Dunham, *The History of Miletus* (London: University of London Press, 1915), p. 80.

8. Dunham, *ibid.*, p. 15.

9. B. S. Ridgway, *The Archaic Style in Greek Sculpture* (Chicago: Ares Publishers Inc., 1993), p. 37.

10. Peter Kingsley, 'From Pythagoras to the *Turba Philosophorum*' in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 57 (1994), pp. 1-13.

11. Isocrates, *Busiris* 28; Herodotus, *Histories*, 2.81; Iamblichus, *The Life of Pythagoras*, 3.4 in *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*, ed. K. S. Guthrie and D. Fideler (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Phanes Press, 1988), pp. 60 ff; Porphyry, *The Life of Pythagoras*, 6-8 and 12, in *ibid.*, pp. 124-5; Diogenes Laertius, *The Life of Pythagoras*, 3 in *ibid.*, p. 142.

even if they had. My aim is to show that, contrary to accepted opinion, an important stream of Greek philosophy is intimately linked to ancient Egypt. In pursuing this aim, it will be necessary to show that this philosophical stream had its source not simply in rational speculation but in types of inner practice and mystical experience that have close affinities with shamanism.

SHAMANS FROM THE NORTH

In 1951, E. R. Dodds published a groundbreaking study of the ancient Greeks, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, in which he argued, amongst other things, that there was an influx of shamanic influences into the Greek world during the seventh and sixth centuries BC. He believed that the source of these influences was to be found in the northern tribes of Scythia (to the west of the Black Sea) and Thrace, which themselves had come under the influence of the shamanic culture of Siberian tribes much further north.¹² His reasoning was that, during the seventh and sixth centuries, Greek colonies were being established and beginning to flourish all around the Black Sea. It was at this time that stories began to appear of seers, magical healers and religious teachers all exhibiting shamanic traits, and all linked with the north. So, for example, out of the north came Abaris, riding on an arrow, as did the Buryat shamans of Siberia. The arrow, it seems, was the Buryat equivalent of the witches' broomstick. Abaris was supposed to be so advanced in the art of fasting that he didn't need to eat at all. He was also able to predict earthquakes and banish pestilences, and he taught the Greeks to worship a northern god, whom they called the Hyperborean Apollo.¹³

Dodds also refers to a poem by a Greek devotee of this Hyperborean Apollo, named Aristeas, which relates how he (Aristeas) made a fantastical journey into the north that has clear shamanic features. Aristeas himself was credited with powers of trance, and his soul, in the form of a bird, was able to leave his body at will.¹⁴ This same ability to practise out-of-the-body flight was also attributed to another Greek called Hermotimos, from the Ionian city of Clazomenae (now Klazumen in

12. E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1951), pp. 140f.

13. Dodds, *ibid.*, p. 141.

14. *Ibid.*

Turkey).¹⁵ According to Dodds, the opening up of the Black Sea to Greek trade and colonization provided the crucial opening to the exotic shamanic culture of the north. It led to a new conception of the human soul and of the soul's capacities amongst the Greeks, which was then taken up in Orphism (Greek legend associated Orpheus with Thrace) and Pythagoreanism (later tradition, Dodds points out, brought Pythagoras into contact with Abaris). For Dodds, Pythagoras was a Greek 'shaman type', and his practices and teachings were subsequently given philosophical formulation by Plato. As Dodds puts it: 'Plato in effect cross-fertilised the tradition of Greek rationalism with magico-religious ideas whose remoter origins belong to the northern shamanistic culture.'¹⁶

PSUCHE: FROM HOMER TO PLATO

To understand how the shamanic conception of the soul was new and different from what prevailed in the Greek world during the eighth century and earlier, we need to go back to Homer. It is likely that Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were written down in the second part of the eighth century BC, reaching their final written form in the early part of the seventh century. They had of course existed in oral form long before that, so they present to us a picture of the human soul as this was experienced by the many generations to whom the poems were known only orally. In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, not only do we find that the soul (*psuche*) was conceived quite differently from how we conceive of it today, it was also conceived quite differently from how it came to be conceived just a few hundred years later by Plato.

In Homer, the *psuche* was not considered to be the centre of waking consciousness, but rather was thought of in a more limited way as a kind of phantom or ghost that leaves the body of a person when he or she dies. As such it lacks real and substantial existence, and it goes down to Hades where it will continue to exist as the vaporous image or *eidolon* of the person that used to live on earth. So rather than 'possessing' a *psuche* when they were alive, a person became a *psuche* when they died. They became a shadow of what they were in life.¹⁷ Thus, when Achilles met the *psuche* of his dead friend Patroklos, he

15. Ibid. 16. Ibid., p. 209.

17. Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, ed. Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 186–92.

tried in vain to embrace it, and it vanished with a thin cry into Hades.¹⁸

In Homer, great emphasis is given to physical organs and limbs as the location of psychic attributes. The centre of waking consciousness is the chest rather than the head (which was associated with the *psuche*), and here in the chest Homer's characters not only feel emotions of anger, joy, fear and grief, but they also conduct an inner dialogue with their *thumos*, and come to decisions about what to do, and how best to act.¹⁹ The *thumos* at first sight seems to be much closer than the *psuche* to our idea of the 'soul', for it is where emotions, thoughts and decisions were felt to take place. However, we do not find Greek heroes identifying themselves with their *thumos*. It seems rather to have been experienced as a semi-autonomous person inside the hero, with whom the hero would have conversations, and through whom the gods would communicate. So we read that Achilles will only fight when the *thumos* in his chest tells him to; and we read of the gods instilling courage into a warrior's *thumos* when he feels afraid.²⁰

Human consciousness, as it is presented to us in Homer, is very physicalized: it is experienced in the body—in the lungs, the heart, the belly or the limbs. So much was this so that the word for lungs (*phrenes*) could be used almost interchangeably with *thumos*. Likewise, the heart (*kardia*) and belly (*etron* or *etor*) had as strong psychic as physical associations. At the same time there is no word in the singular for the living body, which is usually referred to by the plural words for 'limbs'—*guia* or *melea*. The word for 'body' in the singular is *soma*, but this designates not a living body but a corpse.²¹ The living body was, it seems, experienced as a conglomeration of psycho-physical energies distributed throughout the limbs and organs. Thus we often read of hands, lower and upper arms, thighs and calves almost as if each had a certain psychic function, though the main psychic centre remained the chest. Meanwhile, the *psuche* was more or less eclipsed during waking hours. It only became active during sleep or at death, and in Homer it did not perform the integrative role

18. Homer, *Iliad* 23: 99–101.

19. Jan Bremmer, *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 54f. See also Dodds, op. cit., p. 16.

20. Homer, *Iliad* 9:702f. and *Odyssey* 2:320. See also Dodds, op. cit., p. 16 and R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), p. 52.

21. Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1982), pp. 5–8.

for waking consciousness that it would come to perform in later times, especially in the writings of Plato.

Dodds pointed out that in the literature of shamanism we meet a quite different way of thinking about the soul. The shaman's practice depended on an inner concentration of psychic energies, such that the forces of the soul, normally distributed throughout the psychophysical organism, were gathered into a unity. It was then possible to experience the soul as an entity in its own right, quite independently of the body.²² This was the basis of out-of-body flight or astral projection which, as we have seen, was practised by Abaris, Aristetas and Hermotimos. Far from being a vaporous image or *eidolon*, the soul was for these people a substantive reality and it was rather the body that was considered ephemeral and ultimately insubstantial. According to Dodds, this view, based on the spiritual practices of the northern shamans, was then taken up in Orphism and Pythagoreanism, where we meet the new formulation: the body is the 'prisonhouse' of the soul, or even its 'tomb'.²³

This view of the soul implies a quite different relationship to the realm of spirit, which is apprehended no longer as the shadowy half-reality of *eidola*—phantoms or ghosts—but as a realm more real than the world of physical existence. The Underworld is not a place of half-realities, but a spiritual Otherworld into which one can travel in order to attain true knowledge and spiritual power. Thus both Orpheus and Pythagoras made epic journeys into the Underworld, very different in quality from Odysseus' conjurations on the fringes of Hades.²⁴

The central doctrine of Platonism, inherited from the Orphics and Pythagoreans, that soul or *psuche* is a reluctant prisoner of the body and is essentially divine, in contrast to the body's transitory and corruptible nature, is the expression of a sensibility very different from that of Homer. It has been perceived as so 'un-Greek' that it was

22. Dodds, *op. cit.*, pp. 150 and 210. See also Eliade, *Shamanism*, p. 479. For comparisons with yoga techniques, see Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 318–26 and Ralph Metzner, 'Transformation Processes in Shamanism, Alchemy, and Yoga' in *Shamanism: An Expanded View of Reality*, ed. Shirley Nicholson (Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1987), pp. 239–42.

23. As recorded by Plato in *Phaedo* 62B and *Cratylus* 400C. See the discussions in Dodds, *op. cit.*, pp. 146–50.

24. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffar (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), pp. 196–9 and 300–302.

famously called by the German classicist Erwin Rohde 'a drop of alien blood in the veins of the Greeks'.²⁵ Since for Dodds the source of this 'drop of alien blood' was in the shamanic cultures of the north, he naturally concluded that Platonism arose out of the Greeks' contacts with the Thracians and Scythians during the late seventh and early sixth centuries. These ideas were then elaborated and developed in the milieu of the Orphic and Pythagorean religious communities that were later established in southern Italy and Sicily, communities with which Plato would subsequently come into contact. But while Dodds undoubtedly felt that he had satisfactorily answered the question as to the source of this 'drop of alien blood', there are factors that may cause us to think otherwise.

THE LURE OF THE SOUTH

One of these is that while we can be certain that Plato's thinking was profoundly indebted to the Pythagoreans—for we know that Plato visited Pythagorean communities in southern Italy and Sicily, and we are able to identify Pythagorean doctrines in his writings—we can be much less certain that Pythagoras' thinking was influenced by northern shamanic cultures. In the several accounts of Pythagoras' life that have come down to us, his biographers fail to mention any pilgrimages by him to the Thracian or Scythian tribes of the north. What they do tell us is that for Pythagoras the lure of the south was far greater than that of the north.²⁶ Rather than going north, Pythagoras went to Phoenicia, to Babylonia and to Egypt. Of these three destinations, he spent by far the longest time in Egypt—according to Iamblichus twenty-two years.²⁷ During this time he not only mastered the hieroglyphic language but was 'initiated in no casual or superficial manner in all the mysteries of the Gods'.²⁸

After his travels, Pythagoras migrated to southern Italy where he settled and founded his community at Croton. We know that during the mid to late sixth century, when Pythagoras would have gone to

25. Quoted in Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, p. 139.

26. The three main accounts of Pythagoras' life are those of Iamblichus, Porphyry and Diogenes Laertius, translated in *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*.

27. Iamblichus, *The Life of Pythagoras*, 4, in *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*, p. 61.

28. Iamblichus, op. cit., 4, in *ibid.*, p. 61. For his mastery of hieroglyphs, see Porphyry, *The Life of Pythagoras*, 12, in *ibid.*, p. 125.

southern Italy, it was already strongly influenced by Egyptian culture, and had been for at least two hundred years.²⁹ It is also significant that if there was contact between Pythagoras and the Scythian shaman Abaris, it was—according to Iamblichus—because Abaris came to visit Pythagoras in Italy, not because Pythagoras ventured north to Scythia. Far from Pythagoras needing to learn anything from Abaris, it was Abaris who sat at the feet of Pythagoras, learning from him physiology, theology, divination by numbers and many other esoteric sciences.³⁰

It is generally accepted that during his lifetime Plato established profound connections with the Pythagorean communities of southern Italy and Sicily, altogether making three journeys to Italy and Sicily between 388 and 361 BC.³¹ Ancient sources such as Diogenes Laertius and Cicero also report at least one, possibly two, visits to Egypt.³² Our earliest extant source for Plato's spending time in Egypt is Strabo who, when he went to Egypt, was shown by the locals where Plato stayed at Heliopolis, clearly implying a strong tradition in Egypt itself that Plato had been there.³³ Strabo's account provides important evidence that Plato's visit to Egypt was not simply an invention of his later biographers, wanting to insert an obligatory sojourn in Egypt in order to build up a myth about the esoteric sources of his wisdom. While of course we cannot be absolutely certain that Plato went to Egypt, the records that have been left to us of his journey there are from sources whose veracity we have no good reason to doubt.

29. The strong influence of Egypt on southern Italy is documented from the eighth and seventh centuries BC onwards, for which see Kingsley, 'From Pythagoras to the *Turba Philosophorum*', p. 4 with nn. 21–6.

30. Iamblichus, *The Life of Pythagoras*, 19 and 32, in *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*, pp. 8of and 109.

31. Plato's journeys to Tarentum in southern Italy and to Syracuse in Sicily are documented in his Seventh and Eighth Letters, in *Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII*, trans. Walter Hamilton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 112–58. See also F. C. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 1:1 (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1982), pp. 153–6.

32. According to Cicero (*De Republica* 1.10.16 and *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* 5.[29].87), Plato visited Egypt twice before going to Sicily and Italy, but Diogenes Laertius (*Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 3.6) gives only a single trip to Egypt on the way back from Sicily and Italy. For the sources of Plato's life, see W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 4: *Plato, The Man and His Dialogues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 8–38. A useful brief summary of biographical sources for Plato in Egypt is given in Whitney M. Davis, 'Plato on Egyptian Art' in *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 65 (1979), 121–7: p. 122 n. 3.

33. Strabo, *Geography* 17.1.29.

Apart from the biographical accounts there is, however, another and more fruitful approach to the question of the possible influence of ancient Egypt on Plato. It requires that we ask ourselves the following question: If Plato (and for that matter Pythagoras) had visited Egypt, what might he have learned there? Can we discover in the writings of Plato anything that has affinities with, and therefore could be transmitting, ancient Egyptian wisdom? Could Plato, either directly or through his contacts with the Pythagoreans, have learned from the Egyptians anything comparable to the teaching about the soul and the kind of shamanic practices that Dodds attributed to the northern tribes of Thrace and Scythia? While such an approach might be criticised as simply looking for confirmation of an idea for which we already have a strong predilection, it could also be seen as a way of freeing ourselves from the current prejudice that there could have been no Egyptian influence on Plato. It is necessary sometimes to adopt a counter-prejudice in order to open our eyes to what has long been staring us in the face.

In taking this approach we need also to be aware that although there are ancient Egyptian texts in which the soul is presented as having the capacity to exist separately from the body, and its travels in the out-of-body state are given in considerable detail, the consensus amongst Egyptologists is that these texts are specifically funerary texts. Their content was applicable only to the dead, not to the living. If there was anything like shamanism in ancient Egypt, then according to mainstream Egyptology it was only dead Egyptians that practised it, not living Egyptians. I have argued elsewhere that we need to suspend this presupposition if we are to allow the deeper content of Egyptian religious texts to speak to us.³⁴ I will not go over these arguments again here, because it would take far too long. Instead, I shall make the counter-assumption that the literature of ancient Egypt usually termed 'funerary' was not necessarily exclusively funerary, but also had a non-funerary meaning and purpose. In so doing, I hope that the possible connections between the wisdom of Plato and the wisdom of the Egyptians will be given a better chance to come into the light of day.

34. Jeremy Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts: The Mystical Tradition of Ancient Egypt* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 2005).

THE EGYPTIAN PSYCHE, EXOTERIC AND ESOTERIC

When Pythagoras and Plato went to Egypt, they would have encountered a similar kind of consciousness to that which is described in Homer. Just as in Homer soul qualities are distributed throughout the physical organism, and great emphasis is placed on physical organs and limbs as the location of psychic attributes, so in Egypt we find a comparable view expressed. The heart was for the Egyptians the main centre of consciousness, where people experienced emotions such as joy and anger, grief and fear. It was also the organ in which reflection and contemplation occurred. Like the Homeric *thumos*, it was furthermore the place where wishes and intentions gestated. But also, like the *thumos*, the heart was a semi-autonomous centre, a second person within the person, capable of being quite at variance with that person and standing as an accuser against him or her.³⁵ For the Egyptians the belly was the centre of instinctive impulses, and could be 'hot' or 'cold' depending on the degree to which these had been integrated into the wider social and moral context.³⁶ As in Homer, the limbs were regarded as the bearers of will. Strong arms or legs indicated the capacity to carry out one's wishes: as one maxim put it, 'He who has two arms is effective.'³⁷ By contrast, the head was not considered to be a centre of waking consciousness, and yet was most closely identified with the whole person, in a way that parallels what we find in Homer. Just as in Homer the head was the bearer of the soul or *psuche* as it travelled into the Underworld, so in Egypt we find the head of the deceased attached to the body of a winged bird as it journeys through the Egyptian Otherworld or *Dwat*.

This form that the soul or *ba* of the person takes can be seen in figure 1, but it should be understood that we are now in different psychological territory from the ordinary and everyday experiences of the average Egyptian. The *ba* is an esoteric concept that we meet in specifically religious contexts, rather than those that are concerned

35. See for example, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, chap. 30B, trans. R. O. Faulkner (London: British Museum Publications, 1985), p. 27. See also Jeremy Naydler, *Temple of the Cosmos* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 1996), pp. 186f.

36. Naydler, *op.cit.*, pp. 184–6.

37. Building inscription of Sesostris I, in Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 127. See also Naydler, *op.cit.*, pp. 179f.



Figure 1 *Ba* bird flying³⁸

with day-to-day experiences. This fact is not sufficiently appreciated today. When people talk about the ancient Egyptian understanding of the soul, this esoteric psychology is treated as if it were what everyone thought, but it was essentially a priestly teaching. The teaching was that the *ba* only comes into its own when the body is inactive and inert, which is usually either when the person is asleep or else dead. In exceptional circumstances, the person could also be in a trance state, neither asleep nor dead. The central requirement was that the psychophysical organism be stilled. The heart, belly and limbs must all be stilled, and thereby the soul-forces, normally distributed throughout the internal organs and limbs, could be gathered into a unity and concentrated into the form of the winged *ba*. If this occurred in a trance, then the person entered an enhanced state of consciousness in which their *ba*, as a concentration of soul-forces, was experienced as existing independently of the body.

Ancient Egyptian texts suggest that the *ba* needed to see the body inert in order to know itself as independent of it: the *ba* actually defined itself over against the body.³⁹ And then it knew that whereas the body is subject to death and decay, the *ba* itself is not, but can exist separately from the body.⁴⁰ In figure 2 we see the *ba* hovering over the body, knowing itself to be different from it. What is portrayed

38. Tomb of Arinefer, Thebes. New Kingdom. Drawing by Barry Cottrell.

39. See for example *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, chap. 89.

40. *Ibid.*, chap. 154.



Figure 2 The *ba* hovers over the body⁴¹

here is a dualism between body and soul that is only experienced in exceptional circumstances. It is nothing to do with normal daily experience. The key element here is that the soul in its form of the *ba* is liberated from the body, and thereby knows itself as an entity that has an existence independent both of the body and of the whole psycho-physical organism.

From such a standpoint, the body must appear to be a restriction on the soul which, experiencing itself as capable of existing separately from the body, knows that in essence it belongs to a different order of reality from that of the physical. This understanding of the soul's separability and essentially independent spiritual existence was re-expressed in doctrines (in all likelihood based on rituals) attributed by the Greeks to Orpheus. As we have seen, these were according to E. R. Dodds derived from northern shamanism. Plato refers to them in his dialogue *Cratylus*, where we learn that the Orphic poets held that 'the body (*soma*) is an enclosure or prison in which the soul is incarcerated'.⁴² From the point of view of the free soul or *ba*, this is how the

41. New Kingdom papyrus of Tehenena, Paris, Louvre. After W. Max Müller, *Egyptian Mythology* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1918).

42. Plato, *Cratylus* 400c, trans. Benjamin Jowett in *The Dialogues of Plato*, ed. R. M. Hare and D. A. Russell, vol. 3 (London: Sphere Books, 1970), p. 148.

body must appear. According to the Pythagoreans, to whom Plato alludes in the same passage, the body is not just a prison but should be seen as a tomb: it is 'the tomb (*sema*) of the soul, which may be thought to be buried in our present life'.⁴³

Given the close correspondence to Egyptian priestly teaching, and given the accounts that have come down to us of the long sojourn of Pythagoras in Egypt, it seems a little strange to be looking north for the sources of this doctrine. There is good reason to believe that the poems ascribed to Orpheus were in fact composed by Pythagoreans, since their place and time of origin was southern Italy and Sicily in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, when the Pythagorean communities flourished in that area.⁴⁴ We have already seen that Egyptian influence in southern Italy and Sicily was strong from the eighth and seventh centuries onwards. Since Pythagoras was himself deeply influenced by his first-hand knowledge of ancient Egyptian religion, an Egyptian derivation for this view of the relationship between soul and body seems far more probable than a northern one. This is certainly how Herodotus saw it. He travelled in the south of Italy and in Sicily in the fifth century BC, at the time when Pythagoreanism was already well established there. He states that 'rites known as Orphic' were 'really Egyptian and Pythagorean'.⁴⁵

PLATO AND THE EGYPTIAN TRADITION

The separability of the soul and the possibility of it existing independently of the body is one teaching that is central both to Plato and to ancient Egyptian sacred texts. It could be said to constitute the very kernel of Platonism. Given the possibility that Plato himself spent time studying in Egypt, we should not assume that he was simply transmitting Egyptian doctrines second hand, through his association with the Pythagoreans. He was not merely 'transmitting doctrines' in any case: he was reworking them and making them his own. This does not mean, however, that they were original to him: rather, he was

43. Ibid., though Jowett translates 'tomb' as 'grave'. See also *Gorgias* 492E-493 for further reference to this doctrine as having a Sicilian or Italian source.

44. Charles H. Kahn, *Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans: A Brief History* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001), p. 20.

45. Herodotus, *Histories* 2.81, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 159.

absorbing a living tradition, and re-expressing that tradition in terms of his own culture, and in terms of his own understanding.

Let us then turn to *Phaedo*, where we find the pursuit of philosophy portrayed as a spiritual practice. In the dialogue, Socrates describes the inner development of the philosopher as involving 'purification' or *katharsis*. This latter

consists in separating as far as possible the soul (*psuche*) from the body and teaching the soul the habit of collecting and bringing itself together from all parts of the body, and living so far as it can, both now and hereafter, alone and by itself, freed from the body as from fetters.⁴⁶

What Plato is discussing here, through his character Socrates, is a kind of consciousness that transcends the normal awareness of soul qualities as distributed throughout the physical organs and limbs. The soul (*psuche*), normally immersed in the psycho-physical organism, must practise the spiritual exercise of collecting and bringing itself together 'from all parts of the body' in order to concentrate its forces in a single point. In Plato's dialogue, Socrates goes on to say that the practice of true philosophers involves 'the release and separation of the soul from the body'.⁴⁷ In other words, what is normally unconsciously immersed in the body, and not distinguished from it, is through an enhancement of consciousness (which is what *katharsis* entails) released and thereby experienced as separate. Since this experience is a precursor of what we must all experience at death, the practice of purification or *katharsis* is a preparation for death: 'True philosophers', says Socrates, 'practise dying'.⁴⁸ This, of course, is precisely what the religious literature of the ancient Egyptians, from the Pyramid Texts to the Book of the Dead and beyond—a literature usually referred to as 'funerary'—is all about. It is a literature concerned with the practise of dying. And one of the most important teachings it contains is to do with the separability of the soul or *ba*.

If Plato had spent some time in Egypt studying with Egyptian priests, he would not only have learned about the separability of the soul. He would also have learned that there is a further component of

46. Plato, *Phaedo* 67C, trans. Harold North Fowler (London: William Heinemann, 1928), p. 233.

47. *Ibid.*, 67D and p. 234. 48. *Ibid.*, 67E and p. 234.

the human being, concerning which he would have discovered nothing in Homer, though he might have come across it in Pythagorean circles. This further component is luminous and divine, and constitutes our spiritual essence, whereas the *ba* or *psuche* is best understood as the manifestation of this luminous and divine essence on the soul level.⁴⁹ This divine component of the human being was called by the Egyptians the *akh* or 'shining spirit', and it was associated by them both with the sun and the stars, for its mode of existence is cosmic.⁵⁰ As the Pyramid Texts succinctly put it:

Akh to the sky;
body to the earth.⁵¹

If the *akh* is the innermost aspect of the *ba*, its eternal core, then to become *akh* is to become divinized.

In Plato's writings, the notion that there is an immortal core to the *psuche* is repeatedly expressed. Sometimes he refers to it as the *daimon*, sometimes as the *nous*, and sometimes as the *logistikon*.⁵² In each case it is understood to be both immortal and to be that part of us by which we attain spiritual insight or wisdom. In both respects Plato's conception exactly parallels the Egyptian notion of the *akh*. When, for example, the New Kingdom king Thutmose III is infused with the *akh*-power of the sungod Ra, he not only becomes assim-

49. *Ba* is often better translated as 'manifestation' than 'soul', for it is a term applied to the manifestation of the gods in their perceptible forms: for instance, all sacred animals were seen as the *ba* of a deity, just as the wind was the *ba* of the air god Shu and the visible sun the *ba* of the sun god Ra. See Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, trans. John Baines (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 138.

50. The association of the *akh* with the sun is documented from the Old Kingdom onwards. Thus in *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, §152, trans. R.O. Faulkner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 44, Unas approaches Ra-Atum as an imperishable *akh*, as does Ani in *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, chap. 91. The association is particularly dramatic in the coronation text of Thutmose III, where the king rises to the sky as a falcon in order to be infused with the sungod's *akh*-power, for which see Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts*, p. 208 with n. 57. The association of the *akh* with the stars, or with becoming a star, is found especially in *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, for example §§347-50 where we read: 'Lo, I stand up as this star which is on the underside of the sky . . . for I have not died the death. I have become *akh*.'

51. *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, §474.

52. For instance, in the *Republic*, he tends to refer to it as the *nous* or the *logistikon*, in the *Timaeus* he refers to it both as the *daimon* and the *logistikon*.

lated to the sungod but is also 'acquainted with the wisdom of the gods'.⁵³ This association of becoming inwardly luminous or *akh* with becoming wise conforms to a pattern of initiatory experience that goes back to the Pyramid Texts where the fiery rebirth of the king as an *akh* in the *Akhet* ('the place of becoming *akh*') is followed by his becoming a 'master of wisdom' (*her sai*, literally, 'one who is above wisdom').⁵⁴

Just as in the ancient Egyptian 'funerary' literature, wisdom (*sai*) is acquired only by that person who has crossed the threshold of death and stands in direct relationship to the spirit world, so in Plato's *Phaedo* we learn that 'the wisdom which we desire and upon which we profess to have set our hearts will be attainable only when we are dead'.⁵⁵ The reason that Plato gives for this very radical view of how wisdom can be attained is that when we are dead the soul functions independently of the body. In this state, the soul is able to see into the world of spiritual archetypes which, owing to the soul's association with the body during life, is normally concealed from it. If it were possible to accomplish such a separation of the soul from the body during life, then wisdom would be attainable during life, which is why he defines philosophy as 'the practice of dying'.

This idea of 'dying' before one's actual physical death was the aim of Egyptian initiatory rituals like the Sed festival, and in the Greek and later Hellenistic mysteries it would seem that a comparable crossing of the threshold of death while alive was the main purpose of initiation rites.⁵⁶ Interestingly, it is precisely this experience of the living coming to stand in direct relationship to the spirit world that is described in Plato's *Phaedrus*, and we shall come to this later. For now, we need to pursue a little further the way the Egyptians understood the *akh*, and

53. Jan Assmann, 'Death and Initiation in the Funerary Religion of Ancient Egypt', in *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt*, ed. W. K. Simpson (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 135–59: p. 142 n. 41. See also Alison Roberts, *My Heart, My Mother* (Rottingdean: Northgate, 2000), p. 242.

54. *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, Utts. 249 and 250. See also Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts*, pp. 238–40.

55. Plato, *Phaedo* 66E, trans. Hugh Tredennick, *The Last Days of Socrates* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), p. 111.

56. For the Sed festival, see Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts*, pp. 71–80. For the statements of Pindar, Sophocles, Isocrates and the Homeric Hymn to Demeter concerning crossing the threshold of death while still alive during the Greek mysteries, see Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 289. One of our best sources for the later Hellenistic mysteries is Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. Robert Graves (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950), pp. 285–6.

how this understanding is paralleled in Plato's conception of the divine element in our nature to which he referred as the *daimon*, *nous* or *logistikon*.

We have seen that the ancient Egyptian and the Platonic conceptions agree that this element in us (*akh* or *nous*, etc.) is to be understood as our spiritual and immortal core, while at the same time it is that in us by which we are able to acquire true knowledge, insight and wisdom. For the Egyptians, the *akh* is intrinsically luminous. It is light-filled and radiant like the sun. But this was not just an analogy: there was felt to be a real inner affinity between the *akh* and the sungod Ra. At the very heart of Egyptian religion, from the Old Kingdom through to the New Kingdom and beyond, the highest spiritual aspiration was to become united with Ra. In becoming *akh*, therefore, one realized this inner identity between the sungod and one's deepest human nature. It is therefore not without significance that according to Strabo, the place where Plato studied with Egyptian priests was the cult centre of Ra—Heliopolis. Here Plato would have learned that just as the *akh* is inwardly luminous like the sun, so the highest knowledge is only attained through coming into the presence of, and effectively merging with, the sungod.

It is an interesting fact that, according to Krantor—one of the early Greek commentators on Plato's *Republic*—it was generally believed that this dialogue drew heavily on Egyptian sources.⁵⁷ While this indebtedness is usually thought to refer more to his political ideas than to his epistemology, it is significant that in the *Republic* the highest object of knowledge and the goal of philosophical contemplation is the Form of the Good, which Plato compares to the sun. Just as in the visible world the sun is the source of life and light, which both makes objects visible and gives the power of seeing to the eye, so in the intelligible world the Form of the Good is the source of reality and truth, which both makes objects of thought (the Forms) intelligible and gives the power of knowing to the mind (*nous*).⁵⁸ Plato's conception of the Form of the Good is that it is not simply an idea but is a generative principle, a god. As such, it actually generates the sun, which is its 'child'. So he tells us, 'The Good has begotten it (the sun)

57. See the discussion in Bernal, *Black Athena*, vol. 1 (London: Free Association Books, 1987), pp. 105–7.

58. Plato, *Republic* 507–9, trans. H. D. P. Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), pp. 271–4.

in its own likeness'.⁵⁹ It is hard not to think of Ra's relationship with the visible sun, which Ra was not so much identified with as represented by, for the sun was the visible manifestation, rather than the spiritual essence, of the god. This is made plain in portrayals of the sungod watching the sundisk as it rises or travelling with the sundisk in his boat, as in figure 3. In this and other portrayals there is a clear distinction between the god and the sun disk, that alerts us to the fact that far from the god being a personification of the physical sun, the sun is the physical manifestation of the god.

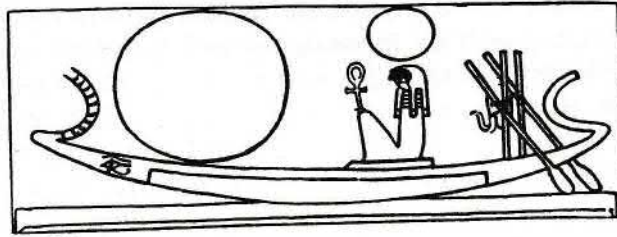


Figure 3 The sungod and the sun disk⁶⁰

The epistemology that Plato gives us in the *Republic* is based on the idea that we only know truly that in which our mind participates. True knowledge is knowledge by participation. So to know the Form of the Good one must know it through a participation in its essence, a knowing that, as Plato describes it, is tantamount to a visionary and ecstatic experience.⁶¹ Once this experience has been achieved, the philosopher is equipped to perceive all the other Forms or principles (*archai*) from which the rest of reality is derived. It is thus the Form of the Good that gives to the mind its power of knowing the content of the world of archetypal forms, for it is 'the controlling source' of both reality and human understanding.⁶² In a similar way, it is the sungod Ra who gives the human being the power of knowing and being effective in the spirit world, the *Dwat*, which is the Egyptian equivalent of the

59. Ibid., 508, and p. 272.

60. Vignette to the Book of the Dead, Chap. 134. From E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 404.

61. Ibid., 517 and pp. 281f.

62. Ibid., 517 and p. 282.

Platonic world of Forms.⁶³ In the New Kingdom Book of What is in the Underworld (*Am Dwat*), as Ra passes through the regions of the *Dwat*, he illuminates them, thereby making it possible for them to be known.⁶⁴ If Plato had studied with the priests of Heliopolis, it is not inconceivable that he would have learned of the night journey of the sungod through the *Dwat*. And if he had, then he would also have learned that if one is to come to know the spirit world, then one would have to travel in companionship with Ra, on his sunboat, for from this vantage point the spirit world becomes accessible to the light of consciousness.

The ancient Egyptians placed a great deal of emphasis on the importance of knowledge of the *Dwat*. For them, the *Dwat* was the source of everything that comes into being on the physical plane. Just as the *Dwat* is the destination of all that is old and worn out, so it is also the origin of all that is fresh and new. All living things emerge from the *Dwat* when they are born, just as they return to it when they die. So although we could say that the *Dwat* is the 'afterlife realm' it is equally the 'before-life realm', for all creatures pre-exist in the *Dwat* inwardly, having a purely spiritual mode of existence prior to their physical birth. For the Egyptians, then, the realm of death is also the source of life. This understanding is central to Egyptian thinking, and we meet it again in Plato.

The world of archetypal Forms that, according to Plato, the philosopher accesses while engaged in the 'practise of dying' is precisely the interior world of non-physical forms or essences that the Egyptians located in the 'hidden region' of the *Dwat*. Just as for the Egyptians this realm is illumined by the light of the sungod as he passes through it, enabling all who travel with the sungod to see into the depths of the spirit world, so for Plato the whole sphere of archetypal Forms is lit up through the philosopher's participation in the Form of the Good. The Platonic spiritual exercise of *anamnesis* or 'remini-scence' is best understood as a means of beholding this order of reality that is effectively trans-temporal. Because it is trans-temporal, it belongs

63. For the *Dwat* as the Egyptian equivalent of the Platonic world of Forms, see Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts*, pp. 20–21 and 83–4.

64. The Book of What is in the Underworld, Div. 1, trans. Piankoff, *The Tomb of Ramses VI* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 238. See also Jan Assmann, *Egyptian Solar Religion in the New Kingdom*, trans. Anthony Alcock (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1995), pp. 22ff.

as much to our future as to our past, for it effectively transcends existence in time. Thus the Platonic reminiscence enables us to recognize the non-temporal order of reality that lies *between* death and birth.⁶⁵ *Anamnesis* is shamanic soul travel by another name, and it is no coincidence that Plato presents this exercise in the *Phaedo* along with the doctrine that the soul, 'gathered into itself alone', can travel into 'the invisible, divine, immortal and wise' world of spirit, the 'realm of the god of the other world'.⁶⁶

If it is true that Plato spent time in Heliopolis studying with the priests of Ra, there is something else that he might also have learned there. This is that union with Ra, travelling in his sunboat through the *Dwat*, and beholding in the *Dwat* the invisible powers and energies of the spirit world, does not encompass the full extent of the ancient Egyptian conception of the spiritual goal. The *Dwat* was understood to have a celestial location, within the body of the cosmic goddess Nut. The ancient Egyptians understood our nature as human beings to be essentially cosmic, and believed that if we are to become fully realized spiritual beings, then this must occur in a cosmic setting. Thus the conception of the spiritual goal was from the earliest religious texts pictured as involving the ascent of the soul to the heavens, either to become united with Ra, or to assume the form of a star. In this process, in whichever way it was conceived, the soul became *akh*—inwardly illumined.

In ancient Egyptian religious texts, the ascent to the sky was accomplished by diverse means—by climbing a ladder, by being wafted upwards on the smoke of incense, by being assisted by the gods, and so on. But the most favoured method of ascent was undoubtedly by transforming oneself into a bird, preferably a falcon (the bird sacred to Ra), and soaring upwards with outspread wings.⁶⁷ This may be because both the *ba* and the *akh* were understood by the Egyptians to have bird forms. Such methods of ascent have shamanic parallels, of course, for this is very much a shamanic motif.⁶⁸ Within the shamanic tradi-

65. Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks*, trans. Janet Lloyd and Jeff Fort (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 354.

66. Plato, *Phaedo* 80D–81A, trans. Fowler in op. cit., pp. 281–3.

67. See, for example, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, Uts. 214 and 302; *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, vol. 1, trans. R. O. Faulkner (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1973), Spells 302 and 312; *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, trans. Faulkner, chaps 77 and 78.

68. For shamanic ascent, see Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism*, chap. 6.

tion, transformation into an eagle was an especially potent means of rising upwards, and the falcon could be seen as the Egyptian equivalent of the eagle.⁶⁹ What is of particular interest to us here is that we read in Plato's *Phaedrus* that the philosopher too must 'grow wings' in order for the soul to fly up to the sky. While it is conceivable that Plato derived this idea of the soul acquiring wings from northern shamanic cultures, for the reasons that I have already given it seems more likely that its origin is Egyptian.

Plato introduces this idea in conjunction both with the spiritual exercise of the soul 'collecting itself together' and the doctrine of *anamnesis*, which practice, he says, involves the soul 'lifting its vision' toward reality.⁷⁰ In one of the most memorable passages—a passage clearly related to initiation rites—Plato then describes the flight of the philosopher's soul to the stars.⁷¹ There it comes to the immortal region of the gods and, standing on the back of the universe, beholds what lies beyond—the colourless, formless and intangible reality that only

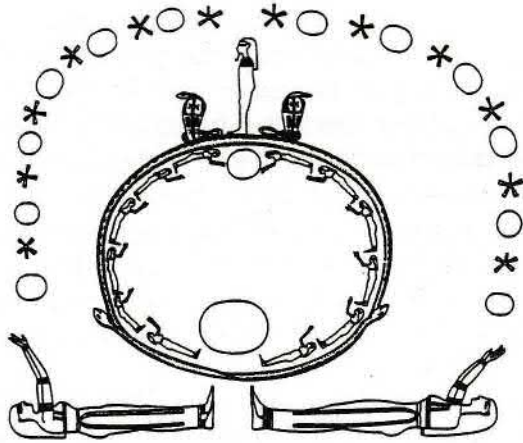


Figure 4 Standing on the back of the universe⁷²

69. Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts*, p. 203.

70. Plato, *Phaedrus* 249C, trans. Harold North Fowler (London: William Heinemann, 1938), p. 481.

71. *Ibid.*, 246E–247E and pp. 472–7.

72. Tomb of Ramesses III, Valley of the Kings. After Erik Hornung, *The Valley of the Kings* (New York: Timken, 1990), p. 94.

the *nous* is capable of perceiving.⁷³ We are reminded of an image in the tomb of Ramesses III which could almost be taken as an illustration of the passage in the *Phaedrus* (see figure 4).

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Plato is often regarded as the father of Western philosophy, and he is seen as the originator of a metaphysical world view known as Platonism. In the light of the preceding discussion, both these presuppositions must be called into question. This is not simply because we have seen the close affinities between key philosophical doctrines of Plato and certain Egyptian religious texts and images. It is also because of the strong link between Plato and the Pythagoreans of southern Italy and Sicily, the likelihood that the Pythagoreans were transmitting teachings whose source was in Egypt, the long-standing tradition that Plato visited Egypt, and the relative ease with which he might have gone there. None of this amounts to conclusive evidence, of course, but then neither is there conclusive evidence to the contrary. We are here simply contemplating a possible scenario that would give us a new perspective on Plato's position in the history of philosophy and a new understanding of the sources of his thought. By accepting an Egyptian influence (either direct or indirect) on Platonism, we are able to see Plato's philosophy in a context both broader and deeper than the history of Western philosophy alone. The context becomes historically broader in so far as Plato's thinking is understood to have been inspired by religious teachings emanating from ancient Egypt. It becomes spiritually deeper in so far as his writings can be seen to rest on a bedrock of *spiritual experience* rather than simply rational speculation.

'Platonism' may therefore not be as purely Platonic as it has come to be regarded: we could see it as transmitting a tradition whose origins are far more ancient than either Plato or Pythagoras. In antiquity, there was a widespread view that Plato was writing within a tradition, of which he was by no means the founder. Neoplatonists like Numenius and Iamblichus saw Plato's philosophy as rooted in the

73. According to Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 92, this is 'by far the most influential text about the experience of mysteries' and has 'become the basic text of mysticism in the true sense'.

cults, rituals and doctrines of the Near East, and many others saw it as a link in the chain of transmission of Pythagoreanism and Orphism, teachings whose indebtedness to Egypt was common knowledge.⁷⁴ This is not to deny Plato's originality or genius, but only to suggest that we might understand him better were we to place him within a larger context than we are used to doing. It may be that Plato's contribution to Western philosophy, like that of other early Greek philosophers, was that he put into terms understandable to his contemporaries, and thereby made accessible, teachings that were essentially esoteric and that hitherto had been wrapped in secrecy, under the protection of the Egyptian priesthood.

If this is correct, then we would also have to look again at the Egyptian sources of the Hermetic tradition. At first encounter, the Corpus Hermeticum can seem to be more 'Platonic' than Egyptian, but if we approach it with an awareness of the degree to which Platonism itself is re-expressing (in accordance with Greek cultural norms) Egyptian spiritual perspectives, the 'Platonic' element in these texts resolves itself into a rather thinly disguised Egyptian element that has simply been couched in Greek philosophical language. In the Corpus Hermeticum, we meet for instance the doctrine that the soul or *psuche* is separable from the body, just as is the Egyptian *ba*.⁷⁵ We also meet the important distinction between the *psuche* and the *nous*, which corresponds to the Egyptian distinction between the *ba* and the *akh*.⁷⁶ Just as in both Plato and the Egyptian Pyramid Texts, wisdom is attained only by one who crosses the threshold of death in order to stand in immediate relationship to the spirit world, so also in the Corpus Hermeticum we meet the same understanding.⁷⁷ Again, the sun in the Hermetic writings is linked to the form of the Good in a way that parallels both Plato and ancient Egyptian teachings.⁷⁸ So too is the world of the dead linked to the world of archetypal forms.⁷⁹ Last but

74. Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 304–5 and 130–32.

75. Corpus Hermeticum, x.6–8; xi.19, trans. Clement Salaman et al., *The Way of Hermes* (London: Duckworth, 1999), pp. 46–8 and 57.

76. Corpus Hermeticum, xii.2–4, and *The Way of Hermes*, p. 59.

77. Ibid., xi.3; xiii.2–3, and *The Way of Hermes*, pp. 52f and 65f; 'The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth' in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James Robinson (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977), pp. 292–7.

78. Corpus Hermeticum, x.2–6; xvi.5–6, and *The Way of Hermes*, pp. 45–6 and 75.

79. Ibid., i.24; vii.1–5; xi.15–17, and *The Way of Hermes*, pp. 22, 39–40, and 56–7.

not least, the mystical ascent to the sky is as central to the Hermetic tradition as it is to both Egyptian and Platonic mysticism.⁸⁰

The Corpus Hermeticum has long been seen as a somewhat exotic offshoot of the Platonic tradition, using Platonic metaphysics as a springboard into pseudo-Egyptian mystical flights of fancy.⁸¹ This view has become increasingly untenable as more recent studies have shown the extent of the Corpus Hermeticum's rootedness in Egyptian precedents.⁸² But the conclusion has not yet been drawn that the apparent 'Platonic' elements in the Corpus Hermeticum may themselves be an indication of Egyptian influence. If the Corpus Hermeticum is more self-consciously 'Egyptian' than Plato ever set out to be, this does not mean that its Platonic elements are necessarily Greek. They too may be more Egyptian than they at first seem. The parallels between Plato and the Corpus Hermeticum may best be understood if we open our eyes to the fact that Plato was not the originator of a Greek philosophical tradition called Platonism, but was—like the author, or authors, of the Corpus Hermeticum—working within, and re-expressing in terms of his own culture and understanding, a much more ancient spiritual tradition emanating from Egypt.

80. Ibid., 1.24–6 and *The Way of Hermes*, pp. 22–3; 'The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth' in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, pp. 292–7.

81. The champion of this view was A.-J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste* (1944–1954), and it still has its exponents, for example John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (London: Duckworth, 1996), p. 392, who sees in Hermeticism 'certain basic entities of Platonic metaphysics' that 'have found their way into realms far removed from orthodox Platonism'.

82. The two major studies are J.-P. Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Egypte*, 2 vols. (Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1978–82) and G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).