

ANCIENT EGYPT – Philosophy

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Overview Although the ancient Greeks--that is, Thales, Pythagoras and Plato--referred to Egyptian philosophy as the origin of their own, and as the original wisdom, we have little philosophy, strictly speaking, remaining from the three millennia of Egyptian imperial power. We do have, though, plenty of evidence of practical philosophy, popular philosophy on the ground, which greatly enriches our sense of the ancient Egyptian mind.

Ptahhotep Living in the late 25th century B.C.E., Ptahhotep was vizier to the Pharaoh, influential and respected; when he reached the age of 110 his wisdom so recommended him, as a perceptive student of the human condition, that he was prevailed upon to write down his understanding of life, especially for the benefit of his son. There followed a collection of 37 maxims, largely preserved, in which he wrote out his philosophy of life, putting special stress on how to deal with personal issues and protocols at the Pharaoh's court, how to praise one's wife, and how to use silence prudently and to your advantage. Truthfulness and timing are given particular attention, as means to social skill.

Practical philosophy Though the ancient Egyptians were brilliant astronomers and architects, innovated in technologies, and developed a rich theology, they were not at their most inventive in dealing with philosophical issues such as those of metaphysics, logic, or epistemology--where the Greeks excelled. The man on the street was likely to appreciate such points as Ptahhotep's--wise and practical life lessons--and to have his own repertoire of spells, religious practices, and moral strictures. For such folks *The Book of the Dead*, under compilation from 1550 B.C.E. to 50 B.C.E., provided a helpful cautionary road map to the next world, and held out cautions for those concerned about salvation. (Spell 125 in *The Book of the Dead*, concerns the 'weighing of the heart,' a fearsome balance in which the soul of the deceased is weighed against a feather--symbol of the Goddess of Justice, Maat, to determine the weight of the sins of the deceased.) Such abundant Egyptian literature as *The Story of Sinuhe* or *Instructions for Merikare* deploy lessons in caution and sobriety, which appear to have been everyday goals in Egyptian ethic.

Akhenaten (d. 1336 B.C.E.) The Pharaoh Akhenaten, the creator of a unique version of monotheism, stands out for the brilliance (and transience) with which he imposed a new 'philosophy' on the Egyptian people. Perhaps we should say, 'a new way of seeing,' in which the supreme god, the sun god, mastered all the other phenomena of the sky, 'the moon among stars' by another image. Akhenaten gave the people a short-lived vision of an alternate to their age old polytheism. After his death his brilliant vision was harshly dismantled.

Readings

Assman, Jan, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, Ithaca, 2001.

Hoffmeier, James, *Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism*, Oxford, 2015.

Discussion questions

What was the role of the great Library of Alexandria, in inviting foreign philosophers, and enriching Egyptian philosophical culture?

Religion, magic, and philosophy tended to merge in the mind of the ancient Egyptian on the street. Does the guy or gal on the street in New York City carry an 'organized philosophy within him or her'?

What kind of social/political culture is required to foster the birth of technical philosophy--Plato, Aristotle--as distinct from the practical philosophy of the everyday?