

## The Ka and Totality in Ancient Egypt

This is a speculative essay on the meaning of the Ka in ancient Egypt from May 1988. I'd forgotten that I'd written this, and I'm surprised to find that I'd written on this subject so long ago. The essay is written on the simple premiss that the Egyptians asked themselves the same fundamental questions about the nature of reality that the Greeks did (i.e., 'why is there something rather than nothing?' and 'is reality one, and if it is one, why are there many?' And so on). The most fundamental questions that can be asked of the world are likely to be universal.

My interest was in the possibility that these questions might lie at the root of religious thought and practice. A good way to find out if the Egyptians thought like this is to assume (for the purposes of argument) that they did. By the time I wrote this piece, I'd already read *On the Mysteries* by Iamblichus, which book suggests that the religious mysteries of both Egypt and Assyria are rooted in the same kind of intellectual territory discussed much later by Plato. Unlike modern specialists in Platonism, Iamblichus regarded Plato as a theological writer, who was discussing important theological questions in dialogue form.

To be clear, I am *not* suggesting that the Egyptians were proto-Platonists. But the distinctions between the outward forms of theological and religious ideas does not preclude the possibility that the differences have a common root in the same fundamental questions which can be asked about the nature of reality. We already know that there were many common practices in the ancient world which suggest the presence of a common intellectual substrate, more or less lost to us. Sacrifice, worship of divine images, and so on. We write off these obvious similarities as the products of a more or less universal form of primitive stupidity. But the opposite may be true. And we won't find this out if we don't consider the possibility.

The pages were scanned at 300dpi, and they are in JPG format. All the pages were typed using an IBM golfball typewriter.

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The concentration on D'Arcy Thompson has largely diverted me from my main work, though material still thrusts itself before me, especially as the Prof. Thompson project is closely related to it.

Here I record some information and thoughts not yet committed to paper:

I) It seems to me that the Egyptian concept of the Ka is, if you like, the inverse of what the individual is. Or, to put it another way, if each individual is a totality, yet the material, concrete existence of that individual is not a totality, the Ka is the difference. Thus, the existent and visible form is an illusion; an alteration of the totality. Hence the Ka is the reciprocal of the invisible form: both what is required to be added to the visible form in order to restore its totality, and what must be taken away. The visible reality of a form is an illusion caused by the alteration of the One; the coming into existence being the result of excess and defect.

Neither excess nor defect are actually possible: they are illusions. Only the substratum of the One is real. Reality, as we speak of it in common sense terms, is not real at all, but a false perception of the true reality, which is the One. The coming into existence is an illusion, an alteration of the One: it is its fragmentation and its augmentation, Both of which are impossible.

If this interpretation is correct (and I believe that it is, though it is difficult to express, and I am less than happy with the way I have expressed it here), then

it is clear that the ancients regarded the 'real' world not only as an illusion, but as fundamentally impossible. Hence, if the world is a place of impossibility, which has a reality of sorts to us, then the impossibility of existence and the impossibilities of existence, have some kind of truth; some kind of veracity (we might say an altered kind of truth).

I think that the ancient argument would have run either along the above lines, or very similar lines.

Thus we have two arguments for the possibility of impossibility, which are related to each other:

a) If the cosmos is One, then it must contain all things, and hence all things are possible, including the impossible. Otherwise the totality would not be complete.

b) If the visible and material world is fundamentally a breach of the One, then in a sense it is impossible. Hence the impossible is possible.

Both of these arguments are reconciled in the ideal that the cosmos is the product of a paradoxical substratum, and is the result of the attempts of the One to remain consistent with itself. The One must be neither one nor many, because otherwise it would not be complete. Yet it must be both, otherwise it would not be complete.

The paradoxical nature of the substratum means that it is totally beyond our experience, and transcends all the categories of existence which we employ in order to make some kind of sense of the world. Thus these categories are of no use in understanding the transcendent nature of the subs-

tratum which underpins the visible and partial reality, except when it is realised that they are of no moment to the substratum: being a means of the expression of that substratum, and may be contradicted or denied, because the essence of the totality is paradox. The expression of that essence may involve the breaching of our fundamental and common sense categories.

We might question why it is that the essence of the substratum is paradox. In doing so we must remember that it is only a way of speaking. In fact the substratum of totality may transcend the categories, not because its purpose is to break them, but because to the substratum they have no real existence. The great and the small, the one and the many, at some level of transcendence, are not distinguished. Likewise, difference and similarity are products of the alteration of the One, as the alteration of the One is the product of the nature of the One itself.

It is thus possible to conceive of the visible reality as an improbability: i.e., as an alteration which is an improbable and, in Platonic language, unlikely version of the substratum of totality. That is to say, if the impossible is possible, then the concept of the impossible is meaningless. We must therefore, be limited to speaking of probabilities and improbabilities. So that, an alteration of the One is a more or less probability

or improbability. We must speak, as Plato did, of likelihood; in more or less statistical terms.

The common sense view is that what is probable is what is real. Whereas the paradoxical view is that what is improbable is the true reality, since it more fully participates in what is transcendent and other. I.e., it is more nearly like the transcendent ground of being, the substratum of totality, which is both improbable and paradoxical.

But being paradoxical and totality means that the improbable and the probable must both be present, as it were. The consequences of this are extremely important.

We can conceive of this in several ways, each of which has some validity:

a) The improbable is the reciprocal of the probable. Therefore we can imagine the totality as a cake which is divided according to the proportions of probability and improbability.

b) We might imagine the opposite of this, so that the 'this' is the improbability, and the 'that' is the probability.

c) We might imagine that both are true, and that the 'this' and the 'that' are merely points of view, which have no absolute validity apart from a particular perspective.

Thus, the improbable and the probable can be conceived as opposites, as contraries, as clearly distinct. And

yet, they are not distinct. For in a sense, they may be conceived to be the opposite sides of the same coin. More than this, as the same side of the coin viewed from a different direction.

This means that the 'that' or the 'this', rather than simply being the reciprocal of the other, must, by itself, be seen as the totality. As indeed is the individual which is an alteration of the One.

Further, this means that the improbable and the probable must be in some way the same thing, so that it becomes a matter of viewpoint as to which appears to be more real and more present or existent.

Material existence, therefore, must be a pattern of probabilities, a distribution or arrangement of likelihood, and a statistical collocation. Such arrangements and collocations are not going to be simple in fact or simple to grasp: there will be the probability that a thing which has come forth is what it has come to be, and this will have as its reciprocal the improbability that it is what it has come to be. But, if it has come forth from totality itself, pure totality, the All, then that reciprocal will be an infinite improbability. The probability and its reciprocal will amount to more than an infinite number. Thus mathematics is very difficult in such extreme regions, as we know already.

The range of such difficulties is very large, and I do not intend to explore them here.

One point requires to be made before I attempt to def-

ine the Egyptian concept of the Ka as clearly as I can, and relate it to its hieroglyphic representation. And that is that this question of probability leads us directly to the practice of sacrifice and the collecting together of images, the heaping up of things for ritual purposes, which appears to be as old as man's intellectual life. As I have observed before, the main point of this would appear to have been to alter the probability of reality in the vicinity of a religious site. Whether or not my interpretation of the Ka is correct, some such theory of reality is necessary to underpin such practices. And we need not look far to find examples, for careful examination reveals that this theory of reality was held by Aristotle, and probably by Plato, and others, as well. Thus, this is not an absurd projection of the theories of Cantor into antiquity, merely the implicit assertion that Aristotle and Plato were peddling ideas of great antiquity and subtlety. The barrier to the acceptance of this is twofold: firstly, the necessity to have an unfolding model of the development of the human intellect means that we need a great increase in human intellectual power between the Egyptians and the Greeks (their lack of communication is for a different, though closely related reason); secondly, for the same reason, we cannot allow that the ancients had a clear perception of the problems of the infinite, irrespective of the fact that the evidence is all around in the texts and in the remains.

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Unaccountably, I left out the most important reason of all for the inability to accept the role of the infinite in antiquity. And that is, that it is the rational and final root of religion.

The definition of the Ka, therefore, would seem to me to be the 'that' which is transcendent, and not specifically the imaginary reciprocal of the 'this'. The Ka is not a specific form of transcendence, but generally that form of transcendence defined as what is beyond: i.e., the broadest definition imaginable. It is the reciprocal of ourselves and the totality which transcends our understanding, and also the paradoxicality of the substrate which has a character beyond our comprehension. It is all these.

Yet I do not know this, and freely confess that I am guessing here. This is advanced as no more than a hypothesis which is to be tested. It may turn out to be the case that the Ka represents one of the more limited definitions of the beyond and the transcendent, but we shall see.

As is well known, the form of the Ka in the hieroglyphic carvings is a pair of arms extended in an embrace. This strongly suggests the idea of the reciprocal in a number of ways, in that it suggests containment, the complement of the sexual embrace, or the support of the offspring by the mother. The reciprocal is suggested, but totality, the wider meaning, is not. Yet the sign which is more or less identical but with the palms turned outwards signifies nothing. Hence, by contrast, the sign



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Ka might be taken to mean totality in addition to 'the reciprocal', though I do not mean to suggest at all that this is how the meaning came to be ascribed. As we have seen, the two ideas of 'the reciprocal' and 'totality' are not incompatible according to the theory I have outlined.

A proper examination of Ka (as well as Qa and Kha) at some future time.