

Magic and Religion in Ancient Egypt

Part I: The Roots

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Preface

The title of this series: “Magic and Religion in Ancient Egypt” is a description of its content – but also a statement of its perspective. The position of this series is, that the magic and religion of ancient Egypt both have their roots in the same mental background, and that, for the ancient Egyptians themselves, a distinction between magic and religion was meaningless. That is why both will be treated here on an equal footing.

The first part of the series will be devoted to this common background of magic and religion.

Quoted works are referred to with abbreviations in italics: see the Bibliography on page 82.

Permission to use the quotations from the work of Miriam Lichtheim was graciously granted by The Regents of the University of California.

Italics in quotations are from the original author.

Transliterations are given in the system of the *Manuel de Codage*.

*We are so small between the stars,
so large against the sky*
Leonard Cohen

Introduction

Our goal is, to understand the ancient Egyptians to the point, where we can look through their eyes, to see their world as they saw it. To accomplish this, we need to reconstruct their world as fully and as faithfully as we possibly can – but we also need to reconstruct their “way of looking” at the world: their perspective.

In the current series, we will restrict ourselves to the field of magic and religion. In this area, “reconstructing their world” means the collection and description of all tokens of religious and magical beliefs and practices. Since the Egyptians have left us a wealth of those, this can occupy us for quite some time. Without a proper understanding of the Egyptian perspective however, we will just end up with a fascinating, but incomprehensible collection of curiosities. (It is a nice contradiction, that precisely in the field where we have so much material at our disposal, the interpretation of that material proves to be so difficult.) We will therefore begin the series with a study of this perspective.

Let us start with a quick look at what there is to explain. On the one hand we have an admirable culture that produced, a/o:

- The wisdom of the precepts of Ptahhotep:
 - “Good speech is more hidden than Greenstone, yet may be found among maids at the grindstones”.
 - About the hearing of petitioners: “Not all one pleads for can be granted, but a good hearing soothes the heart”;
 - “People’s schemes do not prevail,
God’s command is what prevails;
Live then in the midst of peace,
What they [the gods] give comes by itself.”¹
- A system of values and virtues that we immediately recognize, such as in this part of the traditional autobiography:
 - “I gave bread to the hungry, clothes to the naked
I brought the boatless to land
I buried him who had no son
I made a boat for him who lacked one”²
- Religious positions of extreme humbleness, expressed in fine poetry in the Pyramid Texts (e.g. Spells 309 and 446);
- Some remarkably modern looking religious concepts, such as Coffin Text 1130 (“The Four Good Deeds”), the Instruction of Merikare (“Well tended is mankind – god’s cattle”³), and the Great Hymn of the Aton (often compared with Psalm 104);
- The idea that morally just behavior on earth was helpful in reaching the Afterlife (Chapter 125 of the Book of the Dead);
- And touching tokens of personal piety on some New Kingdom stelae.

And on the other hand we find:

- The crude and brutal Cannibal-hymn of the Pyramid Texts (Spell 273-274);

¹ AEL-I, 65. Cf. the gospel according to Luke: 6, 22-27.

² AEL-I, 17: from the false door stela of Nefer-seshem-Re. Cf. the gospel according to Matthew: 25, 34-36.

³ Cf. Christ as the Good Shepherd.

- Some coarse and vulgar ideas about the Afterlife: “I [the King] eat with my mouth, I urinate and copulate with my phallus, I am the owner of seed who takes women from their husbands whenever he wishes, according to his desire.”⁴
- Especially in the Coffin texts “magic incantations of the most frenetic sort”;⁵
- An unwavering reliance on magic to reach the Afterlife – even in Chapter 125 of the Book of the Dead;
- And last but not least: some stark forms of sorcery – the kind of urinating on the effigies of enemies, and of sticking needles in dolls of wax.

In addition to this, we find in religious doctrine inconsistencies and contradictions without end, to the point where one would like to speak of muddleheadedness:

- A god can be the sun, or a beetle, or a lioness, or a falcon (Re).
- A god can be the vile slayer of his brother, but also a proud symbol of royal strength (Seth).
- A goddess can be both the inflictress of illness, and the one who restores health again (Sachmet).
- Every temple in the land claimed that it was build on the Primeval Hill: the spot were creation once took place.
- Religious hymns reach the highest forms of poetry, while at the same time religious ritual consists of the most prosaic practices such as washing, anointing and clothing the image of the god, and presenting it three times a day with a hearty meal.

With respect to beliefs concerning the Afterlife, matters aren't any better:

- The dead go to Eternal Fields, where they grow crops of enormous size⁶ – although even the king has to plow these fields himself.⁷
- Even the humblest dead carry shabti's along in their tomb: small statuettes of servants, magically prepared to plow their fields for them, and perform all the other chores that they may be summoned to.
- The dead become gods, who journey in the retinue of the Sun-god along the sky, sailing with him in his solar bark, spending their days singing and rejoicing.
- All the dead become Osiris, king of the dead. As Osiris, they reside in the Duat: the Netherworld.
- The dead leave their tomb by day, to go out and do what the living do.

If we cast our gaze somewhat wider, we find magic and sound empirical practices side by side in such areas as building (where founding rites and founding deposits supplement the skills of the stone mason) and medicine (where all treatments are at least partly magical). In the area of the pictorial arts, we find remarkably naturalistic depictions of plants and animals, side by side with clumsy, unrealistic renderings of the perspective. And although everyone could tell from firsthand experience that virtually all tombs would be robbed, this did not stop the Egyptians of making enormous investments in tombs and tomb-equipment.

How is it possible that one bosom can contain such contradictions?

As we will see, the “contradictions” mostly find their origin in our own mind, not theirs. In their mind, they were every bit as logical (and at times as illogical) as we in ours. If we want to understand this, we must study their perspective – and such a perspective is culturally defined.

⁴Pyramid Texts, Spell 317 § 510. *FPT* 99.

⁵ As Miriam Lichtheim puts it, in *AEL-I*, 131.

⁶ Book of the Dead, Chapter 109: “Its emmer is seven cubits, its ear is of three cubits and its stalk of four cubits”. *FBD* 102. One cubit was approx. 52 cm.

⁷ See e.g. a relief of Ramesses III in his mortuary temple at Medinet Habu, illustrating Chapter 110 from the Book of the Dead.

If one does not come into intimate contact with other cultures, it is hard to fathom to what extent one's culture determines one's perceptions.⁸ To be able to look at things from the perspective of the ancient Egyptian, we will have to study his culture. But this will not suffice: we also have to know enough about our own culture⁹ to be able to eliminate those elements from our mind that would be alien to his. This would entail a/o the fruits (both sweet and bitter) of science, and the experience that comes from a long and complex history.

To a large extent, the differences between cultures are based on different ideas, or cognitions. The way that we *think* has a major influence on our emotions and our behavior, which in turn set us apart from others. The cognitions that help to shape a culture will be partly conscious, and partly subconscious. A couple that usually remain subconscious together form the basic perception of reality that is known to philosophers as an ontology. Ontology deals with questions such as:

- What is the nature of the world, what are its categories, and what are their interrelations?
- What is the nature of our own existence?
- What is real, what is valid: what has value, what has not?

All thinking departs from here – whether we realize it or not.

If cognitions are the “pattern” of a cultural outlook, its “hue” is determined by a backdrop of emotions and feelings. This determines the spirit of a people: confident or despondent, ambitious or complacent, aggressive or passive. In the case of ancient Egypt, this background was largely determined by climatic and ecological factors, by a marked geographical isolation, and – until the end of the Old Kingdom – by the fact that this was literally an unprecedented civilization. As the very concept of a downfall was not yet known to them, their confidence was of the kind that can move mountains.¹⁰

Finally, the “depth” or intensity of a culture is also one of its determining factors. With this I mean the extent to which man has replaced Nature with Culture. The social animal that mankind evolves from already has some cultural traits. The play of apes and dogs is an early stage of culture. With the advent of language, the number of cultural elements rapidly increases. Later on, new techniques such as agriculture and metallurgy spur further outbursts of “culturalization”: they bring new rituals, codes and habits. Inevitably, the aggregate sum of these elements will gradually push back the original awareness of Nature. In our days, western man's environment is far more determined by Culture, than by Nature. If we want to study a people that lived (as the ancient Egyptians did) in circumstances of an inverse character, we must take this into account as a major factor.

In our analysis of ancient Egyptian magic and religion, we will come across all of these matters.

Good descriptions of the way of thinking of the ancient Egyptians have been available ever since Henri Frankfort's pioneering work in the 1940's.¹¹ What has been lacking so far, is a theoretical framework that exposes in somewhat greater detail its in-

⁸ For the ignorant, culture is those things that are foolish and absurd in others, and logical and reasonable in ourselves.

⁹ I write this paper with my own (north-western European) cultural background as reference. So when I refer to “our” culture, I mean 20th -21st century western culture. In the same way I will speak of “us”, meaning the members of this culture.

The fact that one's own cultural perspective is an element in the study of another culture implies, that for e.g. a Buddhist or a Muslim the path to understanding ancient Egypt would not be the same as for a Hindu or a Christian.

¹⁰ See also my article “The Formative Period of Pharaonic Egypt”, elsewhere on this site.

¹¹ See the works cited in the Bibliography.

ternal structure, and that more accurately establishes its position in the context of human mental evolution in general.

Frankfort (an American of Dutch descent) calls this mode of thinking “mythopoeic”, or myth-forming, and he places it in an evolutionary context by calling it “pre-Greek”, or “primitive”. In both respects he is right, but both need some further qualification. As we will see, this way of thinking *does* produce myths, but before it does, it produced – at least in ancient Egypt – magic, and several types of rites and rituals. Only *then* arose both gods and myths.

Referring to it as pre-Greek does point to the relevant fact that the western way of thinking comes from a new approach, introduced by the ancient Greeks. It misses however two points:

- In other parts of the world, and in other times, the same type of step has been set by other peoples (such as in ancient India, and ancient China).
- And some peoples still live - and quite happily too - with “pre-Greek” thinking today.

Calling it “primitive” now puts us off. Since the later decades of the 20th century, the evolutionary position has become suspect, because it is prone to ethnocentrism and other forms of cultural self-glorification. As a result, the word “primitive” itself has become controversial. It can however also mean “original”, “earliest”, and the like, and in this sense, there is nothing wrong with referring to those who live close to nature as “primitive”.

If we could put the perspectives of ancient Egypt and of our modern world side by side, compare them, and highlight the main differences, we would already have achieved a fair degree of understanding. But if we could reconstruct the genesis of both systems, this would still add considerably to our knowledge. Seeing how both systems have evolved would further elucidate their internal structure. That is why we will make an effort to follow these trajectories.

We will start at the very beginning: the dawn of Man. Reason and logic will allow us to picture in some detail man’s point of departure. Unfortunately, we will find that this approach soon gets exhausted. From a certain point onwards, the number of possibilities just expands too much (which is why the world knows so many different cultures.)

In the second chapter, we will then try to reconstruct an intermediate position: somewhere between earliest man, and the period of historic ancient Egypt. For this we will rely on the work of two eminent Egyptologists: Eberhard Otto and the already mentioned Henri Frankfort. Otto made some interesting “educated guesses” about the immediate predecessors of the ancient Egyptians. Frankfort’s main proposition was, that the findings of modern anthropology are also valid in the field of Egyptology.

Only then will we turn to historic Egypt, in Chapter 3.

In order to further explore the differences between the way of thinking of the Egyptians and ourselves, we will finally (in Chapter 4) look into the development of our own ontology. For this, we will focus on ancient Greece: for the western world the turning point from the primitive to the modern.

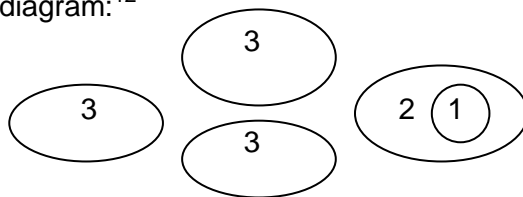
1. Perceptions of reality: the first steps

Man does not suddenly appear out of nowhere. He comes with a heritage: that of his animal ancestry.

Every animal can recognize whether another individual belongs to his own species, or not. Animals of social species – such as the ancestors of man – can in addition to this differentiate between individuals of their own group, and those of other groups of their own species. This amounts to the ability to structuralize the world into – at least – these categories:

1. us (the group that I belong to),
2. them (the other groups of our species), and:
3. the rest (the other species).

In a diagram:¹²



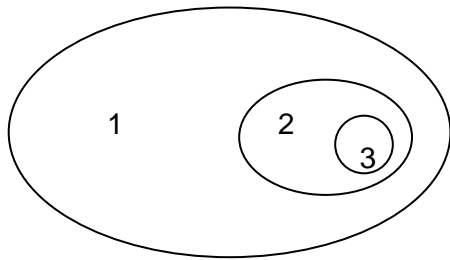
This may seem very simple indeed, but it already requires the use of two different types of relationship:

- horizontal (the different species);
- and vertical (our group as part of our species).

When man arose, with more self-consciousness and more intelligence than other species, he soon recognized that other animals share some basic characteristics with his own kind. Just how wide-spread this perception is, follows from the frequent use of phrases among primitive peoples such as “my brother, the lion”, or “my brother, the bear”. In the totemism of Australia and Asia, and the vision quests of native Americans, we find the most intense expression of this attitude. Early man perceives his own kind as part of the animal kingdom – even as we declare him aloof of that position. For him, all animals share the same characteristics: they can all move independently, and they all care for their offspring. In ancient Egypt, we find ample proof of this non-discriminating attitude. The Egyptians worshipped gods in the shape of a falcon and of a lioness, but also that of a frog, and that of a centipede. All animals were still equal, and man was neither more nor less.

¹² These diagrams are called Venn-diagrams. They are used in mathematics to represent sets. Every ellipse or circle stands for a set of a certain type. When two ellipses overlap, the overlap contains members that belong to both sets. If one set contains all cars of the brand Ford, and another contains all red cars, then there is an overlap of red Fords. When one ellipse falls entirely within another ellipse, then this means that the first is a sub-set of the second. If we have one set of all cars, then the set of all cars of the brand Ford is a sub-set of the first set.

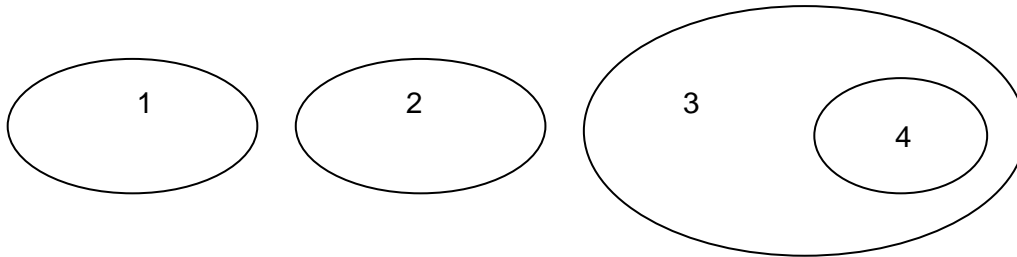
So, from the perspective of early man, our diagram changes as follows:



1. All animals
2. Our species: mankind
3. Our group

Since early man already has enough abstracting powers to see kinship with the animals, it seems safe to assume that he can also make out the other two essential categories of the phenomenal world: plantlife and inanimate matter.

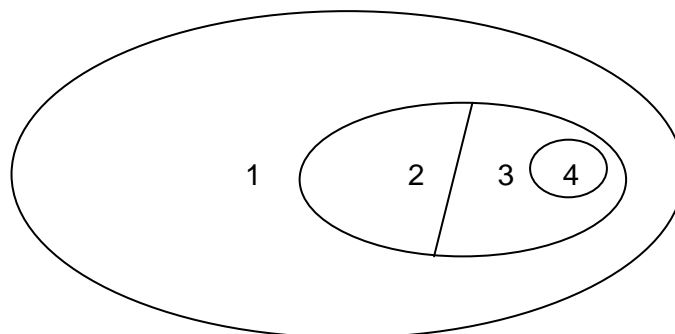
We dare therefore expand our model as follows:



1. Inanimate matter
2. Plants
3. Animals
4. Man (the extra distinction of "our group" serves no further purpose).

As simple observation learns, living organisms change significantly after death. When dead, the once living entity can no longer move, grow, eat or reproduce. In other words: it becomes inanimate. Death reveals that living organisms are made of inanimate matter plus something extra: life. At death, life vanishes, and only the inanimate matter remains.

We may therefore assume that even earliest man perceived his world as consisting of the following categories:



1. Matter. The part outside 2-3-4 is inanimate matter.
 2. Plants
 3. Animals
- } living matter

4. Man

In words: all that exists, belongs to one sphere: a sphere of matter. Part of this matter is infused with life. The province of life consists of plantlife and animal life, and Man is part of the latter category.

A consequence of this, that at first is not so obvious, is that *outside* this sphere, nothing *is*. All that exists, is part of this one sphere, this one existence. There is not a glimmer of transcendence yet: this earliest, most primitive ontology is solely confined to what can be directly experienced.

2. Before the historic ancient Egyptians

As mentioned in the Preface, the approach of reason and logic will not bring us very far in reconstructing the ontology of earliest man. In fact, it already stops right here. Beyond this point, the number of possibilities expands just too much. We will come back to the Venn-diagrams later, but for the moment we have to shift tactics.

For the next steps, we will take our bearings directly from the material of ancient Egypt. This means that for the developments that are described hereafter, we can not claim validity outside the ranks of the ancient Egyptians and their immediate predecessors.

We will in this chapter try to reconstruct the ontology that links the just described earliest perceptions of reality to those of the historic ancient Egyptians.

We will start with the importance of language for early man.

2.1 The importance of language

A few examples may illustrate the use of language by the Egyptians. From the autobiography of Harkhuf, a high official of the 6th dynasty:

O you who live upon earth,
Who shall pass by this tomb
Going north or going south,
Who shall say: "a thousand loaves and beer jugs
For the owner of this tomb,"
I shall watch over them in the necropolis.¹³

On a stela from Abydos, of Sehetep-ib-Re (12th dynasty):

All people of Abydos, who shall pass by this monument in going downstream or upstream: as you love your king, as you praise your city-gods, as your children remain in your place, as you love life and ignore death, you shall say:
A thousand of bread and beer, oxen and fowl, ointment and clothing, incense, unguent and all kinds of herbs, all kinds of offerings on which a god lives, for the Ka of the revered prince, count, royal seal-bearer, beloved of his lord, favored sole companion, deputy seal-bearer, Sehetep-ib-Re, the justified, son of Dedet-Nekhet, the justified.¹⁴

To pronounce the offering-formula ("A thousand of bread and beer") was enough to supply the deceased with offerings. It was not even required that the speaker was a priest or a magician: anybody would do. The words were powerful enough, all by themselves, to produce the desired effect.

In Egyptian magic, we find a general reliance on language (either spoken or written) as its active agent. A small strip of papyrus with a potent formula on it, tightly rolled in a small container that was carried as a pendant, could all by itself deter evil.

So language was perceived as something immensely powerful. How did this come about?

¹³ *AEL-I*, 24.

¹⁴ *AEL-I*, 128-129.

What *is* language? Functionally, it is a means of conveying meaning. Technically, it is a code: words are sounds that represent objects (nouns), persons (pronouns), attributes (adjectives), activities (verbs) etcetera. Words are symbols that represent something else.

But what do we need symbols for, if we can have recourse to the original objects themselves? Well, that is exactly the point. We can *not* always have recourse to the original objects. If I want to invite my fellow to go deer-hunting, I probably need to refer to a deer without actually seeing one. I can convey my meaning by making a gesture, e.g. to suggest antlers on my head, and pointing at my bow and arrows. Using words instead would however be easier, be less ambiguous, and would allow the simple inclusion of a lot more information, such as where and when we should go hunting. It would also solve the problem of inviting someone on a hunt for an animal without antlers.

As a species, language has made us less dependent on nature, because it allows us to refer to matters that are at any particular moment out of sight. In fact, language allows us to choose from an almost infinite variety of items to communicate about: we can literally talk about a million things, in or out of view, real or imaginary. All of a sudden, language makes the world so much larger, that for early man it must have seemed to explode.

Language expands our world, but it also offers some measure of control over it. First of all, language facilitates generalizations. It provides handy labels, that assist in the formation of categories. Suppressing the differences between individual items of a certain class of objects, we can refer to all the different sorts of “tall, woody plants” simply and collectively as “trees”. Simplifying our surroundings, we can easier take control over them.¹⁵

Language however also offers options for control over other people. As soon as my fellow and I have agreed that the word “tree” stands for “tall, woody plants”, then whenever I say this word, he will see a tree in his mind. This means that I can – to some extent – control what my fellow thinks about.

Today, language is still in use as an effective means to influence what people think: complete sections of the economy are based on it. But for early man, it must have been pure magic.

There is some physiological evidence that suggests that man learned to speak as early as one million years ago.¹⁶ This would make language, together with tool-making, one of the oldest cultural traits of man. Its main evolutionary significance was, that it allowed for more effective formation of groups, and more effective operations by groups.

For hundreds of thousands of years, language and tool-making almost exclusively determined man’s culture. It was not before the advent of agriculture, that additional factors appeared: new technologies (like making pottery) and new, more complex social and socio-economic structures (as a result of a more sedentary way of life). This means that for a very long period, language made up a much larger part of human culture, then it does today. The relative importance of language for primitive man can hardly be overestimated.

We have already seen the impact of language on the field of magic, but some of it also becomes evident in the way that primitive artists draw. In many cases, Egyptian drawings make more sense if you imagine that you can hear the artist speak, while he is drawing: “This is a chest, made of wood. And these are the necklaces that are

¹⁵ Unfortunately, generalizations are also the main tool for prejudice.

¹⁶ The cranial form of *Homo Erectus* indicates that this species may have been able to speak.

inside it". And with the latter words, he draws the necklaces that he knows to be *inside* the chest *above* it.

The artist shows us what he *knows*, not what he *sees*. In the case of the concealed necklaces, he shows them *above* the chest, simply because that seems the best option.¹⁷

2.2 The power of symbols

Words are symbols: sounds that represent things. The use of symbols is however not limited to man: animals know symbols too.

Pavlov's dog starts salivating when he hears a bell. Upon repeated presentation of food accompanied by the sound of a bell, the sound has come to mean "food" for the dog. In that sense, it has become a symbol for food. The same will happen if we make a habit of shaking a box of dry dog-food before filling our dog's food bowl.

Animals can also make active use of symbols in the form of symbolic behavior. Wolves can show their submission to other members of the pack by lying on their back, exposing their throat. Bees can use certain types of "dancing" to show to their hive where they have found nectar. And quite detailed, too: in what direction, how far away, and even how much. For this reason, some even speak of a language. Several other species display behavior that comes even closer to real language. The sounds that dolphins and whales make, strongly suggest speaking or singing.

What appears to be unique to man is, that man can readily make new symbols – if need be in seconds – for as many objects or other matters as he wants. He can also freely combine symbols in new combinations, thereby creating new meaning. He can even make meta-symbols, or symbols for symbols: the letters t+r+e+e together are a symbol for the word "tree", which in turn is a symbol for a tall, woody plant. There is literally no end to what we can do with symbols: symbols are one of the main ingredients of human culture.

Words are symbols. The impressive impact of language may well have caused an increased appreciation for symbols in general. The Egyptians were exceptionally keen on the use of symbols, especially in the area's of kingship, religion and magic. In Egyptian magic, we often find a stacking of symbols, one on top of the other. Take e.g. an amulet that must protect someone against dangers. It would be a good idea if we made this amulet in the *shape* of a protective symbol, such as the Eye of Horus. But we can further enhance its effectivity by using as *material* gold: for gold is the flesh of the gods. Now I have combined *shape* with *material*: a fine example of SymbolStack®.

Next to gold, all kinds of precious stones were perceived as materials with a special power. Amulets carved from stones like lapis lazuli or turquoise were highly valued. Certain colors were also regarded as extra potent, such as red (the color of blood) and green (the color of vegetation). An amulet of red carnelian, in the shape of a heart, unites therefore the symbolism of *color*, *material* and *shape*: indeed a strong combination!

With respect to their relationship to their subject, we can distinguish two types of symbols: this relationship can be either arbitrary, or abstracted.

Arbitrary symbols are connected to their subject by agreement. Most words fall into this category: that we call a table "table", and a chair "chair", is in the final analysis mere convention. The bell of Pavlov's dog is also a case in point: if we would present

¹⁷ More rarely, the contents of a concealed space are shown as if seen *through* the sides of it. For an example, see Schäfer 125.

food accompanied by the sound of Gregorian song, the dog would start salivating upon hearing a Te Deum.

Arbitrary symbols can only be effective after a period of learning. All parties concerned must learn what the symbol stands for. However, once the link has been established between an arbitrary symbol and its subject, it will be as effective as any abstracted symbol.

Abstracted symbols are derived directly from their subject. An effective abstracted symbol can be understood immediately, intuitively. In the case of the deer, making a gesture that suggests the image of antlers does the trick. The antlers are a characteristic feature of deer, therefore to refer to antlers is – more or less – to refer to deer.

By referring to a characteristic feature of an object, I can *picture* that object in someone's mind. In other words: I can use a part to represent the whole – provided it is a characteristic, essential part.

This is one of the most important, most widely applied fundamentals of Egyptian magic. We come across this one, time and again. It operates through a very strict and rigid logic:

- As we have seen in the previous paragraph, the name of a matter can bring to mind the matter that it refers to.
- This means that the name can represent that matter.
- An essential part can represent the whole. Inversely, what can represent the whole, must be an essential part of it.
- This means that the name of a thing is an essential part of that thing.
- So to know the name, is to know the essence of the thing.

This explains why for the Egyptians a list of names (or Onomasticon) equaled an encyclopedia: for them, it contained all the essential knowledge about the things that were only enumerated by their names.

For us, this is not logical, because we realize how the memory works. We recognize the process in which the name of a town brings back in our memory what we know of that town. We recognize that the name triggers the memories that were already stored in our mind. For the primitive, this process remains unnoticed. For him, the knowledge about the town becomes manifest in his mind *at the moment* he reads its name. Therefore, the knowledge was in the name.¹⁸

Another example:

- A person's name can bring to mind the person that it refers to.
- This means that his name can represent that person.
- An essential part can represent the whole. Inversely, what can represent the whole, must be an essential part of it.
- This means that the name is an essential part of the person that it refers to.
- Since the name is part of a person, whatever befalls the name, befalls the person.
- So if I erase my enemy's name, I will truly harm him.
- If I give my child a name in which the name of the king is blessed, I increase the king's wellbeing every time I call my child.¹⁹

¹⁸ We might object that, for someone unfamiliar with a given town, reading its name would not enrich him with any knowledge about it. If confronted with such an objection, an Egyptian scholar would no doubt patiently have explained, that the ignorant can not read, and therefore would not have any business with an Onomasticon.

¹⁹ Such as Pepy-anch: (king) Pepy lives.

Parallel to what we have seen with the Onomasticon, to know the name of a person, is to know, to understand that person – and from understanding comes control, and from control comes power. This too is a very common element in Egyptian magic. An example from the Pyramid Texts: “Unas is a master of cunning, whose mother knows not his name.”²⁰ This means, that not even his mother has any power over him.

In the Book of the Dead, there are several Chapters that deal with the names of monsters that have to be passed on the way to the Hereafter. Chapter 146 e.g. is about the twenty-one portals of the House of Osiris, in the Field of Rushes. Both the portals and their keepers are dangerous, and can only be dealt with successfully if one knows their name. One example out of twenty-one:

[Title:] *What is to be said by N when arriving at the seventh portal of Osiris.*

[The deceased:] Make a way for me, for I know you, I know your name and I know the name of the god who guards you. “Shroud which veils the Limp One; Mourner who wishes to hide the body” is your name.

[Gloss:] “Ikenty” is the name of her door-keeper”.²¹

So knowing their names was essential to pass both the portal and its keeper.

2.3 Early man’s relation to nature

A rather common description of primitive thinking is, that it is undifferentiated.²² On the whole, it would be more accurate to describe it as less differentiated than modern thinking, but it is truly undifferentiated with respect to “existence”.

For primitive man, all that exists is part of one sphere: the sphere of matter. Everything within that sphere is real, outside it exists nothing. Early man knows but one reality. And within this one reality, man and nature, society and the cosmos: all share the same, interrelated existence.

Compare it with living in an enormous, but closed room or box. All that exists, exists in this huge, yet confined space. The earth is its floor. The mountains in the distance are its walls, and the sky lies on it as its roof. And outside this room, *nothing* exists. If we try to imagine this, we may get a nightmarish vision of a gigantic, cardboard box, floating lonely through the vastness of empty space – except that, for early man, there is no space. There is only “the box”.

And within this box, all things share the same destiny. If things go well, they go well for man, beast, plants and even the sand and the rocks. If things go awry, every entity and every substance in the box will suffer.

Outside the box, nothing exists. This means that there is nothing out there to put one’s faith into. This results in a commitment of unbelievable intensity: an utter commitment to the world, to the community that one belongs to, and to its beliefs and goals. If a community is sufficiently coherent, this may result in a unified, single focus of enormous strength. The incredible achievements of many primitive societies are

²⁰ Spell 273-274: *AEL-I* 36.

²¹ *FBD* 136.

²² See especially Zandee: “*Het ongedifferentieerde denken van de oude Egyptenaren*”. Zandee gives an excellent, highly systematical enumeration of examples of this undifferentiatedness.

the result: the Ziggurats of Mesopotamia, the jungle cities of Meso-America, Stonehenge, the statues of Easter Island – and yes: the pyramids of Egypt.²³

In the texts of historic ancient Egypt, we find many allusions to this common existence, this common destiny. Maat, the principle of Justice and Order, plays a key role. If the king rules justly, he promotes Maat. In so doing, he strengthens an important element of the cosmos, and thereby all of the cosmos, all of its constituent parts, thrive. Man and beast are fertile, the inundation of the Nile has exactly the optimal height, and the harvest is lush.

A common expression of this principle is linked with the accession of the king to the throne. This accession is always portrayed as a new beginning, a new era of prosperity and justice, after an imaginary dark age of poverty and wrongdoing. A typical example from the Pyramid Texts:

The sky is at peace, the earth is in joy, for they have heard that the king will set Right [Maat] in the place of Wrong [Isfet].²⁴

Another one, also from the Pyramid Texts, this time in celebration of the King's resurrection:

The fields are content, the irrigation ditches are flooded for this king today.²⁵

A somewhat different example from the Instruction for king Merikare:

When free men are given land,
They work for you like a single team;
No rebel will arise among them,
And Hapy will not fail to come.²⁶

The first three lines clearly demonstrate sound political understanding: if a king promotes the material wellbeing of his subjects, he will benefit from this in having grateful, loyal subjects. But then the fourth line adds, that Hapy (the Inundation of the Nile) will not fail to come. When the king does what is right (reward his followers), nature will be beneficial.

Yet another example, from the Instruction of king Amenemhat (12th dynasty) for his son, king Sesostris I. In the midst of an enumeration of his good deeds as beneficent king, Amenemhat says:

I was grain-maker, beloved of Nepri [the grain-god]
Hapy honored me on every field
None hungered in my years
None thirsted in them.²⁷

Such was nature's response to his just kingship.

(If we compare these four examples, we see that in the oldest texts "the sky and the earth" rejoice, and "the fields" are content, whereas in the later examples, it is Hapy

²³ The opposite of commitment is detachment. To detach oneself, one needs a place to withdraw to. Inside the box, there is no room for this. Since detachment is a prerequisite for skepticism, we should be cautious with assuming too much skepticism in primitive societies, such as ancient Egypt.

²⁴ Spell 627, § 1775. *FPT* 260.

²⁵ Spell 457, § 857. *FPT* 152.

²⁶ *AEL-I*, 103. From the First Intermediate Period.

²⁷ *AEL-I*, 137.

and Nepri, the gods of the inundation and grain, that respond. We will come back to this later, when we discuss the development of the gods out of originally immanent powers.)

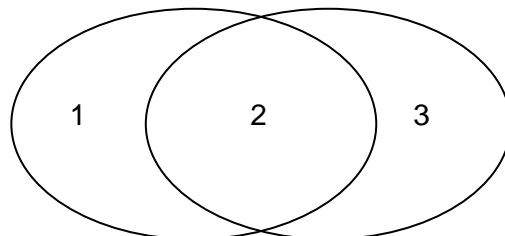
That nature could influence man was evident enough, but man felt he could influence nature too, for both were firmly linked to one another in the common existence inside “the box”. Man felt involved in nature: he felt that he could contribute. The world’s drama was also his own. All around him, great events took place: the turning of the seasons, the yearly sprouting of new crops, the succession of the generations. Those were not just spectacles to behold: those were events to participate in. He had to move with the rhythm, he had to join in.²⁸

This joining, this participation, makes the roots of some of the earliest rituals.

In 1909, Arnold van Gennep (a Frenchman of Dutch descent) published a comparative study of a group of rituals that he called “Rites of passage”.²⁹ Since then, the term “rite of passage” has become a household word (in cultural anthropology, that is). The rituals in question are connected with a person’s transition of one phase or status to another. In most cases, this transition is the result of a natural process, such as birth, adolescence or death. Van Gennep included however also rituals concerning culturally determined transitions, such as marriage and the joining of a profession. In the first group, primacy lies with nature. Nature provides drama, and man responds. In the second group, primacy lies with man. Man creates his own drama, and he then responds to that in a comparable fashion.

There is yet another group of rituals that also centers on natural processes, but that has no relation to an individual’s position or status. Examples are rituals concerning agriculture (sowing and harvesting), the winter solstice, the coming of the rains or (in Egypt) of the Inundation.

We can group all these rituals as follows:



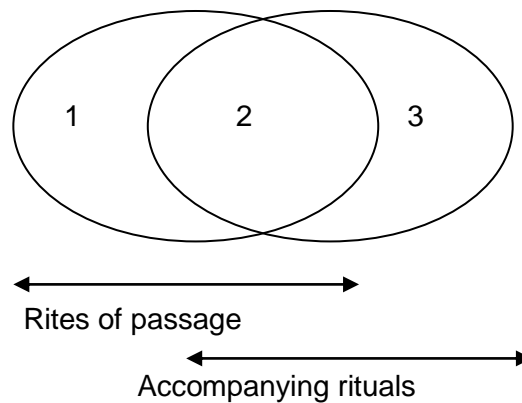
1. Rituals concerning transitions of man in predominantly cultural processes, such as marriage and the joining of a profession.
2. Rituals concerning transitions of man in predominantly natural processes, such as birth and death. Seen from another perspective, these are rituals that accompany the natural phenomenon in question.
3. Rituals to accompany other natural phenomena, such as the turning of the seasons.

1 and 2 together are the group of “rites of passage”, as defined by Van Gennep.

2 and 3 are together a group that we will call concomitant, or accompanying rituals.

²⁸ To some extent, we can compare this with the urge of young children to participate in the world of the grown-ups, by participating in their activities. The little boy who wants to “help” his daddy mending a bicycle, or the little girl who wants to “cook” on her toy-furnace while mommy prepares a meal, also know themselves surrounded by great wonders – and they just can’t wait to join in.

²⁹ *Les rites de passage*.



The key element in accompanying rituals is that of participation. In the perception of man, the event itself (like the Inundation) pre-exists: it is not his doing, not his making. In his former existence with the animals, he was just a spectator. With the recognition of the wider significance of these phenomena comes the urge to join in, to participate. In “the box”, everything is within reach. Nature relates to him, and he relates to nature. He *can* join in.

The spirit in which these rituals will be performed may differ widely. An optimistic and confident people may perform them to celebrate a festive occasion, a pessimistic people may be hoping to avoid disaster at a perilous moment.³⁰ A passive people may see their role as that of a chorus, merely in attendance, whereas a more active people may gradually come to think that the event itself is dependent on their initiating it. But the involvement was in all cases total and unconditional – as becomes all too apparent when we realize that in some cultures, some of these rituals involved human sacrifice.

2.4 Materialness

Primitive man experiences all as being material. His idea of “matter” however is different from ours. For him, everything that exists is material by default: the concept of immaterialness does not yet exist. And because everything is material, it all:

- has substance,
- has an existence of its own, independent of any other entity,
- and is subject to the laws of nature: it can both undergo and exert influence.

It is an axiom of primitive thinking, that if something displays *any* of these aspects, then it *is*, therefore it is material, and subject to *all* aspects of materialness.

If we can experience something, then it apparently is capable of exerting influence: it influences us.

We experience through our senses. In all probability, early man recognized the same senses as we do: sight, hearing, smell, taste and feeling – although he may not yet have differentiated between smell and taste the way we do. Feeling was decidedly different, though. For primitive man, feeling encompasses every experience that he can not attribute to his other senses. This includes therefore such things as emotions, dreams, memories and ideas. As late as in ancient Greece, some philosophers did not yet distinguish between warmth as an emotion, and as a physical property.³¹

³⁰ In historic ancient Egypt, we can actually see a gradual shift from the first to the latter.

³¹ See page 74.

We can now see why: both were perceived by the same sense – that of feeling.³² This blurred the distinction between the two.

Invisibility is not a problem. A rock is material, but so is the wind: although we can not see it, we can feel it, when it presses against our body. It exerts influence, therefore it *is*, and therefore it is material.

A rock, the wind, and a thought: all of them are material. The matter of the wind is just lighter, thinner, than that of the rock. That of a thought is thinner still. This may seem a strange, and mediaeval looking idea, but actually, the concept of “thin matter” is still with us today – even in science.³³

If something can influence me, it is material. Emotions, ideas, dreams and memories: they can all influence me, so they are material, and subject to all aspects of materialness. This means that, in addition to the ability to exert influence, they can undergo influences. Also, they have an existence of their own, independent from me, as the one who experiences them.

We are now touching again on some of the basics of magic. To undergo influence means a/o that it can be handled. Evil dreams can be send to someone. Thoughts can be manipulated from a distance.

To have an independent existence means that thoughts can act on their own, even against the person that is thinking them. Thoughts can be dangerous, if one is not up to controlling their power – or if someone else is controlling them, from afar.

Someone’s looks may exert influence, too. When my child looks at me, how can I not be moved? When my love smiles at me, will I not be glad? When my superior scowls at me, will I not feel insecure? So looks can exert influence. They are therefore material, can be handled (if one knows how to, if one knows the right ritual), and send out to someone. That is where the Evil Eye comes from.

But there is even more, that turns out to be material. The pyramid of Unas (last king of the 5th dynasty, approx. 2350 BC) was the first in which the Pyramid Texts were carved on the walls. In Spell 273-274 (also known as the Cannibal Hymn), the king hunts the gods: “The king is one who eats men³⁴ and lives on the gods” (§ 400). The gods are snared, tied, strangled, cut up, cooked and eaten. As a result, the king comes in the possession of all of the faculties of the gods. The following is a selection of some lines from this Spell:

It is the king who eats their magic (hkA)
and gulps down their spirits (Axw)
(..)
He enjoys himself when their magic (hkA) is in his belly
(..)
He has swallowed the intelligence (siA) of every god
(..)
Lo, their souls (bAw) are in the king’s belly
their spirits (Axw) are in the king’s possession.³⁵

So eating the gods means acquiring their spirit (Ach), soul (Ba), intelligence (Sia) and magic (Heka). These matters then must be material: they can be eaten.

³² In our language, we still adhere to this principle: we “feel” loved, or neglected.

³³ Check out “ether” in an encyclopedia for more.

³⁴ In the face of what follows, this simple statement that Unas eats *men* can be easily overlooked. I would say though, that this presents the real shock of this Spell.

³⁵ *FPT* 80-83.

Thoughts too, are material. Thoughts can therefore exert influence: not just on me, but also on the outside world.

What happens, when I make a plan?

- I think of something: in my mind I make a picture (either visually, or in the form of a set of statements) of how something should be in the future.
- I start working on it.
- I accomplish my goal (hopefully).
- And the end result is, that the picture in my mind has materialized, has become true.

I thought of something, and it came about! This may seem quite basic to us, but in the early history of man it was revolutionary. That thoughts, things inside your head, can actually materialize in the outside world must at first have been a truly awesome experience.

This is how king Sesostri I (12th dynasty) tells of his plan to build a temple for the god Atum:

“Behold, my majesty plans a work, thinks of a deed of value. (..) Having come as Horus, I have taken thought. Having established the offerings of the gods, I will construct a great house for my father Atum.”³⁶

Here, we can still feel the awe that even the king himself felt, at devising such a plan. And his courtiers felt it too, for they answered:

“*Hu* is in your mouth, *Sia* is behind you, O King! What you plan, comes about!”³⁷

Yes, this plan would come true: an architect would be commissioned, who would gather thousands of workers, who would quarry stones by the tons, sculpture statues by the dozen, fashion an image of fine gold for the god, weave new garments for him from the finest linen, bring white loaves and beer, herds of cattle, natron for purification and incense to recreate the wondrous scent of the air in the land of god. And all of this would come from just one picture in the mind...

We can look at this skeptically, and say that it took the power of a king to achieve this, not the power of a thought – but skepticism just isn't part of the primitive way of thinking. And even today there is in some quarters still a firm belief in the independent potential of thoughts and dreams: “If you really believe in your dreams, they will certainly come true!”

If a man hates his neighbor, he can think of him becoming ill. And sometimes this may happen, and sometimes not. But if it does happen, then the thought was effective: it did exert influence, it made something happen. The fact that it sometimes works, and sometimes not, just goes to show that he can still improve on his ability to effectively think this kind of thought.

This, and examples like it, are then also taken as proof that thoughts can have an effect on the outside world, not just on me.

What if I think of a potential danger? If I want to be prepared to face the dangers around me, I must give them some consideration. But I must be careful with this: maybe my thinking can make a potential danger a real one... From here comes the fear for wrong, or dangerous thoughts: a fear that still is with us today. We'd rather not think of some things, lest they become real.

³⁶ *AEL-I*, 116-117.

³⁷ *AEL-I*, 117. *Hu* is the “personification” of Authoritative Utterance, *Sia* is the “personification” of Intelligence.

Thoughts have power, and so have words. As we have seen in the paragraph about the importance of language, language offers some degree of control. When I utter the name of a certain object, people who hear me – and who know the object in question – will see it in their mind. With words, I can influence what people think of.

We can take this one step further. I can describe something in words, that I have seen, but that my audience has not. If my language-skills suffice, I can create an image of what I have seen in *their* mind: with words, I can create something that originally wasn't there.

At some point, early man extrapolated from this, that words could be powerful enough to create, not just an image in the mind, but anything at all: the word as a creative force. The Egyptians called this concept Hu; the conventional translation of this is: "authoritative utterance".³⁸

A good example of the independent power of words can be found in the so-called Memphite Theology:

The Ennead is the teeth and lips in this mouth [that of Ptah] which pronounced the name of every thing, from which Shu and Tefnut came forth, who gave birth to the Ennead.³⁹

The process of creation is here described as that of pronouncing the name of everything, whereby it comes into existence. Ptah starts with pronouncing the names of the gods Shu and Tefnut, thereby creating them.

Since a god has more power than a man, his words have more power, too. In fact, one might say that his utterances are authoritative "ex officio". Therefore, for Ptah, to pronounce the name of things is to create them.

(We find here, side by side, the concept of the power of words, and the notion that the name of a thing in effect contains its essence.)

If thoughts have power, does this then mean that everything that can be thought of, can become real? Is *anything* possible?

Some of the most comprehensive stories about magic in ancient Egypt can be found in the Papyrus Westcar. Dating from the Hyksos period, it tells a series of tales that supposedly happened during the 4th dynasty.

In the first one, the magician Djadja-em-anekh at some point has to recover a pendant, that is lost by a girl on a lake. The magician:

said his say of magic. He placed one side of the lake's water upon the other, and he found the pendant lying on a shard. He brought it and gave it to its owner. Now the water that had been twelve cubits deep across had become twenty four cubits when it was turned back. Then he said his say of magic and returned the waters of the lake to their place.⁴⁰

In the second, the magician Djedi is summoned to the court of king Khufu (Cheops) to show his skills.

³⁸ The ancient Greek concept of Logos is another (most likely independent) offshoot of the same concept.

³⁹ *AEL-I*, 54. Lichtheim translates "which gave birth to the Ennead", taking the pronoun as referring back to "the teeth and lips". It seems more plausible to me that it refers to Shu and Tefnut. The writer of this text ostentatiously wishes to incorporate – and thereby subordinate – the Heliopolitan cosmogony. In that cosmogony, Atum is the first god, who then produces Shu and Tefnut, after which they, in turn, create the rest of the Ennead. In the Memphite Theology, Ptah takes the place of Atum. Once he has created Shu and Tefnut, the rest of the original process may continue.

⁴⁰ *AEL-I*, 217.

His majesty said: “Is it true, what they say, that you can join a severed head?” Said Djedi: “Yes, I can, O king, my lord.” Said his majesty: “Have brought to me a prisoner from the prison, that he be executed”. Said Djedi: “But not a human being, O king, my lord! Surely, it is not permitted to do such a thing to the noble cattle [a circumlocution for mankind]!”⁴¹

After thus lecturing his king (a ploy by the author to give his audience an additional shiver?), Djedi successfully joins the severed heads of a goose, a “long-leg-bird” and even an ox.

Of course, these tales were meant to marvel people. They were deliberately aimed at pushing the possible to the limit. But the message is nevertheless, that yes: *anything* that you can think of can be made true, if a powerful magician can lend a hand.

If anything can be possible, then why can we not all be powerful magicians, and live happily ever after?

The texts show, that in ancient Egypt, not everyone could be a magician, and not every magician would be as knowledgeable and powerful as Djedi, or Djadja-em-ankh. There were several words for “magician” in the language of ancient Egypt: these may have corresponded with several types or classes of magician. The most important, the most prestigious, was no doubt the *Xry-Hbt*, literally: “he who carries the book”. The conventional English translation of *Xry-Hbt* is “lector-priest”. The French translation of “prêtre-ritualiste” (“priest and performer of rituals”) comes closer to the mark, however. He was a priest, specialized in the knowledge of religious and magical texts. During ceremonies, he would hold the book-scrolls, and read from them the appropriate texts. Since Egyptian magic was largely dependent on these texts, he in effect performed the rituals. He can be recognized in depictions by his book-scrolls, but also by his dress, that includes a diagonal band over his shoulder.⁴²

This means that – at least in historic ancient Egypt – a magician had to be able to read and write. This already restricts the profession to the relatively small elite that was literate. Within that elite, the “prêtre-ritualiste” was a specialist. He was connected to the House of Life (the temple-facility that served as library, archive, ritualistic workshop and school), where he studied and copied the sacred texts. For the correct performance of e.g. the ritual of Opening the Mouth his expert assistance was indispensable. But on the other hand, the magic of the offering formula could be wielded by anyone who pronounced the right words (see page 10).

It seems then that there were two kinds of magic spells. Some, like the offering formula, belonged to the public domain. They were carved on stelae, and on the facades of tombs, for everyone to see. They *had* to be visible, to attain the desired effect. Others, like the text of the ceremony for Opening the Mouth, were “copyrighted material”: only available through the services of a specialist, with access to the right book-scrolls. But in both cases, pronouncing the correct formula was enough to produce the desired outcome. The “trick” was, to *know* the right formula.

This explains why funerary spells were so frequently given along inside the tomb, either on the walls, or on papyrus. From the Pyramid Texts to the Book of the Dead, the deceased was equipped with all the tools necessary to act as DIY magician.

So, although individual words did have some power, some potential all by themselves, it still took a lot of knowledge to combine these words into really effective spells. This is no doubt why we find so much slavish repetition in the use of these formulations: the slightest error might ruin the effect.⁴³

⁴¹ *AEL-I*, 219.

⁴² In later days, he wears two long feathers on his head instead.

⁴³ For a different view, see *Rite*, 9.

But even then, some magicians were better than others: some could accomplish more than their colleagues. No doubt they studied harder, read more texts, and remembered them better.

Still, if some of these magicians were so powerful, why then did they not become king and rule the world?

The magicians were literate, and knowledgeable. In ancient Egypt, this was the same as being wise, and the wise lived by Maat. Maat was the guiding principle of Truth, Order and Justice, the infallible touchstone that determined what was right, and what was wrong. In the words of Ptahhotep: "Great is Maat, lasting in effect: unchallenged since the time of Osiris."⁴⁴ Maat was the Constitution of ancient Egypt. Maat restrained the magician, as it restrained the king, and even the gods. It prevented power from becoming corrupt, and it kept everyone into his assigned place, into his own particular office. Kings were meant to be king, and magicians were meant to be magician. That was how it had always been, and how it should always be. If either king or magician would trespass on the other's terrain, he would thereby seriously upset Maat. Nature would respond with disaster, until it deprived king and magician both of their power. That is why the wise, respecting Maat, kept to her ways.

Another aspect of matter, is its relative importance. We might say that for primitive man, matter matters more than for us. Since for him, there is nothing *but* matter, this need not surprise us.

In Egyptian magic, much attention is given to the material that props are made of. An amulet must be of a particular type of stone. Cloth must be of a specific quality. The ink and papyrus that will be used to write down a spell must be fresh. The material of which these things are made contributes significantly to the effectiveness of the magic.

Another example comes from sculpture. The Egyptians preferred to make their statues from the hardest types of stone, such as granite or diorite, even if it meant an enormous increase in the required labor. This becomes all the more amazing when we realize that all statues would finally be painted - so that no one could tell the difference between e.g. limestone and granite. Apparently, some quality of the stone itself was responsible for its preferred status. Since hard stones present more of a challenge to the sculptor, one may have considered them the abode of more power - and therefore better suited for making statues.

Next to resistance, versatility is also a sign of potential, or power. Some materials have the ability to assume many different shapes. They can become everything, therefore they have great potential, great power. Clay is an example: in the Bible, god creates man from clay. Clay will however lose its potential when dried. Wax on the contrary does not. That is why wax is so popular in magical rituals - and not just in ancient Egypt. Dolls that must represent an enemy are often made of wax.

With rope, one can also make new forms, over and over again. And although it is in origin one of the humblest of materials, it can be used to restrain the mightiest of both men and beasts. Rope is therefore an especially powerful material, and its use, notably in the laying of complicated knots, is an important element in magic all over the world.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *AEL-I*, 64. Lichtheim translates "Justice", instead of Maat. With "typical" Egyptian concepts, such as Maat or Ka, I would prefer to leave them untranslated. A fine example of how *not* to address these matters is Faulkner's translation of the Pyramid Texts. He translates the word Ka in at least four different ways, depending on context. This deprives the reader of the possibility of forming his own judgement as to the meaning of the term.

⁴⁵ In the Egyptian hieroglyphic script, several signs depict magical cords. Best known is the cartouche. Another one is a sign that means "protection" (sA).

2.5 Matters of life and death

In any ontology, ideas about life and death will matter a lot. For the Egyptians, so obviously concerned with both, it was certainly no different. So let's have a look.

Life after death: the roots

How did one first come to the idea, that there is life after death? It defies all logic, and it can certainly not be substantiated with any physical evidence.

Or can it?

Frankfort has put forward the proposition that for the Egyptians, as for other primitive peoples, memories of the dead were the basis for believing in the existence of an Afterlife.⁴⁶

The memories of lost loved ones can seem very real indeed. They can appear in one's mind, to the point where one can actually talk to them. If my wife has died, I can still seek her advise by thinking of her, putting my question before my mental image of her, listening to her voice as I remember it, giving the advise that I know she would have given.

The dead still speak to us, and sometimes we may even see them right before us. For a moment we think that we see our lost love – but it was just a flicker of the eye.

For any post-Freudian, it is all too easy to explain these things, but for early man it must have been awesomely intense, and often frightening – especially when the deceased came back with remorse. After all, the dead know us as we know ourselves: they know exactly how to torment us. (For this reason, in some cultures the dead are primarily seen as evil spirits.)

Once dead, no person will ever walk again, and the body will decompose. For primitive man, who is much more familiar with death than we are, this is an unquestionable reality. But still we can see the dead in our mind, we can communicate with them, and sometimes we can even see them, right there, sitting on the porch as they used to.

The conclusion then is simple: man lives on after death. Since we see the dead exactly as they were in life, they do have a body, too – although it must be a new body. That is why the deceased is said to eat again, drink, defecate and copulate again.⁴⁷ He will enjoy life to the fullest, including all bodily functions.

For primitive man, the realm of the physical is much larger than for us: it includes memories, dreams and apparitions. So yes: for primitive man, there *is* physical evidence for the Afterlife.

The dead live on. This is not what early man hoped or craved for: this is what he knew to be true. It was self-evident. The Afterlife was an automatism: it would follow death as surely as night would be followed by a new day.

This means that all the rituals concerning death are just helpful: they are not indispensable. They support, they do not bring about. They are “accompanying rituals”: accompanying a natural process, a process that takes place anyhow.

⁴⁶ AER 89.

⁴⁷ See e.g. Book of the Dead, Chapter 10 (FBD 37).

If acquiring the Afterlife is an automatism, why did the Egyptians then spend so much time and effort on their tomb and burial?

As we have seen,⁴⁸ accompanying rituals may be performed with the intention of supporting, or strengthening, a natural process. The burial practices were mostly meant as additional safety measures; this agrees nicely with the well-attested Egyptian passion for “better safe than sorry”. But there is more: as we will see, one believed that it was possible to *improve* on one’s existence in the Afterlife – and much of the provisions in the tomb were meant just for that.

Although acquiring the Afterlife was an automatic, natural process, this did not mean that it was unthreatened. Growth e.g. is a natural process, but it can be interfered with by all sorts of dangers, such as disease, drought or attack by other species.

Funerary texts (Pyramid texts, Coffin texts, Book of the Dead etc.) were meant to assist the dead on his journey to the Afterlife, by supplying him with valuable tips and a “roadmap” (in the case of some Middle Kingdom coffins even in a very literal way⁴⁹), and spells to ward off danger. The roadmap was to prevent him from getting lost, the spells to prevent him from succumbing to the dangers he would have to confront on his way. In addition to this, other texts were designed to improve the deceased’s existence in the Afterlife, offering spells that allowed him to enjoy all available options. (That the Egyptians believed that attaining the Afterlife was an automatism, also explains a few more matters that would otherwise have to remain a mystery. We will come back to those at the end of this paragraph.)

Life after death: the predynastic period

If we look for the oldest traces of Egyptian Afterlife beliefs, we arrive at the archeological evidence from the predynastic period in Upper Egypt.⁵⁰ This shows the following:

- There was a general tendency to bury the dead in an oriented way: head south, usually facing west, sometimes east.
- The dead were accompanied by substantial quantities of gravegoods: vessels of stone and earthenware, tools and weapons, jewelry and make-up.
- There was a marked differentiation in the relative wealth of the various tombs, apparently expressing the relative wealth of their occupants in life.

We should be cautious in deducing too much from essentially “mute” evidence, but the following conclusions seem to be justified:

- The Afterlife was in some way connected to an east-west-axis.
- The dead could make use of goods that accompanied them into the tomb.
- It was considered worthwhile to take as much of these goods along into the tomb as one could afford.

Although we are in this chapter concerned with the period that *precedes* historic ancient Egypt, we must consult the written sources from the dynastic period if we want our theories to have any “substance” at all. From the total corpus of available texts, we will try to pick those that are the oldest, in order to have the closest possible relationship to the archeological evidence just mentioned. We can then investigate if those texts can shed more light on the meaning of that evidence.

⁴⁸ § 2.3 “Early man’s relation to nature”.

⁴⁹ “The Book of Two Ways”: Coffin Texts 464-468.

⁵⁰ During the predynastic period, the cultures of Upper and Lower Egypt are still very different, but in the end, Upper Egypt carries the day. So if we are interested in any roots of the dynastic, we must look at Upper Egypt.

As we will see in the next paragraph, there are some grounds for assuming that the oldest extant texts are those that are not in any way concerned with either myths or gods. By the time we find enough texts in the tombs of ancient Egypt for any serious study of their content, we are already in the 5th dynasty (approx. 2400 BC). Even at that time, no mortuary texts are completely free of mentions of the gods. We can however discern some remnants of myth-free (and therefore possibly pre-myth) texts.⁵¹

- May she [the deceased] be buried in the western necropolis in great old age. May she travel on the good ways on which a revered one travels well.” Tomb of Ni-Sedjer-Kai, 5th dynasty.⁵²
- “May he [the deceased] journey in peace on the holy ways of the West, journeying on them as one honored”. Tomb of Harkhuf, 6th dynasty.⁵³

Side by side we find here two different allusions to the West: as the place where the necropolis is, and as the place where the deceased hopes to travel over good or holy roads. Since the actual roads in the western desert are – from the perspective of a dweller of the Nile valley – not very “good”, we must assume that those roads were thought to be a lot further to the west, beyond the desert: like “the land at the end of the rainbow”.⁵⁴

In the historic period, burial in the West was considered advantageous, but not indispensable. Royal tombs and their associated necropolises were located on the westbank of the Nile (at least until the end of the New Kingdom), but there have always been tombs on the eastbank as well. Those who build their tombs on the eastbank – among which were people of wealth – expected to live again, no less than those who had their grave on the other side of the river. So burial in the west was only a supportive, helpful extra: as is usual with accompanying rituals.

As we have seen, during the predynastic period, most burials were oriented in such a way, that the deceased was either looking east, or west. In the dynastic period, he would invariably be looking east. On the east side of coffins and sarcophagi, a door was depicted, with one or two eyes above it. With these eyes, the deceased could see the sun rise in the east, and then through the door go out among the living. Even in the huge stone sarcophagi of the kings of the 18th dynasty, these eyes are still present.

The texts from the historic period confirm, that there was a solid association between the rising and setting of the sun on the one hand, and the birth and death of man on the other hand. By preferring the west as burial site, and orienting the dead to either west or east, the dead became part of the cycle of the sun, and this served to further *facilitate* his resurrection into the Afterlife – again: as is usual with accompanying rituals.

Although the burials of the predynastic were oriented either east or west, this seems just a minor variation on a theme that basically remained the same from the predynastic into the dynastic: that of orienting the dead in relation to the daily course of the

⁵¹ The Egyptians were always reluctant to discard older ideas for newer ones. Retaining matters that were ever found useful much more agreed with them. We must be careful not to use this phenomenon too lightly as “proof” for anything to be older than it seems, but it may nonetheless have served to preserve some really old ideas.

⁵² AEL-I, 15.

⁵³ AEL-I, 23.

⁵⁴ In an immanent world-view, the hereafter is in “this world” too – since there is no other world.

sun. My conclusion then is, that this relation was already in place in the predynastic: before the advent of the myths.⁵⁵

What did the Afterlife look like, in that land, far to the West?

About this, we are well informed. From the Pyramid Texts onwards, we do not lack in detailed accounts about the Field of Rushes, or the Field of Offerings.⁵⁶ And in many manuscripts of the Book of the Dead, the large vignette that accompanies Chapter 110 is one of the highlights. Here, we see the deceased plowing the fields, and reaping a rich harvest. Work is so light in this happy land, that he can do it wearing his finest clothes. And his crops are abundant: his emmer and barley stand as tall as he does. So life in the West is as life before death – only better, and easier.

One of the ongoing features from the predynastic to the dynastic was that of a conspicuous consumption of wealth – in life as in death. In a society so intensely committed to this, differences in the quality of the Afterlife may be taken for granted. Only the wealthy could afford a sumptuous tomb, with large stocks of food and equipment. Those who had nothing in this life, could expect little more in the Afterlife. The common folk would have to toil for themselves, as in their first life. But even they would be happier then before, for they would live in the Beautiful West, where everyone would be happy. And they too would grow huge crops, with miraculous ease...⁵⁷

How long would the second life last? If we consider the origin of believing in the Afterlife – that of remembering the deceased – we might suppose that their existence would last for as long as they were remembered. In that case, we would expect wealthy individuals to raise huge memorials for themselves on crossroads and the like, as the Romans did. Although tombs were often built on a scale that was also meant to impress, and cenotaphs and stelae were erected at Abydos, remembrance by the living seems not to have been an overriding concern.

In the historic period, the sources are very explicit: the Afterlife would last forever – provided one did not die again. The Book of the Dead contains several spells that are meant to prevent this second death (see Chapters 44, 175 and 176). Whether this was already the case during the predynastic, can not be determined with any certainty.

The body after death, predynastic period

The belief in an Afterlife is almost universal among pre-modern societies, but the treatment of the body after death differs widely. It may be buried in the soil, or put in a subterranean chamber or cave; it may be exposed to the elements or to carnivore animals, thrown in the water or burned.

This diversity of customs unequivocally shows, that not all peoples still attach value to the body after death. In ancient Egypt, burial was the custom however, throughout both the prehistoric and the historic era. Perhaps the most consistent feature of

⁵⁵ We will come back to this matter in more detail in § 2.11: “Second degree notions concerning the Afterlife”.

⁵⁶ See the index to *FPT*, page 326.

⁵⁷ This again reveals one of those unexpected biases that come from our own cultural perspective. In all modern religions, the promises of the Afterlife are the same for rich and poor. It takes a conscious effort to assume that this might be different in another culture.

Egyptian burial customs was the great care with which the body of the deceased was treated.⁵⁸

The earliest burials consisted of a shallow pit in the sand, into which the body (with its gravegoods) was laid to rest. The first addition to this simple scheme was that of a reed mat or animal skin into which the body was wrapped to protect it from the rubble and the sand. Later the roof and the sides of the tomb were strengthened with timber or mudbrick: again to protect the body.

For westerners, this is not particularly difficult to relate to. We tend to feel a close association between our self and our body. To a very large extent, we feel that our body *is* our self.⁵⁹ It seems that this was no different for the Egyptians. All feelings of love and respect for the deceased were directed towards the body. In preparation for burial, it was probably washed, perfumed and clad in its best clothes.⁶⁰ (Bandaging and mummification did not come into use before the dynastic period).

Providing for the dead, predynastic period

Predynastic tombs contain a lot of vessels of various sorts. The general assumption is, that most of these were storage pots for food. Sir Flinders Petrie, the original excavator of the Naqada necropolis, describes that many of the earthenware pots were filled with ashes of "wood and vegetable material". His conclusion was, that at the funeral a big burning was held, the ashes of which were given along into the tomb.⁶¹ Perhaps this means, that one attempted to dispatch food provisions to the dead by burning them (so that the wind could carry them to the West?)

There were however alternatives. The following is an excerpt from the Pyramid Texts:

Oho! Oho! Rise up, O Teti!
 Take your head
 Collect your bones
 Gather your limbs
 Shake the earth from your flesh!
 Take your bread that rots not
 Your beer that sours not.
 (...)
 Rise up O Teti: you shall not die!⁶²

King Teti (approx. 2300 BC: the first king of the 6th dynasty, and the second in who's tomb the Pyramid Texts were carved) is called upon to rise from death.

The emphasize of the text is first on his bodily resurrection, and immediately after this on his food provisions. After all, what is the use of a body when there is nothing to eat or drink? Then we are informed that those provisions will not rot, not sour. They are magically treated, to extent their shelf life indefinitely.

⁵⁸ Especially from later periods, many instances are known of rude and irreverent behavior towards the dead by embalmers. No doubt these were aberrations, resulting from all too frequent professional contact with corpses. Rumor has it that even some modern students of medicine occasionally exhibit some disrespectfulness while working in the dissecting room...

⁵⁹ For Christians, it is even an article of faith that the blessed will be resurrected *in the flesh*.

⁶⁰ A few burials from the Old Kingdom have been discovered, in which the deceased still wears his clothes.

⁶¹ Hoffman 117.

⁶² Pyramid Texts, Spell 373. *AEL-I*, 41-42.

This text must be about the food supplies that were given along inside the tomb: offerings, presented outside the tomb, would be regularly renewed by fresh ones, and would therefore not require conservation.

Magic conservation was an alternative for burning the food at the funeral.

Whether offerings to the dead (supplied outside the tomb) were already made in the predynastic period, can not be determined with certainty. Due to a lack of monumentality of the tombs, no evidence of predynastic offering places has been found.⁶³

So what do we have so far?

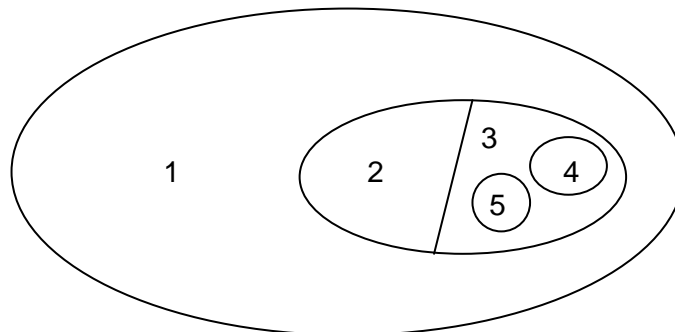
About the continuation of life after death:

1. Man will live on, after death. This will happen automatically, because it is the way of nature. Man knows this to be true, because he experiences the dead.
2. The rituals surrounding death are supportive, accompanying rituals. They facilitate, they do not bring about.

About the nature of the Afterlife:

1. The dead live in a land, far, far away to the West, but in *this* world.
2. Life after death is comparable to life before death. The dead still have (or again have) a body, and need sustenance as in life. Fortunately, they live in a “land of milk and honey”, where agriculture is a cinch, so they have no trouble filling their needs.
3. The wealthy can obtain a supplement on the standard package. They can equip their tombs with all the comforts of home.

We can now extent our Venn diagrams by the inclusion of a brand new category: that of the dead.



- 1. Matter
 - 2. Plants
 - 3. Animals
 - 4. Man
 - 5. The dead
- } living matter

To us, this looks a bit silly: the dead as part of the realm of living matter. Again a fine example of the “contradictions” referred to in the Introduction: contradictions that find their origin in our own mind, arising from our own perspective, our own ontology.

As the dead were still part of “this world”, they were not out of reach for the living. A striking example of this is provided by the letters that the living could write to the

⁶³ The oldest evidence for the existence of offering places at the side of tombs – from which later the offering chapels evolved – is from the early dynastic period. See Wolfgang Helck: *Opferstelle* in: *Lexikon*, part IV, 589 (1982).

dead. These letters were then left at the tomb, where the deceased could pick up their mail, when they came to collect their offerings.⁶⁴

The Automatic Afterlife: its impact on This Life

The circumstance that the Egyptians could be certain of the Afterlife, had a profound impact on their behavior towards death, funerals and tombs. In fact, much of this behavior would remain inexplicable, if we did not take this certainty into account.

It is true that the Egyptians invested heavily in their tombs and burial equipment, but not to the point where they would have impoverished either themselves or their descendants.⁶⁵ They did not borrow for it, nor in any other way burden posterity.⁶⁶ They were not desperate to reach the Afterlife: they just wanted to provide for themselves.

It also elucidates the remarkable resignation regarding the considerable probability of having their tomb robbed, somewhere in the future. Such an event would deprive them of their luxury – but not of their existence in the Afterlife. That existence could not be taken from them, by whatever means, for it was automatically theirs. And in the meantime, they would have enjoyed their luxuries for as much and as long as they possibly could.

On the same plane lies the al but absolute certainty, that in the not too distant future, no more offerings would be presented at the tomb. Every tomb-owner was a son, and a grandson. So they all knew, from first-hand experience, that grandfathers received less offerings than fathers, and great-grandfathers none at all. If their own existence would be dependent on offerings by their descendents, they had no reason to expect a bright future. But that was not the case: they would always be able to sustain themselves in the West, growing crops of enormous size. Even if their tomb would be shattered, destroying the reliefs that could magically replenish what posterity no longer cared to supply, they would not be lost. They had therefore every reason to look at the future with the confidence that we see on their funerary statues.

Another point is the use of phonies in tomb equipment. The Egyptians didn't mind using fake artifacts, such as wooden models of "golden" or "alabaster" vessels, or earthenware pots that were decorated to make them look like stone. Even massive wooden "canopic jars" were sometimes used. If the burial equipment should actually bring something about, this would have been very strange indeed. But as the Afterlife would be reached anyway, this was just a means to impress the neighbors: in death like in life.

Most importantly however, it explains why the vast majority of the general populace, that could afford no bigger tomb than a hole in the sand, didn't mind supporting with their labor the burial practices of the better-off. They would have their own Afterlife, a life without any riches – just as their first lives. But they *would* live again! And they *would* get by, just as they always did...

⁶⁴ A touching specimen is the "letter to Anchiry", from the 19th dynasty, now in the museum at Leiden. It has been translated into Dutch by Hans D. Schneider: "*Een brief voor Anchiry*" (no date). For an English translation, see Alan H. Gardiner & Kurt Sethe: "*Egyptian letters to the dead, mainly from the Old and Middle Kingdoms*" (1928).

⁶⁵ This is even true for the 4th dynasty, when the kings build massive stone pyramids. As the tombs of the courtiers of the same period show, there were still enough resources available for a leisurely existence – in life as in death – for substantial numbers of retainers.

⁶⁶ Not even the setting aside of ever more funerary foundations seriously upset the economy. The produce of such foundations was mainly foodstuffs. With these foodstuffs, people could be paid / kept alive: in this case funerary priests. Too much foundations would result in a shift of resources from the center to the periphery – but not in poverty. And if the number of funerary priests would increase too much, then some of them would just have to go back to the countryside to produce the food themselves.

There are two more aspects about life & death still to be covered:

- the boundaries between the animate and the inanimate;
- and the nature of life as a phenomenon.

For both we depend however completely on written and pictorial sources that are just not available for the predynastic period. Treatment will therefore have to be postponed until § 3.3 “More about life and death”.

2.6 The theory of Otto: ritual precedes myth

So far, we have only mentioned the gods in relation to ancient Egypt’s historic period. In our Venn-diagrams of the ontology of earliest man, the gods do not yet figure as a category.

Animals worship no gods, therefore earliest man knows no gods when he is first born as a species. Then, in historic ancient Egypt (from about 3.000 BC onwards), we suddenly find a full-fledged polytheistic religion. Just how many gods there were can not be reconstructed, but even a list of only the most important ones easily exceeds 100. And they appear in many shapes and forms: as men or women, as animals, objects and all sorts of mixtures of these.

So how and when did this remarkably rich concept of divinity develop?

Some important clues can be gleaned from an essay by Eberhard Otto: “Das Verhältnis von Rite und Mythos im Ägyptischen”⁶⁷ (1958). Otto starts⁶⁸ with the observation that the large majority of ancient Egyptian religious texts is meant as an adjunct to certain acts, or rituals.⁶⁹ In most cases, these texts refer extensively to myths. He then focuses on the following two phenomena:

1. the particularly loose and variable relationship between rituals and their accompanying mythical allusions, and
2. the existence of some very old, completely myth-free rituals.

For the first, examples can be found everywhere.

A Spell from the Pyramid Texts, accompanying the presentation of a black jar and a white jar during the offering ritual:

Take the two Eyes of Horus, the black and the white; take them to your forehead that they may illuminate your face – the lifting up of a white jar and a black jar.⁷⁰

The Eye of Horus has, in the myth, been pulled out by Seth. It was then restored by Thot, and given back to Horus. Since this constitutes the most significant instance of “giving” in Egyptian myths, all gifts (especially offerings) can be likened to the Eye of Horus.

⁶⁷ “The relationship between ritual and myth in Egypt”. It is the text of a lecture that Otto held for the “Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften” in December 1957. It was subsequently published in the “Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften”, in 1958.

⁶⁸ The scope of Otto’s lecture is considerably wider than the references in the current paper. A few of the other main items are the depictions of rituals in temples and tombs, a particular type of god-forming out of priestly roles in certain rituals, and dramatized myths.

⁶⁹ If you want to picture ancient Egyptian rituals, don’t think of anything grandiose like a performance of Aïda at the Pyramids. If you imagine a man who solemnly recites texts from a book in his hands, you’ve got the general idea.

⁷⁰ Pyramid Texts, Spell 43, § 33. *FPT* 9.

In this example, two jars are presented. As these jars are white and black, they are referred to as “the white Eye of Horus” and “the black Eye of Horus”, respectively. Just a few lines below, we read:

O Osiris the King, take the white teeth of Horus, which shall furnish your mouth – 5 bunches of onions.⁷¹

The onions that are presented for the king to eat, are likened to the teeth of Horus. The correspondence between onions and teeth is now in their color (white) and their intended location: in the mouth.

Another example:

O King, take the Eye of Horus which you shall taste – a *dpt*-cake.⁷²

Obviously, no-one shall consume “the Eye of Horus”. The king shall consume a *dpt*-cake.

O Osiris the King, take the Eye of Horus on account of which Seth has rejoiced – a *mTpn(t)*-dagger.⁷³

Here, the gift for the king is a dagger. It is likened again to the Eye of Horus – but this time with direct reference to the moment when Seth cut it out of Horus’ face! Because all gifts can be equated with the Eye of Horus, this is done with the dagger also – in complete disregard for Horus’ feelings in the matter.

In these texts, the Eye of Horus serves more purposes than Aloe, Ginseng, Echinacea and Royal Jelly combined.

Another kind of ritual / magical spells, also richly represented in the Pyramid Texts, is the type that protects against snakes and other vermin. The following is part of Spell 386:

Horus fell because of his Eye, Seth suffered because of his testicles. O Serpent whose head is raised, who is in the *nAwt*-bushes, fall down [like Horus], crawl away [like Seth]!⁷⁴

The snake is free to choose either the faith of Horus, or that of Seth – as long as he is driven off.

From these examples we can learn the following:

- The purpose of the mythological allusions is, to enhance the ritual, to improve its effectiveness.
- To us, the mythological references often seem over the top: dragged in by the head and shoulders.
- There is no noticeable restraint in the possible ritualistic application of any given myth. Likewise, any ritual may be hooked up with an infinite variety of mythological references.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Pyramid Texts, Spell 45, § 35. *FPT* 9.

⁷² Pyramid Texts, Spell 51, § 38. *FPT* 10.

⁷³ Pyramid Texts, Spell 57Q, § 40+17. *FPT* 13.

⁷⁴ Pyramid Texts, Spell 386, § 679. *FPT* 127. In the myth, Seth tore out Horus’ eye, and Horus ripped off Seth’s testicles. Really nice lads, eh?

⁷⁵ In mathematical terms: myth : ritual = n : n.

- At times, the “drift” of the myth that is alluded to, is even completely contrary to that of the ritual in question (Otto gives another, elaborate example from a hunting ritual: see *Rite* 12). The ritual itself presents a logical story, with an orderly progression, but the mythical references may randomly jump in every conceivable direction.

All of this strongly suggests that the mythical angle is secondary: only brought in after the drawing up of the rituals.

Otto then gives the following examples of old, myth-free rituals:

- The classical offering formula: “An offering that the king gives”: see also § 2.1 “The importance of language”.
- Several spells from the Pyramid Texts. He gives this example:

Raise yourself, O king
 Receive your water
 Gather together your bones
 Stand on your feet, being a spirit at the head of the spirits
 Raise yourself to this bread of yours that knows no mouldiness
 and your beer which knows no sourness⁷⁶

(The earlier mentioned text from the pyramid of Teti is almost identical. See § 2.5 “Matters of life and death”.)

- Several parts from the ritual for Opening the Mouth
- A part of the funerary ritual that is referred to in several texts. A typical example comes from the Pyramid Texts:

O my father the king, raise yourself upon your left side.
 Place yourself upon your right side for this fresh water which I have given to you.
 O my father the king, raise yourself upon your left side.
 Place yourself upon your right side for this warm bread which I have made for you.⁷⁷

- We can add to these the ritual of embracing, in which the Ka (life-force) of a father is passed to his son, or from the king to his courtiers.⁷⁸ Later this ritual is also transferred to the realm of religion: on the reliefs in temples, we often see how the gods embrace the king, to share their Ka, their life-force, with him. A textual example can be found in the Pyramid Texts:

You [Atum-Cheper] set your arms about them [the gods Shu and Tefnut] as the arms of a Ka-symbol, that your Ka might be in them. O Atum, set your arms about the king, about this construction [the tomb], and about

⁷⁶ Pyramid Texts, Spell 457, § 858-859. *FPT* 152.

⁷⁷ Pyramid Texts, Spell 482, § 1002-1003. *FPT* 169. Similar: §§ 730, 1047, 1747, 1878, 2182. In the Coffin Texts: Spells 1, 51 and 327. Book of the Dead: Chapter 169. References kindly supplied by Michael Tilgner.

⁷⁸ See Kaplony in “Ka”, *Lexikon*, Band III, 275-282 (1980).

this pyramid as the arms of a Ka-symbol, that the king's Ka may be in it, enduring for ever.⁷⁹

Otto lists the following clues that these rituals are very old indeed:

- their unusually archaic language;
- a completely inflexible relationship between ritual and text:
- and rigidly repeated formulations - as if the Egyptians of the historic period did not really understand them anymore.

Otto is very definite about this: the myth-free rituals are older than the ones with mythical allusions.⁸⁰ It seems to me that we should make two critical remarks though:

- The rigidly repeated formulations do not necessarily indicate that the Egyptians did not fully understand them anymore. Lack of understanding may just as well lead to inappropriate variations. Furthermore, without mythical reinforcements, the text is all that can give effectiveness to the ritual. Sticking to that text as closely as possible just seems a good idea under those circumstances.
- For later periods, it has been shown that the Egyptian scribes were capable of consciously archaizing their texts.⁸¹ They may have done this already in the 5th and 6th dynasties, with respect to some Spells in the Pyramid Texts. Perhaps some of the myth-free texts that we find there were drafted in the period itself. In that case, myth-free rituals were at that point still part of a living tradition.

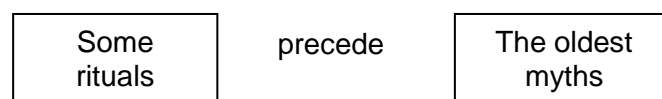
Still, these matters do seem to indicate the following:

1. that the origin of myths and rituals is unrelated,
2. that myths and rituals remained essentially independent from each other, existing side by side, to be combined as necessity prescribed, and
3. that, when combined, ritual had priority over myth.

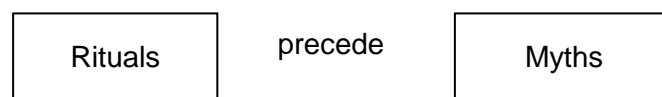
Otto's claim that at least some rituals are older than the oldest myths can not be proven beyond doubt with the material that he presents. However, for the purpose of constructing a verifiable theory, we will assume that his hunch in this matter is correct.

2.7 Consolidating the evidence

The temporal relationship that Otto supposes can be represented as follows:



As we are mostly interested in the relative age of rituals and myths as phenomena, we can abbreviate this in the following format:



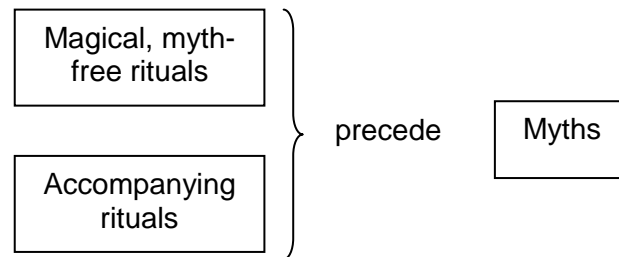
⁷⁹ Pyramid Texts, Spell 600, § 1653. *FPT* 246 (translation slightly modified: see note 44, on page 22).

⁸⁰ *Rite* 9.

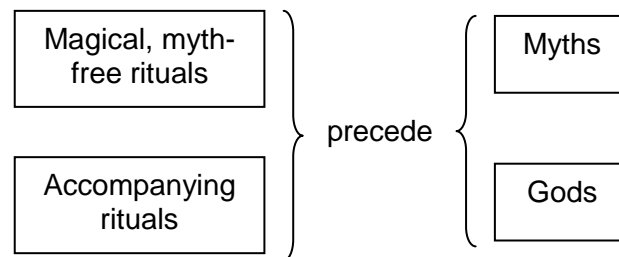
⁸¹ A good example is the so-called Memphite Theology. In her *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Part I* (1973), M. Lichtheim still classifies this work as belonging to the Old Kingdom. In the *Introduction to Part III* (1980) she has to reclassify it as a work from the 25th dynasty (page 5).

As we have seen in § 2.3 “Early man’s relation to nature”, some of the earliest rituals are accompanying rituals. By their very nature, these are originally without magic: they are just meant to accompany a natural phenomenon – not to bring it about. There are however also some old and myth-free rituals that do display clear signs of magic. One example is the mention of “bread that rots not”, and “beer that sours not” in the Pyramid Texts. Another one is the offering-formula, discussed in § 2.1 “The importance of language”.

We can therefore expand our little scheme as follows:



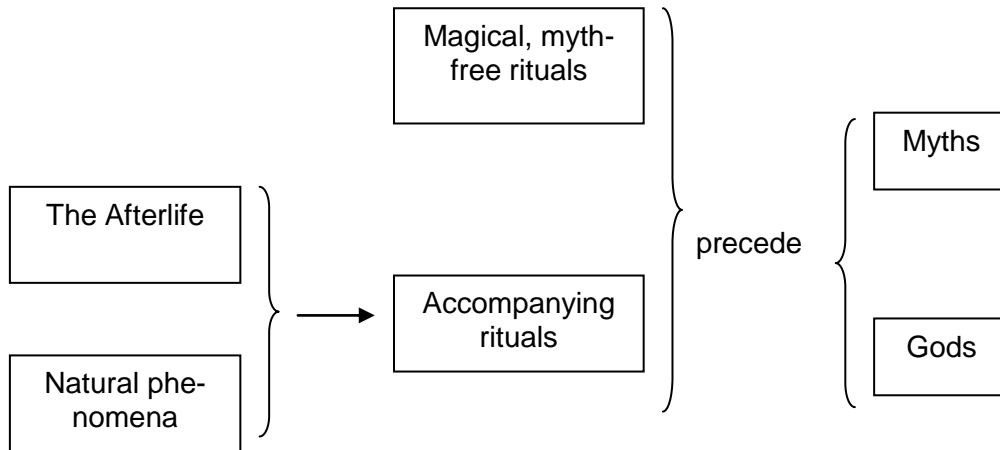
The protagonists of Egyptian myths are gods. It would of course be conceivable that the concept of gods existed for some time before there were myths, but if we check the myth-free rituals, we find no allusions to any gods, either. We will therefore tentatively further expand the picture as follows:



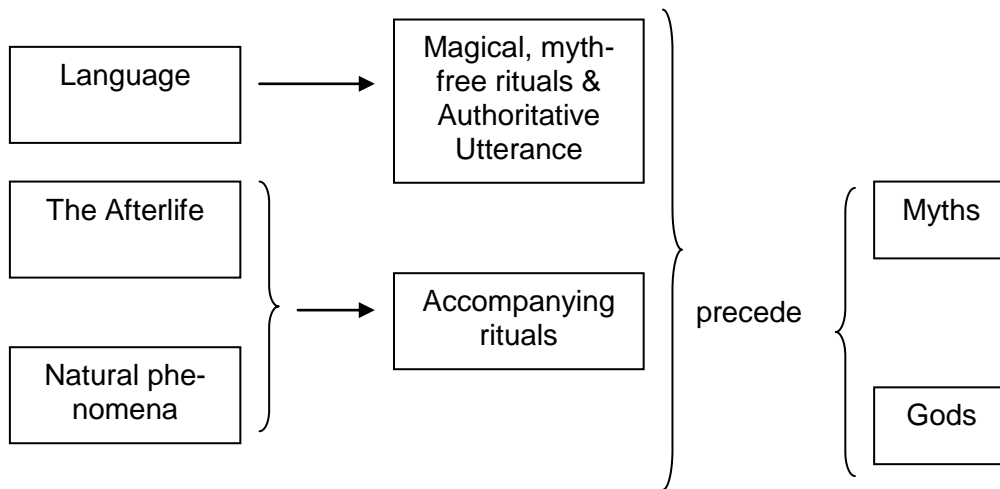
This implies that the development of the oldest rituals was not prompted by a belief in the existence of gods.

The belief in an Afterlife is at least as old as the myth-free rituals – because so many of these deal with the Afterlife. This means that the concept of the Afterlife might be older than that of the gods. In that case, the Afterlife was not a gift of the gods. It was not their reward for a just life: it had nothing to do with morals, with living righteously. This agrees perfectly with the notion, that living again after death just happened automatically. It equally well agrees with the conspicuous lack of moral preconditions for admittance to the Afterlife in the Pyramid Texts. Even after the introduction of the gods, the Afterlife only slowly (almost reluctantly) got an ethical dimension.

As a class, accompanying rituals are derived from the awe and admiration for natural phenomena – including the Afterlife. Because of this derivation, we can insert an arrow of causality between the Afterlife and the other natural phenomena on the one hand, and the accompanying rituals on the other:



As we have seen in § 2.1 “The importance of language”, the acquisition of language led to an increased appreciation for the power of symbols, and to the idea that words can have an effect on nature. From there stems the concept of Authoritative Utterance, and the use of words as the major instrument of ancient Egyptian magic. First, magic was added to already existing accompanying rituals – such as the “bread that rots not” that was added to the resurrection ritual. Later, separate magical rituals emerged completely on their own – like the offering formula.



Interesting as this all may be – and helpful in clarifying the overall picture – we have failed so far to discover a separate phenomenon that may have brought forth the gods. We therefore have to fall back on the last resort: study the Egyptian gods themselves for clues regarding their origin.

There are two reasons why I consider this an undesirable position:

- it is methodologically questionable,
- and it will force us to make use of an evolutionary model.

Methodologically speaking, one would always prefer to track the development of a phenomenon through time, rather than deduce it from later evidence. The written sources that we would need for this are however not available.

With respect to the evolutionary approach, I have already mentioned in the Introduction that in matters of culture, evolutionary models are best left alone since they are prone to ethnocentric bias.

But although our position is now unfavorable, it is not impossible. We can still establish a theory, provided we check it both internally (for consistency) and externally (for support from other, in this case always later, sources).

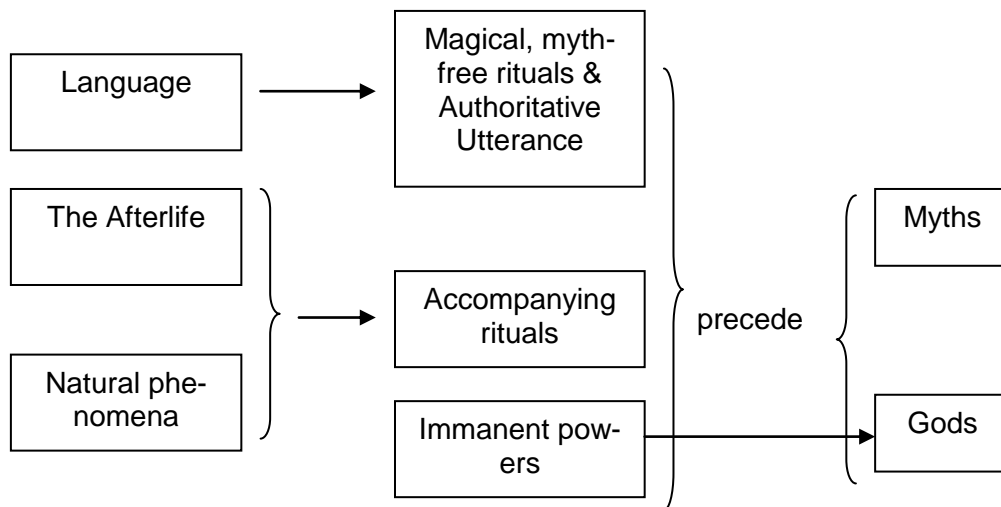
The historic ancient Egyptians worshipped many gods, in connection with a multitude of phenomena: animals great and small, impressive and humble; plants like cereals (as food suppliers) and trees (for the shade they give); the celestial bodies of sun, moon and stars; certain manifestations of the “classic” elements Earth, Water and Air,⁸² and even some abstract concepts, such as Justice (Maat) and Intelligence (Sia).

All these gods displayed a strong dependence on a material domain, even in relatively late texts. If we take into account that matters as Intelligence and Justice were also material, this even holds true for those gods that are often described as “personifications” of “immaterial” concepts.

As Hornung mentions, every god is at least partially transcendent, because for gods the normal limitations of nature do not apply.⁸³ The gods of ancient Egypt however never lost their predominant immanence. Even lofty creator-gods such as Amun and Re stayed forever firmly connected with the wind and the sun, respectively.

From these observations then, we will – for the purpose of constructing a verifiable theory – assume *the pre-existence of totally immanent powers*, from which later the (still mostly immanent) gods of ancient Egypt arose.

In this way, we create a link between the left (earlier) side of our diagram, and the right (later) side.



2.8 The immanent powers

Animals take nature pretty much for granted. Even if they are at times deeply influenced by its workings, they act under that influence without pondering on it. We can

⁸² With the possible exception of the Earth (Aker), the Egyptians appear to have seen these gods only in distinct, concrete manifestations of the elements. In the case of Water e.g. in Nun (primordial water, groundwater) and Hapi (the river Nile), but not in Water “as such”. In the case of Air, Shu is a god of space or emptiness, and Amun of the wind. See *Eine*, 71. This inclination towards the specific and the discrete corresponds with a reluctance to abstract that is also noticeable elsewhere in ancient Egypt. It also agrees with the observation that the ancient Egyptians never regarded nature as such to be alive.

⁸³ See *Eine*, 186.

therefore safely assume, that animals do not recognize the majesty and grandeur of natural phenomena the same way that man does.

Logic dictates then, that this was the same for earliest man. At some point, man came to perceive nature's qualities of impressiveness, splendor and beauty out of his own experience.

As we have seen, early man lived in an extremely close relationship with nature. His awareness of it was intense, because of his utter dependence on it. His commitment to it was complete, because he was not aware of anything else. And he perceived his own existence as inextricably interwoven with that of everything around him.

If we take the trouble of watching nature with some intensity, we will invariably be impressed by it. How much more then, must this have been the case for early man – for the reasons just described. He was like Alice in Wonderland: surrounded by marvels without end. The force of the wind, the arching of the sky, the silently gliding moon, the ferocious strength of the crocodile, and the indifference of the elephant: impressive wonders wherever he went.

Not all individuals will be equally sensitive for the marvels of nature – not even among those who live much closer to it than we do. Everyone can see the sun, but where some will see a grandiose power in it, for others it will always just be a "light in the sky". At the other end of the spectrum, the really sensitive may undergo deep impressions from nature's manifestations – at times amounting to an experience of communion with it.

To feel a sense of communion with nature is not limited to the primitive. Modern man may equally well experience it – although for us the effects will fade much sooner, because we encounter so many more distractions. Also, nature means less to us, because we are by no means so dependent on it. But we can still infer a lot from our own experiences in this area. First of all, it happens with a stunning suddenness. One feels taken by surprise, swept off one's feet, baffled. It's a revelation: we can at last see the world in its true form.

The experience provides its own validation: he who undergoes it, is convinced that it's true, that it offers a look at things as they really are. And on top of this, it is also extremely satisfying. It offers elation, happiness, and great joy.

It is my belief then, that this experience of oneness with nature was the source of the perception of powers. From the later Egyptian gods, we can deduce that the ancestors of the ancient Egyptians primarily experienced these impressions from specific natural phenomena, not so much from nature in total. We know that the historic ancient Egyptians did not consider all of nature as being one, or alive. Neither did they regard all their gods as ultimately being One. No matter how frequently epithets and other divine attributes were swapped between the gods, they always remained separate, discrete entities.⁸⁴ If we extrapolate from this historic position backwards, we arrive in the prehistoric period at a picture where man perceived many separate, discrete powers, as predecessors of the later gods.

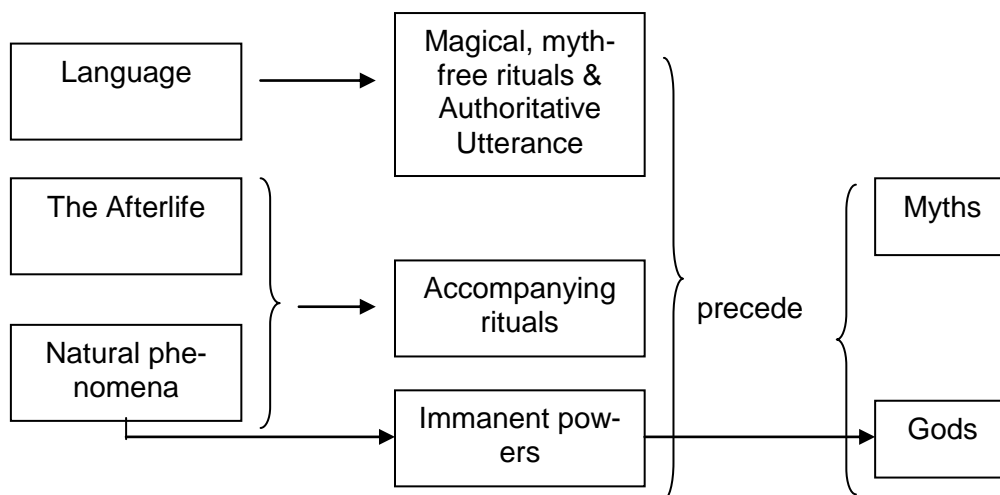
Not everyone will be equally susceptible for the powers. Some will point them out: some will lead where others will follow. This is where the roots lie for the position of prophets and priests.

Not everyone will be equally sensitive for the same phenomena. Some are greatly impressed by the height of the sky, others by the lushness of the vegetation, or by the fleeting river that always moves, yet never changes. That is why so many gods arise.

⁸⁴ For an in-depth treatment of this issue, see especially Hornung's "Der Eine und die Vielen", (1971) (also translated into English as "The One and the Many").

As we can learn from the astonishingly vivid drawings in tombs and on ostraca, the inhabitants of the Nile Valley were acute observers of nature, especially of animal life. No doubt these close observations were the source for a multitude of other, less obvious gods. At first sight, it may surprise us to come across gods in the shape of wild dogs – but once we have seen a thorough BBC-documentary about the intense family life of these animals, focussing on their mutual support and intense cooperation, we will find it a lot easier to understand this. And when we have witnessed the chivalrous daring of an ichneumon attacking a poisonous snake three times its size, our admiration for the bold little predator will be for life. In Nature, to know is to admire, and once the first great shock has paved the way for the *principle* of powers, new powers could be discerned in more modest, less obvious phenomena.

We can now add one more arrow to our diagram of the last paragraph, to indicate the origin of the immanent powers:



The immanent powers, that will in the future produce the gods, are derived from impressions from natural phenomena.

Even for the most sensitive individual, the experience of oneness with nature will at best be something that happens intermittently.

If it does not happen all the time, then maybe it requires the power's consent to come into contact with it. Man may desire this contact much as he wants, but the power will choose if and when it will allow it – and it may favor some more than others. This then means that the power has a will of its own. And since the decision to make contact lies with the power, it is stronger than man. Man proposes, the power disposes.

Some of the most potent natural phenomena can display both a beneficial and a detrimental face. The sun can both caress and scorch, the wind can cool or shrivel; the inundation of the Nile, that should bring life and prosperity, can also be too high and devastate the land, or too low and leave the people starving. The same phenomenon may one time prove benign, the other time malicious. This too demonstrates an independent volition.

The beneficent and the harmful are not equally distributed over all powers. Some are mostly beneficent, such as the power that makes the vegetation grow, but others are mostly detrimental, such as the power that lives in the desert. But even those that are most beneficial, like the one that allows women to become pregnant, can be capricious: they sometimes withhold their blessings, for no apparent reason.

Again, this proves that these powers have a will of their own.

Because of this will, they must be alive.

They are living powers.

The powers that man perceives in nature during this stage, are purely immanent. This means that they not only reside inside the phenomena, but that they are completely *confined* to those phenomena: their workings are limited to the natural range of workings of the phenomenon in question. The power in the sun can only do what the sun can do: bring forth light and heat, in varying intensities. It can not (yet) create life, appoint kings, or reward the just. It is not (yet) a god, it can not (yet) play a part in myths.

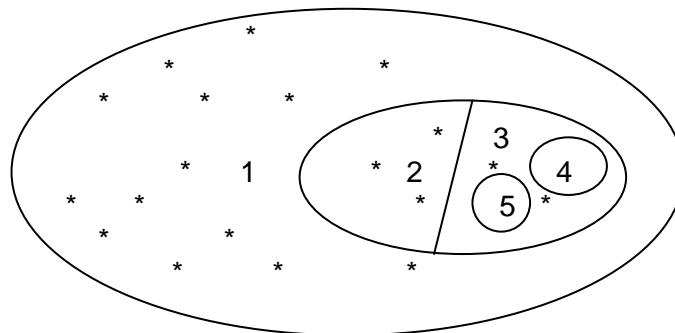
Not only is their range of workings confined, so are their needs. Totally immanent powers have no need for offerings: the sun and the wind do not eat, nor can they appreciate incense or music.

We started off with “inanimate matter” as a separate category, but now we find that there can be powers inside this inanimate matter, powers that are alive. Is the matter then still “inanimate”? Yes, in the case of ancient Egypt, it is. On the one hand, inanimate matter is lifeless. It can be cut and sliced, sawed and sand. On the other hand, it may harbor a power, and that power is alive: it has a will of its own, it can reveal itself or not, and it can use its potential either beneficent or detrimental. It *may* harbor a power, for not all inanimate matter *will*.

This then is the first time that we encounter what Frankfort calls “a multiplicity of approaches.”⁸⁵ In a later chapter, we will deal with it in detail. We will see that it really is a matter of perspective: seen from one perspective, inanimate matter is lifeless; seen from another perspective, it can be the abode of a living power.

On the other hand, this new development introduces a small element of strain into the ontology: a minor cognitive dissonance. For the time being, it remains unnoticed, but with the further development of the gods it becomes more prominent. We shall see how this growing strain is ultimately relieved by the creation of a separate reality.

We now finally arrive at the following ontology-diagram for the prehistoric period:



- 1. Matter
 - 2. Plants
 - 3. Animals
 - 4. Man
 - 5. The dead
- } living matter

The * refer to the powers. These are present in all realms of nature, except the domains of man and the dead. As we will see later, during the Early Dynastic Period there were powers among men. In the Late Period, all the dead became powers.

⁸⁵ See the quoted works in the Bibliography.

In this prehistoric ontology, man perceives all that exists as belonging to one sphere: that of matter. This is by default, because the concept of immaterialness has not yet been born.

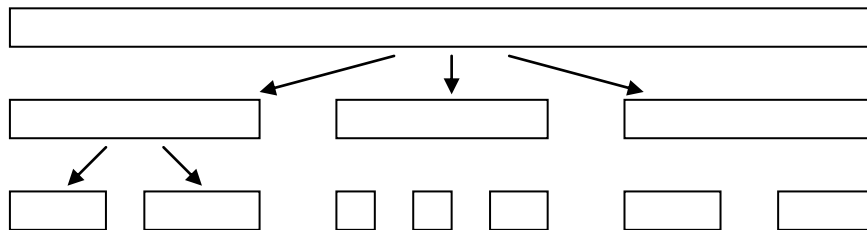
Within this one sphere, two attributes can add something extra to an entity: life, and power. And man perceives the powers in nature as being alive.

2.9 Discreteness versus oneness

We have now reached a seeming contradiction. On the one hand, we have stated that early man perceives more unity, and less differentiatedness around him, than we do (§ 2.3 “Early man’s relation to nature” and § 2.4 “Materialness”). On the other hand, we have just stressed that he sees the powers of nature around him as separate, discrete phenomena. In the words of Frankfort: “Powers confront man wherever he moves, and in the immediacy of these confrontations the question of their ultimate unity does not arise”.⁸⁶

How do we reconcile this?

Before the advent of modern science, the development of knowledge is governed by need: groupings of phenomena are made as need arises. Distinctions within a category, and generalizations over categories, will remain limited under those circumstances. The result is a taxonomy with only a few levels:



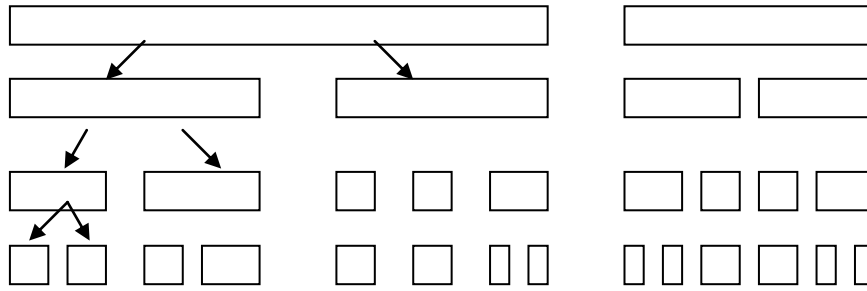
The lowest level is that of the individual phenomena. The highest level stands for the perception that ultimately, all is one. In this (extremely simplified) diagram, only one level of categories is indicated in between.

We may e.g. say, that the highest level is that of matter, the second level that of the main categories (inanimate matter, plants and animals), and the lowest level that of the individual species per category.

When knowledge is sought for its own sake (something that the ancient Egyptians never did),⁸⁷ the number of levels in the taxonomy increases rapidly. Within the lowest classes, new distinctions are made. Subclasses are introduced, as well as higher generalizations. The structure of knowledge gets ever more complicated:

⁸⁶ AER 4.

⁸⁷ In the case of western culture, this process starts in ancient Greece.



In the taxonomy of primitive man, fewer levels make for an overall picture of more unison, and less discreteness. In some aspects however, he sees more discreteness than we do. He does e.g. not make use of a category of “celestial bodies”: as a result, the Moon and the Sun are more unique for him, than for us. He will therefore sooner link the powers in sun and moon to different personalities, resulting in different gods. And since these gods have come from different, ungrouped phenomena, there will be a strong inclination in his mind to *keep* them separate and unique. *That* is why “the question of their ultimate unity does not arise”...

2.10 Further consequences

Inside “the box”, man experiences all things as connected, including with himself. Through these connections, things can influence him, but they allow him to exert influence too. They are like strings: they pull on him, but he can pull back: with magic. He is by no means helpless. In the words of “The Instruction for Merikare”:

He [the god] made for them [mankind] magic as weapons
To ward off the blow of events.⁸⁸

In the historic period, we find that the Egyptians use the word Heka for “magic”. In some contexts, the word can also mean “the force that makes magic work”. This force is in the strength of the connections, in the strings that interconnect the elements of nature.

We have already seen, that all is connected by means of Maat. If the king supports Maat, nature will thrive. There is an important difference though between Maat and Heka. Heka is a purely mechanical concept: it behaves as a network of lifeless fibers. If you pull here, you will get a reaction over there: always, and regardless of any moral aspect. To compare Heka with a weapon is quite appropriate. Like a gun that can be used for hunting, for self-defense, for shooting clay pigeons or for murder, Heka can just as well be used for good or evil. Heka is inherently neuter.

By contrast, Maat reacts as a network of living fibers, like nervous tissue. Maat responds to input the way a living organism would: flourishing when nurtured, decaying when neglected. Maat is an organic concept, with an ethical component.

Together, Maat and Heka form two independent connective systems. The wise can reach his goal by Maat, the magician by Heka.

Cause and effect are connected with strong, rigid strings. For early man, like causes produce like effects, just as for us. In fact, chance plays a much more modest role in his world than it does in ours. His universe is not mechanical to the point of being predetermined: he knows very well that (in a manner of speech) a tossed coin will

⁸⁸ AEL-I, 106.

equally often show heads as tails. But if that coin were to show ten times in a row the same face, then *that* must have a cause. Things that matter, always have a cause. And since he is surrounded by powers, powers with a free will, causes may be found there, too. “There must be a power out there, that caused this strange thing to happen. Is this a sign of some sort, or maybe a threat?”

Call it an easily aroused suspicion – or paranoia. Primitive cultures vary in their degree of paranoia, but they all are touched by it to some extent. In historic ancient Egypt, it is at first only moderately present, but after the demise of the New Kingdom, with its concomitant loss of self-esteem, it is getting progressively stronger.

The string between cause and effect will ensure that a given cause will always have the same effect. But one can also, from the effect, follow the string back to reach the cause: one can create the cause, starting with the effect.

When successful hunters return home with a handsome take, they want to show to those who remained in the village how well they fared. They do so in a mime show, or a dance, to celebrate their success. A successful hunt is followed by a dance that shows a successful hunt. Therefore, a dance that enacts a successful hunt can be performed to ensure the *coming* hunt will be successful, too.⁸⁹

Everything is connected, but not at random: the connections follow certain patterns. Analogy is the essence of these patterns. Resemblance, similarity, parallelism, analogy: signs of correspondence, of equivalence. Things that look alike, or that remind one of something else: indicators of relationships, tokens of connectedness. And if *this* thing is connected with *that* thing, then I can pull here, and have an effect over there.

We have already discussed the impact of symbols in relation to language (§ 2.1 “The importance of language”). As one of man’s oldest cultural traits, the acquisition of language much intensified his appreciation of symbols. As we have seen, this led to the idea that a part can represent the whole, and that a person’s name can represent him.

The concept of analogy is however much wider than just the notion of symbols. Things may remind me of other things much more often.

If one thing reminds me of another, they must have something in common, for they have a common effect on me. As cause and effect are firmly and immutably linked, a common effect indicates a common cause. Therefore, these matters, although not really identical, must share some essential characteristics. The fact that one thing reminds me of something else reveals to me a hidden connection between the two.

Let’s take a look at two practical illustrations of this concept of analogy.

In several Egyptian creation-myths, creation (or “The First Occasion”) began with the appearance of a little hillock out of the primeval waters. This was the Primeval Hill. Here, the first god found for the first time a place to stand. No spot could ever be more holy, more powerful.

Most temples were built in such a way, that one had to mount at least a few steps from the entrance gate to the holiest of holies, at the back of the temple. To go towards the god was always described as “to go up to the god”. In fact, many temples were built on a small mound: either a natural one, or an artificial platform, such as the rear part of the temple of Luxor, or Hatshepsut’s chapels at the Amun temple of Karnak. This elevated piece of land therefore shared essential characteristics with the Primeval Hill: both were sacred spots, both were on higher ground. Sharing these characteristics meant, that a connection between the two was established. This con-

⁸⁹ This concept is called “Vorahnung” by Leopold Ziegler: see *Rite* 9.

nection served as a bridge, over which the temple could draw on the sanctity and power of the Primeval Hill.

In May 2002, the National Geographic Channel (Europe) broadcasted a documentary about an African Zulu tribe. This tribe sees in the python a goddess of female sexuality and fertility, because of the way the snake looks when it has eaten a prey: all swollen up. This reminds them of the swelling of a woman's belly, when pregnant.

Of course, the Zulu's know perfectly well that the python is not pregnant, but has eaten an animal in its entirety. Still, they perceive a sharing of fundamental characteristics between the swollen snake and the pregnant woman, and this strikes them as utterly meaningful. The analogy proves the existence of a connection, a connection that forms an integral part of the pattern of nature: the pattern of a unified existence. It points out to them that the goddess of fertility has the form of a snake. And they celebrate this revelation with a dance by the young and fertile women, a dance in which they gracefully mimic the undulating movements of the snake.

This pattern of nature forms a sturdy fabric, that they know themselves to be part of. Seeing it, experiencing it, adds meaning to their lives. They know that they belong, that they will never be alone.

2.11 Second degree notions concerning the Afterlife

Belief in the Afterlife was based on the continued existence of the dead in memories and dreams. When man started to recognize living powers in natural phenomena, some additional notions concerning the Afterlife arose.

As man felt that all elements of his world were closely connected, sharing the same fate, and as he expected first to die, and then to live again, he expected the sun to die and live again, too. Every morning, at sunrise, the sun was born, and every evening, it died – to be reborn again the next day.

In time, man came to see the continuous cycle of death and rebirth of the sun as an affirmation of his own expectations. After he first allotted his own life to the powers, he took from them new hope for his Afterlife.

The powers share with man the circumstance that they are alive, but it is decidedly a different kind of life. Whereas man's life is relatively short, that of the powers is either cyclical, or continuous.

The moon wanes and waxes in a steady cycle. On the night sky, both a cyclical and a continuous group of stars were recognized. Some stars rotate forever in sight (the so-called circumpolar stars; in the Egyptian texts "the imperishable (or indestructible) stars"), but others – among which the brightest of all, the Dog Star – disappear beneath the horizon, only to return after months ("the unwearying stars").

The river Nile rose once a year – a rising that pregnantly commenced at precisely the moment the Dog Star reappeared on the night sky, just before sunrise.⁹⁰ And in the wake of the inundation, the plantlife that had all but died would vigorously sprout again.

Other powers impress with their continuity, like the lasting earth, the eternal sea, or the unchanging desert. Slightly less obvious is the permanence of plant and animal

⁹⁰ The so-called heliacal rising.

life. Of course, plants and animals do not live forever, but as Frankfort points out,⁹¹ the steady replacement of their ranks by new, seemingly identical individuals, does provide an image of unchangingness, of everlastingness.

All of this confirmed to early man that essentially all life around him was eternal. And as everything was connected, sharing the same fate, this observation strongly affirmed to him, not only the fact that he would live again, but also that his Afterlife would be forever.

2.12 Linkage to a time-frame

To study the development of the ontology of the Egyptians, we have been attempting to make a split in the available material to arrive at two consecutive stages. We have tentatively termed these the predynastic and the dynastic stage, respectively. I take the appearance of the gods as the demarcation line between the two.

Let us now try to determine a *terminus ante quem* (later limiting point in time), and a *terminus post quem* (earlier limiting point in time) for the stage that we have examined in this chapter.

At the first appearance of the hieroglyphic script, signs that denote gods are already present. This means that the demarcation line lies at or before the beginning of literacy – which is conveniently equated with the beginning of the first dynasty. This then must be our *terminus ante quem*.

As most of our clues regarding a pre-gods stage come from the textual evidence of the dynastic period, the relevant material must have been preserved for some time by an oral tradition. We must therefore reckon with the limitations of such a tradition before it was put in writing. Two types of limitation present itself: absolute (in a given number of centuries) and contextual (in the context of a more or less constant cultural environment). The Upper Egyptian predynastic sequence from Badarian till Naqada II/III shows mostly a gradual evolution during a period of about 1.000 years. But even in a stable cultural environment, ten centuries is a very long period for any oral tradition to survive. I would therefore propose that the stage, reconstructed in this chapter, can hardly be older than the beginning of the predynastic period. Such must be our *terminus post quem*.

We can run a small test for the validity of this time-frame, by looking for the earliest evidence of gods in the Nile valley. After all, if the pre-gods period here described does have relevance for the predynastic, it means that we can expect at least a part of that period to be completely devoid of any signs of gods. Can this be shown to be the case?

In the absence of written sources, the predynastic offers but a few indications for beliefs of any nature at all – be they religious or not. We have seen that the burial customs of predynastic Upper Egypt show a remarkable continuity into the dynastic period. If however we look for any signs of gods in the predynastic, we find only some totally inconclusive bits of evidence:

- Small effigies of women, usually with unseparated legs, sometimes with high raised arms, sometimes with beak-like face. Almost identical figurines come from

⁹¹ AER 13. Frankfort only refers to animal life, but for plant life the same observation holds true.

6th millenium BC Anatolia, 6th millenium Iran, 4th millenium southern Iraq, and 4th millenium western Pakistan⁹²

- Some figurines of women with more realistic features, of ivory or bone.
- Bearded male figures in stone, such as the “MacGregor man”, and comparable figures in ivory and bone.

Less then totally clear as they are, the assumption of them being “cultic” lies close at hand. But although some parallels exist with other early cultures, no continuity is discernible from these statuettes into the dynastic period – least of all to depictions of the later gods or goddesses.

If we expect the predynastic *not* to show up any evidence of gods, explaining these images out of harms way would be a lot easier then making the case that they represent some proto-gods of historic ancient Egypt. And it would also deliver us from explaining why we find so much continuity in burial practices, and so little in religion.

⁹² See *Propyläen* 14, photographs 8b, 47c, 66 and 82b, respectively.

3. Ancient Egypt in the historic period

In the previous chapter, we have focussed on those aspects of thinking that I assume to be typical for the direct predecessors of the historic ancient Egyptians. To qualify into that category, an aspect had to be confirmed in the texts of historic Egypt, but without reference to gods or myths. Our guideline was the theory of Otto, about precedence of ritual over myth.

We will now take a closer look at the next stage. As just mentioned, the beginning of this period coincides *at the latest* with the beginning of the 1st dynasty.

3.1 Enter the gods – and myths

As I consider the emergence of the gods to be the demarcation-line between the two consecutive stages, we will start this chapter with their first appearance. And as stated, I assume the gods to have been derived from the perception of totally immanent powers.

Originally, immanent powers do not have an existence independent from their material domain. They are the living force within the phenomena, just as man is alive within his body. The characteristics of these immanent powers can be summarized as follows:

- They all depend on a specific, material phenomenon.⁹³
- They are many: big and small.
- They are alive, and have a will of their own.
- They are extremely powerful,
- but completely confined to their natural domain.

The first item on this list can be taken for granted, because in the ontology of primitive man, everything is material. As we have seen, even such matters as ideas and intelligence are material. This means e.g., that a god of Intelligence (Sia) or of Justice (Maat) is not a “personification”. These gods are derived from powers that originally were experienced as immanent in a material phenomenon. Their origin and background are not different from (e.g.) Geb or Nut.

How then came these powers to be perceived as something else, something more? How did they become gods?

Already in the fully immanent phase, the powers are alive, and have an independent will: they can freely choose whether to direct their workings for better or for worse, and whether they want to reveal themselves or not. Already, this comes close to having a personality. Now man can not really believe in a “person” in the shape of the sky or the sun. In the mind, such a person will inevitably get hands and feet, motives and desires. A further stressing of the power’s free will may then give rise to the idea, that all that the power accomplishes, is the result of a *plan*: a pre-conceived, intentional idea. As the sun in effect makes life possible, the power in the sun then becomes the planner, the creator of life. From this, it is just one small step to omnipo-

⁹³ Not in all cases however, can the original background of every god still be determined. Frankfort has an ingenious theory about Isis (see *AER*, 6), but what may have been the matter in which e.g. Nephthys was immanent?

Many Egyptian gods had a very close association with a given locality: a city, or a province; in these cases, perhaps that locality was originally the “matter” in which they were immanent.

tence. All of a sudden, the power in the sun can not only shine and burn, but it can create life, reward the just, and appoint kings as well.

As the power is getting more and more independent of its material background, its options increase. When man fashions an image, the power can enter into it – so that man can attend to it. For now that the life of the power is more closely resembling that of man, it acquires some human traits in the process. The god – for that is what we are now dealing with – can now appreciate nourishment, clothing and amusement. Like the dead, they are not dependent for their livelihood. They can perfectly well take care of themselves: thank-you-very-much! But just like the dead, the gods can appreciate additional supplies, to further increase their wellbeing.

And what's more: these gods can actually *do* things. They can:

- move about,
- change shape,
- act and interact.

Yes folks, they can walk and talk! And they immediately become stars: the first stars ever, featuring in their very own myths...

When the gods start taking shape, the process gets a creative dimension too. Originally, the perception of the powers was direct: the power in the sun looked like the sun, the power in the earth looked like the earth. But when they are getting “hands and feet”, other options become available. And in the greater realm of Egypt, different ideas could develop about what a given power looked like.

As a result, in some quarters the power of the earth was seen as a god in the shape of a strip of land with a human head, in others in the shape of a lying man, and in others still in the shape of two lions sitting back to back.⁹⁴ As soon as the gods emerge, we immediately meet these many forms. And just as soon, we find that they bear different names: different names for different forms. The earth as a strip of land is Aker, the earth as a lying man is Geb, and as a double lion, it is Ruty. It seems that name + shape originally form a set, having come into existence together.

Although we can assume that the different shapes of a god were originally conceived in different regions, we can for the most part not trace them back to e.g. different nomes. They probably spread rather fast over the land, at a very early stage.

Remarkable is, that these different forms, with their different names, were all retained: living happily together in a peaceful coexistence. The most likely explanation for this seems to be, that one immediately recognized that the different outward forms all belonged to the same power: in this case the power of the earth. That power, now being a god, could assume any shape it wanted. The different names then were just handy labels to distinguish between these shapes.⁹⁵

We should not overrate the degree of transcendence of these gods. From a purely formal point of view, they *are* transcendent, because their workings are no longer confined to those of their original domain. But for the rest, they are still typically immanent. They started to make the jump, from the immanent to the transcendent, but they stay forever frozen in mid-air, with one foot on either side of the border.

⁹⁴ We touch here on the subject, whether ancient Egypt originally knew just one religion, or several religions that only later blended into one. A full treatment of that matter falls outside the scope of the current paper. For the moment, I would just like to point to the remarkable unity of all aspects of religious beliefs and practices all over the country, in all periods: a unity that is far more prominent than the differences in the features of individual gods. For additional remarks to the same effect, see the Preface to *AER*.

⁹⁵ Some additional support for this thesis comes from later Egyptian texts, that state that a god's *true* shape (i.e. separate from all depictions) is “hidden” or “secret” (*Eine* 106).

The continued immanence of the gods shows from their unwavering adherence to their domain. The gods may swap epithets, and acquire additional characteristics, but they will never lose contact with their original base. Re will always be a god of the sun, and Amun will for ever be a god of the wind – making Amun-Re a god of both. Whether Thoth was originally a god of the moon, or a god of wisdom and learning, can no longer be determined – but he will under no circumstance ever lose touch with either of those aspects.

Even in historic ancient Egypt, some gods stay very close to their pre-godly character. The best known of these is Hapy. Hans Bonnet gives in his “Reallexikon” as meaning for Hapy both “Nile”, and “Nile-god”.⁹⁶ Faulkner gives in his dictionary of Middle Egyptian: “Nile (also as god)”. He further gives *Hapy aA* and *Hapy wr* as “high Nile”.⁹⁷ Gardiner gives both “inundation”, and “god of the inundation”.⁹⁸ The god Hapy stays in all respects (workings, epithets, imagery in hymns) so close to his original habitat of the river Nile, that he can hardly be distinguished from it.⁹⁹

Some other gods from the historic period that still mostly act as power are *Iat* (the goddess or power of milk), *Nepri* (the grain-god, or the power in grain), and *Sechet* (the fen-goddess). Being low on the transcendence scale, they are weak in all three new, transcendent aspects of godhood:

- to move about,
- to change shape,
- and to act and interact.

In addition to staying close to their domain, they tend to exhibit only one form, and not to play a part in myths.

Seen from another perspective, these more immanent gods also belong to the category that is – usually with some condescension – referred to as that of the “personifications”. In this case, they are not personifications of ideas, like *Sia* and *Maat*, but of elements of nature. There is a tendency of referring to them as “artificial”. This is however totally unwarranted. In fact, these “personifications” reveal much about the origin of ancient Egyptian gods in general.¹⁰⁰

The development of total transcendence involves an ever further freeing of material restraints, and ultimately of all aspects of materialness. A truly transcendent god is no longer part of the reality that we all live in: it belongs to a separate reality. It is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. It is eternal: not created, not to be destroyed. It is so absolute, that in most cases, only one god will remain. True transcendence tends to lead to monotheism.

This process of further increasing transcendence, resulting in the creation of a separate reality, never took place in ancient Egypt. Even at the very end of their culture, the perception of nature was still that of one undivided reality: “the box” of the previous chapter. Still, as some elements of transcendence have now appeared, we can no longer speak of total immanence. From the appearance of the gods onwards, it is better to call it “a lesser immanence”, or “an immanence of the second degree”.

Back then to the Egyptian gods: the gods of a lesser immanence. Originally, the power in the sky is just that: a power. But when this power is freed from its material

⁹⁶ *Reallexikon* 269.

⁹⁷ *FD* 164.

⁹⁸ *Gr.* 580.

⁹⁹ Bonnet further remarks that Hapy is only rarely seen as a god who receives offers: much more usual it is Hapy, who brings offers to the king and other gods. *Reallexikon* 525.

¹⁰⁰ See also page 15, where some examples are presented that demonstrate the replacement of fully immanent powers (“the sky and the earth”) by gods (*Hapi* and *Nepri*).

limitations, it can assume many shapes. It can take the form of a cow with the name of Hathor, the shape of a woman with the name of Nut, of a heavenly river Nile on which boats ferry the sun and the moon across, or of a falcon with the name of Horus, that has the sun and the moon as its two eyes. The power in the sky can freely choose between any of these forms – and therefore man can just as freely choose which of these shapes he wants to use in a pictorial representation.

A very common depiction in which the sky is shown as a woman, is the tableau of Shu, Geb and Nut. The original perception at the base of this representation is, that the sky vaults over the earth, supported by the air. When the powers in these phenomena become gods, the picture remains essentially the same, but for the purpose of depicting it, one may now select an anthropomorphic representation of these gods. So now we see a woman (Nut), bend on stretched toes and fingertips, arching over a lying man (Geb), while another man (Shu) supports her with upraised arms. This depiction then becomes the root for a host of new stories and images:

- Nut and Geb are man and wife. Shu is jealous of Geb: that is why he keeps them separated.
- The sun fares across the sky. This means that he travels over Nut's back.
- The sun is born each morning, and dies every evening. His birth is from Nut's womb, his death comes when she swallows him. He then travels during the night through her body, to be born again the next morning.

But these images do *not* mean, that the Egyptians imagined the sky to be a woman, that stood bending over a man.¹⁰¹ The sky and the earth were the home of powerful gods, gods that could take any shape they wanted. The earth *could* take the shape of a man, but also that of a double lion. The sky *could* take the shape of a woman, but also that of a cow. And because these gods could take multiple shapes, they could be depicted in more than one form, which in turn could give rise to more than one myth.

Perhaps we should imagine that the power in the sky constantly oscillates in shape between these various forms, too fast for man to recognize them – until the god chooses to reveal one of these forms to his devotees.

When did the myths first appear?

To spot a god, we mostly need just one picture, or even one hieroglyph. To trace a myth requires much longer texts – and those are just not available for the first 6 or 7 centuries of Egyptian history.¹⁰² Fortunately, we have one depiction that clearly refers to a myth, right from the 1st dynasty. It is on an ivory comb. Above the *serech* with the name of king Djet, a pair of wings is depicted. Upon the wings is a boat, with a bird in it – presumably a falcon. The wings are supported on either side by a *wAs*-scepter.

From later Egyptian iconography, we know this to be a representation of the universe. In his palace, the king rules. He is “Horus in the Palace”, in this generation carrying the name of Djet. Above him is the sky, supported by the scepters. And the sun-god crosses the heavens, in his solar bark.¹⁰³

Here we see gods in a picture: the sky-goddess as a pair of wings, the sun-god as a falcon in a boat.

This example shows that there may have been not that much time between the appearance of the gods, and that of the myths. In fact, they may well have been born at the same time.

¹⁰¹ For a diametrically opposed view, see *Bef.phil.* 15, and *AER* 28.

¹⁰² The first being the Pyramid Texts in Unas' pyramid, around 2350 BC.

¹⁰³ In later depictions, the surface of the earth is included in the shape of a horizontal line. In the case of this comb, the upper ends of the comb teeth more or less act as “earth”.

(We call this kind of pictorial representations – such as the tableau of Geb, Shu and Nut, and this one on the comb of Djed – myths, although it's mostly just a picture, with very little “drama”. There were not that many narrative myths in ancient Egypt.)

3.2 The kings that became gods

The gods came into existence as the result of an intense awareness of the might and majesty in natural phenomena. In the minds of the people, hot spots of attention were formed, giving rise to the perception of a living power inside these phenomena. Through an ever further growing attentiveness, the powers broke free from their original habitat, becoming the partly transcendent gods.

This was by no means a one-time happening. As late as in the New Kingdom, the creation of new gods continued. A case in point is Meretseger (“She who loves silence”), also known as “The Lady of the Peak”. She was the goddess of the mountain that dominates the Valley of the Kings, opposite Thebes, and became the patron goddess of the royal necropolis. It was only through the intense activity in the Valley of the Kings, that this mountaintop received such concentrated attention.

That we find this process also active during the 1st dynasty, need therefore not surprise us. In that day and age, the sudden and unprecedented rise to power of the kings of the recently unified state was by far the most prominent spectacle to behold. As the land of Egypt was virtually isolated from the rest of the world, with only some sparse groups of “wretched” Nubians, Asiatics and Sand Dwellers around, the country was to the ancient Egyptians all of the civilized world. When this whole land became for the first time united under one ruler, the awesomeness of it must have struck them as a bolt of lightning. “Never before had the like been done!” Everyone looked at this king. Through their intense awareness, they saw an immense, radiant power in him, a power like that of the gods. Still: this was a man – no sense denying that. He was mortal: he could bleed, and he could die. But his power was of the same magnitude as that of the gods.

The solution to this paradox was simple. Already, use was being made of divine images, into which a god took residence for the purpose of being closer to his people, and being more accessible for their love and respect. So the king was a man, into which a god had taken residence – as if the man was a divine image. The man was an incarnation of the god. Perhaps the most straightforward statement to this effect can be found in the name of Tutankhamun: “The living image of Amun”.

(Even in relatively recent times, comparable events did take place. In 17th century France, the power and glory of Louis XIV reminded his court of the dazzling radiance of the sun, and he was called “le Roi Soleil”: the Sun King.)

Just how fiercely powerful the early Egyptian god-kings were, becomes clear if we consider that they could command their subjects to follow them, not only in life, but also in death. The tombs of the kings of the 1st dynasty are surrounded by a multitude of small graves of servants and palace officials. Whether this represents a true case of “sati”¹⁰⁴ is not undisputed, but remarkable parallels can be found in two other ancient cultures, also precisely at the point where their rulers too for the first time crossed the threshold of absolute power: in Ur (Sumer) and Anyang (China).¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ The word “sati” comes from Sanskrit, and originally refers to the custom of a widow following her husband in death. Although not entirely appropriate, the term is also used to designate the killing of retainers at the occasion of a king's demise, and burying them along with him.

¹⁰⁵ Hoffman 276.

Even before the end of the 1st dynasty, the custom was already past its peak. Hoffman speaks of “an experiment with the limits of power”,¹⁰⁶ soon abandoned as too costly in terms of wasting valuable (human) resources.

Whether, and to what extent, later Egyptian kings were actually regarded as gods, or incarnations of gods, is a matter that falls outside the scope of the present paper. It seems however certain, that this primary principle of god-forming:

attentiveness → perception of a power → birth of a god

was during the 1st dynasty also operative in the domain of man – as was already hinted at on page 39, when commenting on the final ontology-diagram for the prehistoric period.

Let us return for a minute to Louis XIV of France. He used to say: “L’état, c’est Moi”: “The state, that’s Me” (doesn’t sound half as fascinating in English, alas). In ancient Egypt, this was certainly no less true for Pharaoh. So if Pharaoh was a god, then what about the state?

The unified state of Egypt, a state that comprised all of the known civilized world, was definitely a focal point of attention, and perceived as the abode of enormous power. The Egyptians did not abstract enough from the state’s institutions to create the idea of the State as an independent entity; implicitly however, the state religion, with its massive stone temples, certainly glorifies the State.

3.3 More about life and death

As mentioned at the end of § 2.5 “Matters of life and death”, there are two more aspects of this to be covered, for which we totally depend on material from the dynastic period:

- the boundaries between the animate and the inanimate;
- and the nature of life as a phenomenon.

The boundaries between the animate and the inanimate

From the period of historic ancient Egypt, we get no indications that one regarded all of nature as being alive. On the contrary: the distinction between the animate and the inanimate appears to have been as clear-cut and as inflexible then as it is for us now. The hieroglyphic script used so-called determinatives: signs that were used to indicate into what category a word belongs. From these determinatives, it becomes evident that the Egyptians subdivided nature in much the same way as we do. The sign A1 from Gardiner’s signlist¹⁰⁷ stands for the category of “man and his occupations”. Likewise, B1 stands for “woman and her occupations”, and G7 and R8 for “gods”. M1 and M2 denote respectively “trees” and “plants”, and O39 is used for the category of different types of stones. This means that we can discern here the same categories that we use: inanimate matter, plants, animals and man – supplemented with a separate category for the gods. The same type of classification is also used in the so-called Onomastica or Name-lists (see page 13).

¹⁰⁶ Hoffman 279.

¹⁰⁷ A. Gardiner: *Egyptian Grammar*, p. 544 ff.

All of this does however not necessarily prove that the Egyptians regarded “inanimate matter” really as lifeless. In fact, there appear to be some indications to the contrary.

Magicians could make inanimate objects function, as if they were alive. A fine example comes from Papyrus Westcar. In one of the “tales of wonder”,¹⁰⁸ a magician discovers that his wife has been unfaithful to him. He fashions a crocodile of wax, 7 palms long (about 50 cm). He brings it under a spell, and gives it to a servant. When his wife’s lover takes a bath in a pond, the servant throws the crocodile of wax into the water. It immediately turns into a living crocodile of 7 cubits long (about 3½ meter), that snatches the culprit, and dives with him to the bottom of the pond. Neither is ever seen again.¹⁰⁹

Another example is the ceremony of the Opening of the Mouth that is performed on a statue, so that it will be able to serve the spirit of the deceased as abode. Also, the reliefs in tombs, showing agriculture, cattle raising and all sorts of crafts, were considered to be “alive”, in the sense that they could magically provide the deceased with all forms of sustenance.

All these matters appear to indicate that lifeless matter could be brought to life by magic, and therefore, that for the Egyptians, the boundaries between the animate and the inanimate were flexible.

But they were not. We should distinguish between “life” and “effectiveness”. “Life” implies the complete freedom of an independent will. “Effectiveness” may refer to nothing more than the mechanical workings of an instrument, or the efficacy of an agent such as fire or water.

The crocodile of wax catches the perpetrator – but it did not subsequently come out of the pond to roam at will. A statue can hold the spirit of the deceased – but it will not walk away to go see the sights. And the reliefs on the walls of a tomb will produce whatever the deceased needs after death – but the servants on the reliefs will not abandon the tomb to open up shop for themselves.¹¹⁰

So the inanimate objects in these examples are just made “effective” within the context of a specific ritual, for a specific purpose: they do not come to life.

Although the Egyptians show a firm belief in the Afterlife, their belief in death was equally firm. For us, death is something that we rarely meet face-to-face, but primitive man is perfectly aware of the undeniable truth: dying is an irreversible process. Once life has left the body, it will not return. The dead will never wake up again: they will not come back to help you build your new house, or to weave your clothes for you. The dead will not help you raise the children, or bring in the harvest. The dead are gone, for good.

¹⁰⁸ This tale is not in Miriam Lichtheim’s anthology. I have used a Dutch translation: J.F. Borghouts, *Egyptische sagen en verhalen* (1974), page 25 ff.

¹⁰⁹ By the way: the unfaithful wife is brought before the king, who has her burned at the stake. There is a general tendency to regard the ancient Egyptians as an enlightened people. The position of women in ancient Egypt is sometimes mentioned as supporting evidence for this. In comparison with other early nations, the Egyptians do compare favorably – but let’s not get carried away.

¹¹⁰ And yet... Sometimes, a little bit of concern is showing through. In some of the Pyramid Texts, some particularly potent hieroglyphic signs were shown in a mutilated form (e.g. cut in half), left out altogether, or replaced by a simple oblique stroke. This also occurs in some spells of the Coffin Texts. Perhaps this was done here because those who made these texts were so intensely occupied with the magical, that they became sensitive enough to perceive risks of this nature. But these were exceptions. By and large, precautions of this kind were not deemed necessary.

Even the mightiest sorceress of all, the goddess Isis, could not bring Osiris back to life in *all* respects. After his resurrection, he remained confined to the Netherworld. He could no more return to life than ordinary man could, after death.

The nature of life

Finally, let us give some attention to how the Egyptians may have regarded life as a phenomenon.

As we have seen that for primitive man, everything is material, we will start with the proposition that the Egyptians considered “life” to be material, too.

In Egyptian temples, gods are rarely depicted *without* an anch-sign in their hand. Over and over again, they present life (in the form of the anch-sign) to the nose of the king. This seems to suggest that life is something that can be *handled*. And in the mind of the primitive, things that can be handled are material.

In the ritual of Opening the Mouth for a statue, a foreleg is being cut off of a living calf, and then immediately presented to the statue – no doubt dripping with warm blood. It is assumed that the function of this was, to transfer the life-force of the calf into the statue.¹¹¹ Again, this suggests a material character of life.

On the other hand, the most common English translation for the Egyptian concept of the Ka, is “life-force”. Perhaps the ritual with the foreleg was meant to transfer the Ka of the calf to the statue, not life itself. There are strong indications that the Ka could be transferred, and therefore that the Ka was material.¹¹²

The predecessors of the ancient Egyptians were hunter-gatherers. Hunters take the lives of animals on a daily basis. Eating their dead bodies restored their strength. This could be the origin of the Ka-concept.

Perhaps we must conclude that for the Egyptians, life had two aspects:

- an absolute aspect, or “on-off-aspect”: something is either alive, or dead;
- and a gradual aspect: life may be stronger or weaker.

The first is Anch, the second is Ka, or life-force. Anch could only be given by the gods. Once gone, there was no way it could be restored.

Ka could be strengthened in a variety of ways: by eating, but also by passing it on to someone in the embracing ritual.

If anything becomes clear from this short examination, it is that “life” appears to have been a bit of an enigma to the Egyptians – as it still is for us, too. I would expect further analysis to show, that this confusing idea of “life” facilitated the development of the concept of transcendence. Once we have a fully developed transcendence, life is no longer a theoretical problem: it is simply an element in *this* world, that has come from the *other* world, whereto it will return after death.

¹¹¹ See H. Altenmüller: *Opfer* in: *Lexikon*, Band IV, 580 (1982).

¹¹² See P. Kaplony: *Ka*, in *Lexikon*, Band III, 275-282 (1980). See also page 32 of the current paper.

3.4 The dead and the hereafter: revisited

With the birth of the gods, a beginning of transcendence has entered into the ontology. There was still a very, very long way to go before a full-fledged separate reality would grow from this little seedling, but it did already have its influence on the realm of the dead. Time for a re-evaluation.

The materialness of the dead

For earliest man, all is material – including the dead. The dead can still exert influence, therefore they exist, and therefore they are material. There just aren't any alternatives. And because they are material, they still have material needs, and the means (skills and physical abilities) to meet those needs. Their new bodies are of a different kind of matter though: thinner than ordinary matter, invisible under normal conditions. In fact, they will only be visible for those, that they choose to reveal themselves to, as apparitions.

When the powers evolved into partly transcendent gods, the concept of transcendence became available to the dead, also. Although the continued physical existence of the dead receives undiminished emphasis, we find that the Afterlife gets supplemented with more spiritual concepts, such as Ka, Ba and Ach.¹¹³ Even these concepts are still mostly material, as we have seen in the Cannibal Hymn,¹¹⁴ but they also have an immaterial aspect. The Ka may find shelter in a statue, the Ba can fly like a bird, and the Ach can shoot straight to the stars.

Although both the material and the spiritual model of the dead are retained – just happily coexisting – this does (again)¹¹⁵ add a little strain to the internal logic of the ontology – a strain that will only be relieved with the breakthrough of true transcendence.

Royal prerogatives

Originally, the Afterlife was the same for all: a continued existence in a land, far away to the west.

When later the kings became gods, their Afterlife would be in the realm of the gods. There, they could choose from all the options that were available to the gods themselves:

- fare in the solar bark, in the retinue of the sungod,
- be a circumpolar star,
- become Osiris, and rule in the Netherworld,
- etcetera.

During most of the Pyramid Age, it was only the king himself who had access to this godly Afterlife, described in so much detail in the Pyramid Texts. And it was *this* royal, godly Afterlife, that became “democratized” (or rather: usurped) after the end of the Old Kingdom – not the Afterlife as such.

It was under the exceptionally long rule of Pepy II (6th dynasty), that the first breaches appeared in the kingly monopoly. The Pyramid Texts were now for the first time used outside the pyramid of the monarch: in the pyramids of three of his wives. They had

¹¹³ Already one of the later predynastic rulers of Upper Egypt uses the sign “Ka” for his name.

¹¹⁴ See page 18.

¹¹⁵ See page 39, about the introduction of living powers into inanimate matter.

snatched – who knows by what feminine trickery – the keys to the realm of the gods from the feeble hands of their aging husband. After this, there was no stopping it: soon, every dead became “an Osiris”, just like the king.

The body after death: dynastic period

A common idea about mummification is, that it was first prompted by the discovery of accidentally exposed dehydrated corpses that had been buried in the desert sand: natural mummies.

This is however very unlikely. We know, that these are natural mummies, because we recognize the desiccating effect of the dry desert sands. And what’s more: we are aware of the *need* for dehydrating the body to preserve it. As their earliest experiments in mummification blatantly demonstrate, the Egyptians were at first *not* aware of this need. The occasional discovery of natural mummies may well have startled their finders, rather than inspire them to try replicate the effect.

An equally common idea is, that the Egyptians believed that their continued existence in the Afterlife was dependent on having their body preserved. As we have seen, there are good reasons to assume that for the Egyptians, the body was no longer essential after death:

- For primitive peoples, the memories and dreams, in which the dead come back, are the basis for believing in the Afterlife. Life after death is originally perceived as an automatism: just a “fact of life”, not dependent on any action by man.
- Some other primitive peoples therefore even discard the body in rigorous ways, such as burning it, or leaving it for vultures.
- Primitive man is much more familiar with death than we are, so the decay of a corpse (of animals or men) is well known to him. This too, is to him an indisputable, undeniable “fact of life”. That the overcoming of such a fundamental, natural process would become key element in a speculative theory, just is incompatible with the primitive mind.¹¹⁶

Still, looking at later evidence, the idea that a continued existence of the body was believed to be indispensable, comes real easy to mind. Especially some well-known vignettes from the Book of the Dead are very persuasive:

- Right at the beginning of many manuscripts is a scene in which the ceremony for Opening the Mouth is seen, performed before the upright mummy (Chapter 1).
- Perhaps the most copied vignette shows Anubis, caringly bent over the lying mummy (part of Chapter 151).
- Very evocative is also the picture of the Ba-bird, hovering over the mummy (Chapter 89).

All this attention for the mummy strongly suggests that the deceased can not do without his body. So how are we to reconcile this?

In § 2.5 “Matters of life and death”, we have seen how the body of the deceased was treated during the predynastic period: with care and respect, protecting it against the

¹¹⁶ In fact, speculation *as such* is practically alien to the primitive: it is on the contrary one of the hallmarks of the modern mentality.

The sub-title of *Bef.Phil.* reads: “An essay on speculative thought in the ancient Near East”. As early as page 1 of chapter 1, Frankfort gives an excellent exposé of what speculative thought is about, including this description: “(..) we may say that speculative thought attempts to *underpin* the chaos of experience so that it may reveal the features of a structure – order, coherence and meaning”. Quite right – but this is the need of modern man. Speculative thought in this sense of the word was (if we restrict ourselves to the history of western civilization) an invention of the ancient Greeks.

sand and rubble. At the beginning of the 1st dynasty, a new custom was introduced: wrapping the corpse in strips of linen. (The first attempts at mummification are from a considerably later date: probably as late as the 4th dynasty ¹¹⁷). In the tomb of king Djer at Abydos (2nd king of the 1st dynasty), an arm was found, carefully wrapped in linen. ¹¹⁸

In a discussion of the different symbols that the Egyptians used to refer to a god, Hornung dwells extensively on the hieroglyphic sign of a “flag” (Gardiner’s R8). ¹¹⁹ As some old and very detailed examples of the sign show, it depicts an object (perhaps some sort of staff) that is wrapped in cloth, with a band of the cloth left loose at the top. Since the Egyptians used this sign as a general determinative for the sacred or holy, it must have epitomized that concept in some way. Hornung suggests that this means, that sacred objects were usually or always wrapped in cloth. This could be either to protect them from profane looks, or to protect those who had to handle them from getting “burned” by their sanctity.

The Palermo Stone refers to the fashioning of divine images as early as the 1st dynasty (“Birth of Anubis”, “Birth of Min”). This indicates that the gods were by then already transcendent enough to descend into a statue. ¹²⁰ As we have seen, the kings of the 1st dynasty were really, unquestionably gods. And as just mentioned, sacred objects were wrapped in cloth. This most likely included divine images. As the king was in life a divine image of the god Horus, wrapping his body after death was just a natural thing to do: it confirmed that it was in fact a divine image. In that capacity it could help the spirit ¹²¹ of the king to return to the tomb, to take advantage of the provisions that were buried there, and of the new offerings presented outside. In life, a god had found shelter in the body of the king. In death, the king’s spirit would find shelter in the wrapped corpse.

The concept of lodging a spirit in a lifeless object ¹²² (first a divine image, then a corpse) was thus transferred from the realm of the gods to that of the dead.

As early as the 2nd dynasty, we then come across examples of wrapped bodies of non-royals. Wrapping the body of the king was a straightforward affair: the king was a divine image, and divine images were wrapped. In the case of a non-royal, wrapping a body made, that it shared an essential characteristic with the wrapped royal body. As a result, a connection was now established between the two. This connection served as a bridge, over which the non-royal could avail himself of the options of the king. Just as the spirit of the king could easier return to the tomb because it found

¹¹⁷ For a detailed account of early mortician practices, see “The technique of Mummification in the Old Kingdom”, by Ahmed Saleh, on <http://www.mummyspeaks.net>.

¹¹⁸ As this arm in Djer’s tomb wore several bracelets, the excavator (Petrie) automatically assumed that it was the arm of a woman – and therefore probably of Djer’s wife. At that time (early 20th century), no-one had yet seen the mummy of Tutankhamun, whose arms were so lavishly adorned with bracelets... A fine example of an invalid conclusion, based on the perspective of one’s own culture.

¹¹⁹ See *Eine* 21-26.

¹²⁰ That these matters qualified to be listed in the annals of the Palermo Stone, as the most important happenings of a given year, shows how much impact this new phenomenon still had in those days.

¹²¹ The distinctions – if any – between the Egyptian terms Ka, Ba and Ach fall outside the scope of this paper. I therefore use here the somewhat vague term “spirit”. For the principle at work, it is irrelevant under which name the essence of a person was thought to return to the corpse.

¹²² See the remarks about making an inanimate object “effective” instead of living, in § 3.3 “More about life and death”.

there a wrapped body, capable of serving as a receptacle for it, so could now the nobleman's spirit make use of that same device.¹²³

The range of mortician practices was in this period further supplemented with some measures to ensure that the wrapped body still looked as lifelike as possible. Parts of the body were molded with clay or plaster, a face was painted on the bandages, and it was dressed up. Perhaps we need not to look for very profound reasons for this: the relatives may just have wanted to say goodbye to their loved one in such a form that they could still recognize him as the person they once knew... After all, modern undertakers do exactly the same – although they use make-up instead of plaster and paint. On the other hand, these actions would also serve to help the spirit of the deceased to recognize the wrapped body as his own.

Soon after this, two new developments took place. The first was the appearance of funerary statues, the second that of mummification.

As far as the archeological evidence goes, the first royal statues date from the end of the 2nd dynasty (see the two statues of Chaschemwy: one now in Oxford, the other in Cairo). The first non-royal statues are from the 3rd dynasty.¹²⁴ The oldest extant traces of the ritual for Opening the Mouth of a statue – indicating that the purpose of these statues was in fact to prepare them for housing the spirit of the deceased) date from the 4th dynasty.¹²⁵ The first (indirect) proof for mummification also dates from the 4th dynasty. In the tomb of Hetepheres, mother of Cheops, a canopic chest was found. Her internal organs were stored here separately, as would remain the practice during most of the history of ancient Egypt.

If we combine the data so far enumerated, we arrive at the following timeline:

1 st dynasty		2 nd dynasty	3 rd dynasty	4 th dynasty
Sacred objects are wrapped in cloth	Wrapping of royal bodies (Den)	Wrapping of non-royal bodies	First non-royal statues	Oldest evidence for the Opening of the Mouth ritual
Gods enter in a divine image		First royal statues (Chaschemwy)		First evidence of mummification (Hetepheres)
The king is a divine image of Horus				

The ritual for Opening the Mouth is crucial to understanding the relationships between these elements. It is a very complex ritual, the development of which can no longer be traced with certainty. It does appear however, that among its roots are parts of a burial ritual, and of a statue-ritual.¹²⁶ In its fully developed form, during the New Kingdom, it is performed both on funerary statues and on the mummy of the deceased.¹²⁷ In both cases, its purpose is the same: to prepare a lifeless object to

¹²³ An alternative explanation for wrapping a nobleman's body is, that he sought by means of this to become a god in his own right, just like the king. For this early period, that seems however very unlikely.

¹²⁴ The kneeling statue of Hetepdief, now in the Cairo museum, is sometimes dated to the 2nd dynasty, on account of the names of three 2nd dynasty kings on his shoulder. On stylistic grounds, an allocation to the 3rd dynasty is much more likely, however.

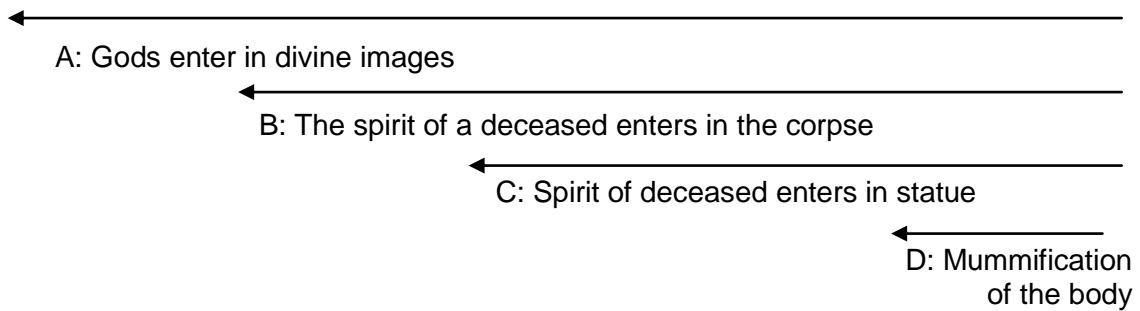
¹²⁵ *Mundöffnung*, 1.

¹²⁶ *Mundöffnung*, 1.

¹²⁷ For the latter, see especially the vignette of Chapter 1, Book of the Dead.

house the spirit of the deceased. This can immediately be linked to the sequence that we have just uncovered: that of housing a spirit, first in a divine image, then in the body of the dead king, and subsequently in the body of any deceased. This is indicated in the table below with heavier lines, that divide it into four different parts:

1 st dynasty		2 nd dynasty	3 rd dynasty	4 th dynasty
Sacred objects are wrapped in cloth	Wrapping of royal bodies (Den)	Wrapping of non-royal bodies	First non-royal statues	Oldest evidence for the Opening of the Mouth ritual
Gods enter in a divine image		First royal statues (Chasechemwy)		First evidence of mummification (Hetepheres)
The king is a divine image of Horus				



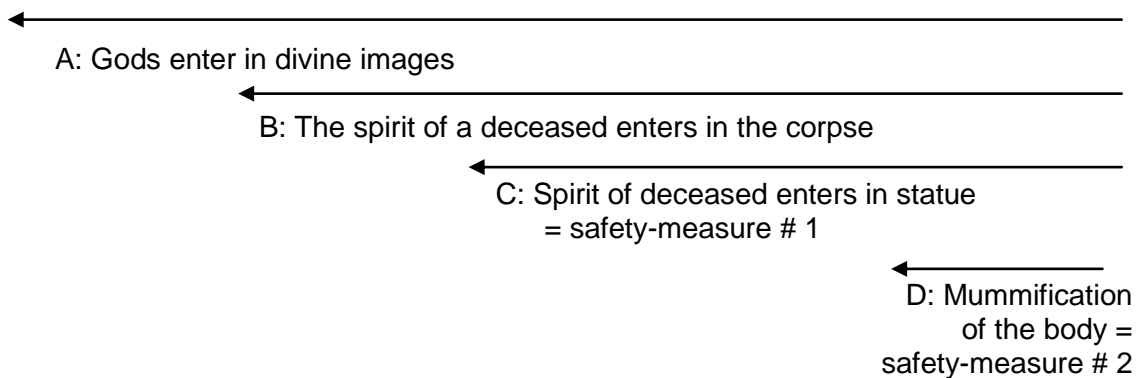
Transfer from A to B: by means of wrapping.

Transfer from B to C: by means of the ritual for Opening of the Mouth.

The method of simply wrapping a body in strips of linen did nothing to preserve it. There can be little doubt that the Egyptians knew this, too. (If no-one else did, then at least the tomb-robbers). And now that the body was endowed with the function of facilitating the return of the spirit of the deceased to the tomb, its loss became a concern.

The first attempt to overcome the problem, was the making of a funerary statue. The second was, to mummify the body. And with their typical attitude of never discarding anything more or less successful from the past, the Egyptians subsequently retained both solutions:

1 st dynasty		2 nd dynasty	3 rd dynasty	4 th dynasty
Sacred objects are wrapped in cloth	Wrapping of royal bodies (Den)	Wrapping of non-royal bodies	First non-royal statues	Oldest evidence for the Opening of the Mouth ritual
Gods enter in a divine image		First royal statues (Chasechemwy)		First evidence of mummification (Hetepheres)
The king is a divine image of Horus				



Eventually, the delineation between mummy and statue became ever more blurred: all the work that went into preserving the body virtually transformed it into a statue.¹²⁸

Conclusion

The continued existence of the body after death was not a prerequisite for surviving in the Afterlife. A well preserved, and well protected body was however the favored instrument for helping the spirit of the deceased to return to the tomb, where he could enjoy both his “burial dowry”, and the new offerings that would be presented there. The funerary statue was considered a suitable back-up.

But although important, neither statue nor mummy were indispensable. Even if the tomb itself, with all that was inside it, would be destroyed, the dead could still fall back on the basic subsistence that the poor had to rely on from the start: that of growing one’s own crops in the West. And even so, these would be of enormous size, and the work would be light, so there was absolutely nothing to worry about!

This kind of thinking, heaping safety measure upon safety measure, is very much “the Egyptian way”.

Providing for the dead, dynastic period

As we have seen, the dead are not dependent on gifts or offerings for their sustenance. Offerings merely served to *improve* the deceased’s existence: if he received

¹²⁸ See in particular the superbly performed mummifications from the 21st dynasty, and the meticulous bandaging in Ptolemaic and Roman times.

A fine example that illustrates the mixing of statue and mummy is the large statue of Mentuhotep II that was found in the shaft that is known as the “Bab el Hosan”, in his funerary complex at Deir el Bahri. This shaft may have been a Ka-tomb. The statue was wrapped in linen, just like a mummy.

enough, he might not even have to work at all (an idea that still hasn't lost its appeal...)

In all funerary texts of the Old Kingdom, mention is made of offerings for the deceased. These offerings consist of "Bread and beer, oxen and fowl, clothing and alabaster, and everything good and pure". They are referred to as gifts of the king: "An offering that the king gives". Otto considers this traditional and standardized offering formula one of the pre-myth texts.¹²⁹

That the offerings will benefit the deceased at the site of the tomb means, that he will either stay there, or periodically revisit it to pick things up. As we have seen that he will also walk over the good roads of the West – which are far, far away from the tomb – we will have to assume the latter.

This in turn means, that the deceased can travel freely between the land of the dead, and that of the living (where the tomb is), and presumably with ease, at high speed. In short: as a bird.¹³⁰ For this, the dead needs to be able to find his way: he needs a sign, that tells him that he is at the right tomb. Therefore we should write his name at the entrance of the tomb.

Inside the tomb, he will find a statue, also with his name on it. And he will find his mummy, that he will recognize as his former body. He can then use either the mummy or the statue to rest in, to feel comfortable in, while enjoying his stay.

To further assure his comfort, the tomb has been equipped with furniture: beds, chairs, storage cabinets etcetera. During the 2nd dynasty, some tombs were even fitted with a toilet.¹³¹ For the dead, the tomb was like a house in the country.

With the advent of transcendence, feeding the dead became easier. The essence of transcendence is, that a force or power becomes totally independent from a material background. The most common application of this principle is with gods and souls, but it is by no means restricted to those two. The historic ancient Egyptians recognized a spiritual, transcendent element in food. This was the basis for a remarkably practical custom, that became central to both religious and funerary ritual.

Every day, the priesthood of a temple prepared a gigantic meal for the god. They presented it to him, with rituals of incensing and purifying, accompanied by music and dance. They would allow the god some time to consume the food, and finally they would clean the table.

The god would have taken just a spiritual aspect of the food to himself. The material aspects of the food remained untouched – and it was therefore still nutritious enough to satisfy the priests.

This principle is further elucidated in the Egyptian language. The word Ka was used to denote a person's (or a god's) life-force. But a very common word for "food" was Kaw: the plural of Ka. The implication seems to be, that "something" in food was needed to support one's life-force. Modern science holds exactly the same position – although with a difference. For science, this "something" is material, whereas for the Egyptians it was spiritual. This meant that a god could satisfy himself with the spiritual aspects of food, without visibly altering its appearance.

As the god was presented with food in excess, what remained could first be presented to the "guest-gods" of the temple, and afterwards to the statues of those individuals who could afford to have one (or more) installed in the forecourt of the temple, as

¹²⁹ *Rite 11*. See also § 2.1: "The importance of language".

¹³⁰ References to the dead in the form of a bird are plentiful. The Ba is depicted as a bird with the head of a human, and the word for Ach is almost invariably written with the sign of the crested ibis. In the Book of the Dead, spells exist for the dead to transform himself into a falcon of gold (Chapters 77 + 78), a phoenix (83), a heron (84) or a swallow (86).

¹³¹ *AER 92*.

part of their funerary provisions. And finally, there was still enough left for the priests to enjoy a hearty meal.¹³²

In funerary customs, the same principle was applied. If one could afford it, one would in one's will apportion the produce of a piece of land for the offering table of one's tomb. After the spirit of the deceased had satisfied himself with the spiritual aspects of the food, the funerary priests ("servants of the Ka") who attended to the tomb made sure that nothing would be wasted.¹³³

One more addition in the dynastic period to the array of feeding options is that of the relief, depicting either a list of offerings, or activities that produce foodstuffs. Perhaps it took the concept of a transcendent element in food before one could arrive at the idea for this kind of depictions. Chance preserved for us one example of paintings in a tomb from the Predynastic: the paintings in Hieraconpolis tomb nr. 100. These mostly show scenes of battle, and the killing of prisoners – nothing that has anything to do with food or food production.

3.5 The Multiplicity of Approaches

We have now made enough progress to evaluate a concept that was introduced by Henri Frankfort, and that has gained a considerable popularity: the Multiplicity of Approaches (MoA).

In his book "Ancient Egyptian Religion" (1948) he describes the MoA as follows: "Ancient thought – mythopoeic, "myth-making" thought – admitted side by side certain *limited* insights, which were held to be *simultaneously* valid, each in its own proper context, each corresponding to a definite avenue of approach. I have called this "multiplicity of approaches", and we shall find many examples as we proceed."¹³⁴ When e.g. looking at the marvel of the sun, its "life-giving power makes him appear as the creator, the source of all existence; but his daily rising indicates a victory over death, and his unalterable course through the sky exemplifies justice".¹³⁵ Each of these approaches resulted in a specific mythological image, that offered a limited insight in the nature of the sungod. At times these images could be in direct contradiction to one another. In the case of the sun e.g., one and the same text could speak of the sungod as the creator of all, and of the sungod as one who was born each morning out of Nut or Hathor.

Nevertheless, by means of this process, early man reaches a beginning of an understanding of the god in question. This process then is termed the MoA. In diagram:

¹³² For a full treatment of this matter, see H. Altenmüller, "Opferumlauf" in the *Lexikon*, Band IV, 596-597 (1982).

¹³³ If we apply rigorous logic to the matter, we can not escape the conclusion that the Egyptian's reasoning was faulty. If the nutritious element in food was spiritual, and could therefore be consumed by gods and the dead, then at some point the food would be completely depleted – and could therefore no longer sustain the priests. Perhaps the sense of wellbeing that comes from an aptly filled stomach was enough though, to overcome this kind of academic objections...

¹³⁴ AER 4.

¹³⁵ AER 16.



Frankfort's basic point of departure is, that when man first arose, he awoke in a strange environment, that he could not comprehend. Man's limited understanding of the laws of nature still hampered his attempts to make sense of the world. As a result, the answers that he found on his many questions were logically imperfect, and he could do no better than reconcile the irreconcilable by regarding it as a token of nature's greatness: "(..) such quasi-conflicting images, whether encountered in paintings or in texts, should not be dismissed in the usual derogatory manner. They display a meaningful inconsistency, and not poverty but superabundance of imagination. (..) The Egyptians exalted their gods by dwelling on the infinite complexity of divine power."¹³⁶

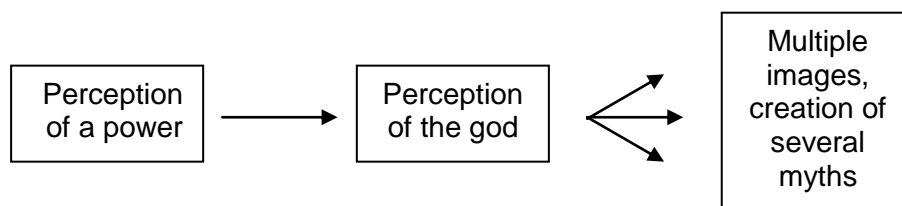
This picture contrasts vividly with ours, in which man awoke with the heritage of his animal ancestry. Part of this heritage was an excellent understanding of nature, such as it presented itself. Early man did not start off with questions, but with a self-awareness in which he immediately recognized himself to be part of all that exists in already familiar surroundings: "the box".

In another work, Frankfort describes a Babylonian myth about the first rains, ending the yearly recurring drought. In this myth, the Babylonians described the rains as a gigantic bird, whose wings were the black storm clouds. The bird then "devoured the Bull of Heaven, whose hot breath had scorched the crops".¹³⁷

About this myth, Frankfort says: "The imagery of myth is therefore by no means allegory. (..) The imagery is inseparable from the thought. It represents the form in which the experience has become conscious."¹³⁸

Frankfort here maintains that the ancients (in this case the Babylonians) first understood this natural event as a fight between certain powers, and that they, at that very same time, added the picture of a bird slaying a bull. He believes that it was only through these pictures, that man could make sense of what was happening.

In the line of reasoning adopted in the current paper, early man did not need to make sense of this happening: it was just part of the world as he already knew it to be. He did however sense the enormous powers in these natural phenomena. Interpreting them as being alive (because they appear to have a will of their own), he added "hands and feet" to them, which led to their partial transcendence. Only *then* did these powers become gods, acquiring the potential of assuming any shape they wanted. And only *then* did man add these fancy pictures to his perception, and did a myth make its appearance. In diagram:



¹³⁶ AER 19.

¹³⁷ Bef. Phil. 15

¹³⁸ Bef. Phil. 15.

For primitive man, perception and understanding are one, so there is no need to increase his understanding of the gods. The myths are a means of reveling in the power and glory of the gods – not a means to understand them.

Although the Egyptians *did* have a “superabundant imagination”, the multiple images of the sun-god are not inconsistent. On the contrary: they are very consistent with the fact that the sun-god is a god. Gods can assume any shape they desire.

Another example of multiple views, this time about the Afterlife:¹³⁹

- The dead become gods, who journey in the retinue of the Sun king along the sky, sailing with him in his solar bark, spending their days singing and rejoicing.
- Every dead becomes Osiris, king of the dead. As Osiris, they reside in the Duat: the Netherworld.
- The dead leave their tomb by day, to go out and do what the living do.

Why should we consider this a set of mutually exclusive views? The Egyptians never state anything of the sort. It seems much more probable, that the Egyptians believed they had a *choice* in the type of Afterlife. Today, we can be gods in the retinue of Re, tomorrow Osiris on his throne in the Duat, and the day after we will go out by day and mingle among the living. Ain't that great?!

This is not a multiplicity of approaches: it is a multiplicity of choices.

All of this does not mean, that there was no such thing as a MoA. On the contrary: primitive man is often content with looking at a phenomenon from different angles, resulting in different images. We may even distinguish between two variants of the MoA.

Firstly, there is a literal type of MoA. If we walk around a tree, we will find that it looks a bit different from every different angle. What we see at a given moment depends on our position, our perspective. Only if we combine all these different views, do we get an accurate picture of the thing as a whole. This is the way that primitive man makes drawings: by combining multiple views of an object into one picture – as we have seen in our short discussion of ancient Egyptian drawing on page 11.

Another, more conceptual type of MoA is used by the primitive as a means of structuring knowledge: he stores the information about one phenomenon, as seen from different angles, side by side. We encountered one example about (in)animate matter on page 39, and another one about the dead being (im)material on page 54. Inherently conflicting views are here retained, without any attempt to reconciliation – producing a slight tension in the fabric of cognitions.¹⁴⁰ Later, with the introduction of formal logic by the ancient Greeks, this method soon became suspect, and was abolished forthwith. In modern science though, it is coming back to the forefront again:

- Certain sub-atomic particles have a dualistic character: in one sense they are matter, in another sense they are radiation.
- Viruses are alive, for they can multiply themselves, but they can also be stored as a crystalline powder: completely inert and “lifeless”.
- Screens of televisions and PC's can be made of “liquid crystals”.
- And electricity and magnetism are two manifestations of one force.

There is nothing wrong with looking at a matter from different perspectives – not if it has different aspects.

What we should further be aware of is, that the term “Multiplicity of Approaches” is essentially descriptive, not explicatory. It describes *how* primitive man looked at cer-

¹³⁹ Already mentioned on page 4.

¹⁴⁰ Before we start feeling better than those primitives, we should be aware of the fact that in modern psychology, at least three different theories exist that attempt to describe the principle of “cognitive dissonance” – and not for the purpose of studying history.

tain things, but it does not explain *why*. If we use the term indiscriminately as a label all for seeming inconsistencies, we run the appreciable risk of glossing over some important mechanisms.¹⁴¹

The picture that Frankfort paints, differs considerably from the one that we have uncovered. Where Frankfort finds a lot of uncertainty, partial truths and unanswered questions, we have found much more certitude, confidence and a firm grip on matters. I would say that the latter picture agrees better with a people, capable of constructing the pyramids.

Nonetheless, Henri Frankfort's contribution to the study of ancient Egyptian thought-processes is immense. With his insistence on an interdisciplinary approach, he was well ahead of his contemporaries. His introduction of the findings of modern anthropology was no less than revolutionary.

Although his overall interpretation is no longer tenable, many of his observations are still highly valuable. Frankfort will remain compulsory reading for all who want to understand the Egyptian way of thinking.

3.6 The ethics of early man: Order & Disorder outrank Good & Evil

One way to judge the value of a religion is to examine its ethical contents. In the case of primitive religions, the outcome of such an assessment tends however to be somewhat disappointing.

In modern, "revealed" religions, a code of conduct is an essential part of the teachings: adhering to it is rewarded with eternal blessing. Primitive religions center much more on worship, offerings and ritual, then on ethics. This does not mean that primitive man is not familiar with ethics and moral values: it just means that he has not embedded these into his religion.

Early man's religion originates from his recognition of the powers of nature. In his perception, these powers are first of all *powerful*: not necessarily good or evil. The powers have a free will, therefore they can choose whether to direct their potential for man's advantage or disadvantage (see § 2.8 "The immanent powers", especially page 38.)

When later the gods materialize out of the powers, the picture stays essentially the same. The gods are neither good nor evil, just mighty. The goddess Sachmet is responsible, both for sending illness and for providing cures against illness.¹⁴² Next to "creating the chicken in the egg", the sun-god has a fiery aspect in the form of the Eye of Re, that chars the king's enemies.

But even if their religion does not furnish anything like the Ten Commandments, there can be little doubt that the Egyptians knew Right from Wrong. Ten minutes of reading in e.g. the Instructions of Ptahhotep will clearly show this to be the case – although there are not that many verses in this lengthy treatise that explicitly dwell on matters of morality. An example can be found though in maxim 6:

Do not scheme against people,
God punishes accordingly:

¹⁴¹ In the final analysis, the MoA may better describe how we look at ancient Egypt, then how the ancient Egyptians looked at their world.

¹⁴² *Eine* 278.

If a man says: "I shall live by it,"
He will lack bread for his mouth.¹⁴³

And again in maxim 19:

If you want a perfect conduct,
To be free from every evil,
Guard against the vice of greed:
A grievous sickness without cure,
There is no treatment for it.¹⁴⁴

So if early man was aware of ethics, but did not derive these from the same sources he derived his gods from, then from what *did* he draw them?

For this, we must again turn to man's animal ancestry.

Evolution favors the successful. For a social species (and man's immediate predecessors belonged to that category), there are some avenues to being successful that are not available to other species. Groups offer options for sharing and helping, based on reciprocity, that can add to the group's chances for survival, and thereby to the chances for survival of individual group members. In this way, a "code of conduct" can emerge – perhaps even genetically coded – in which certain behavior towards other group members is considered "good", and therefore rewarded, whereas other behavior will be labeled "bad", and be punished. Sharing will be "good", while taking advantage of sharing without in due course returning the favor will be "bad". Group members that display "bad" behavior repeatedly will be punished, or even expelled from the group. This will reinforce for the remaining group members their adherence to the rules.

This kind of ethics has a strong utilitarian character. The "right" kind of conduct is that, from which the group will benefit.

These mechanisms may well be the source of early man's ethics. Even in modern ethics, a utilitarian character is still easily discernible, especially in the more formal shape that it takes in the legal system.

As long as the group remains man's main manifestation, there is no real need for further development. Only when the individual comes more to the forefront, will new ideas about Good and Evil arise. In western culture, a distant echo of this process can be found in the Greek tragedies, with their focus on the struggle of one man against the gods (who in this case represent nature, or the natural order of things).¹⁴⁵

Nothing is more important to any species than survival. The functional, utilitarian values of social behavior assist in survival, and from that fact derive their importance. But there are more factors at play that bear on this matter, and some are even more important.

When man emerges from the animal kingdom, and starts to see matters (including himself) in a wider perspective, he soon recognizes his utter dependence on nature as a whole. If the sun were to stop shining, or the Inundation would not return, then all life would soon perish. Although the "right" kind of behavior is important to him, he has to place the natural order of things at the top of the list.

¹⁴³ *AEL-I*, 64

¹⁴⁴ *AEL-I*, 68.

¹⁴⁵ In fact, these matters are still undecided today. To accurately distinguish between utilitarian good and intrinsic Good (if such a thing exists at all) is a task that remains as difficult for us as it has been for any of our ancestors.

Early man lives in a hazardous world. Life is relatively short, and full of dangers. Yet he is able to survive, because he can take advantage of what nature provides. This he can do, because he understands nature, he understands her workings. Even if life is full of surprises, he knows that he can count on the many ordering mechanisms in nature. He sees several types of these – and some phenomena are even governed by more than one:

Mechanisms of repetition:

- Each day is followed by the next.
- Each generation is followed by the next.

Mechanisms of continuous movement:

- The always flowing river.
- The circumpolar stars (or, as the Egyptians called them: “the indestructible stars”), that always keep circling in the night sky.

A mechanism of cyclic movement:

- The monthly cycle of the phases of the moon.
- The yearly cycle of the seasons.
- The yearly cycle of those stars, that periodically disappear below the horizon (“the unwearying stars”).

Mechanisms of repeated growth and decline:

- The sun that rises and sets again.
- The river that rises and falls again.
- Living organisms are born, grow and die.
- In the Nile valley, vegetation as a whole sprouts vigorously after the inundation, then flourishes for a while, to wither again in the heat of summer.

With the striking exception of the movements of stars and moon,¹⁴⁶ all of these matters are of the utmost importance to him. The sun will always rise in the east, and set in the west. The river will always flow, and always from south to north.¹⁴⁷ The animals that he hunts will always be replaced by new specimen, and what he sows in spring, will produce a harvest in summer. Forever the order in nature remains, and man knows himself to be totally dependent on it. If anything were to threaten this order, it would be an immediate threat to his very existence. Disturbing the order then is the most hideous crime of all: it is high treason against Creation itself. And as the institutions of the State were part of this beneficial order of things, any disruption of their functioning was a serious crime too.

This explains why Maat is both Order and Justice: for primitive man, order *is* justice.

The gods were powerful, rather than good. But there was also evil in the world: no sense in denying that.

In the thriving of plant and animal, man sees a great power of fertility. But he also sees the wretched, limping animal, the shriveled bush, and the ailments of his fellow. From these he learns, that there are evil powers, too. Evil is a part of the world: it lives right here with him, inside “the box”, just around the corner.

In the historic period, the Egyptians knew not only gods, but also “demons”. Best known of these is Apep, the eternal enemy of Re. Another one is Nik. Some others are just called “The Destructive One “ or “The Evil One”.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Perhaps this explains why – the world over – so much theological input is given in precisely these matters. Although they display a highly predictable order, their significance for man’s life is not apparent. This may well have aroused early man’s amazement, resulting in a stronger focus, and ultimately in a rich variety of perceived benefits.

¹⁴⁷ When the Egyptians finally made it to Mesopotamia, they called it the land “where the rivers flow in the wrong direction”.

¹⁴⁸ See *FD* 130 (*nbd*) and 320 (*Dw*), respectively.

Where the gods were derived from the workings of natural phenomena, and display as a result at least some kind of personality, the demons remain much more indistinct. The demons are just “evil”, no more, no less. Only Apep becomes a bit more tangible.

The gods emanate from nature’s powers. The demons stem from evidence that at some point, the natural order of things has been disturbed. The gods can be seen in their glorious face, the demons can only be recognized by their disrupting actions.

Apep is the snake-demon that confronts Re during his nightly passage through the Netherworld. For twelve long hours, the battle rages, until finally the serpent is slain, and Re gloriously rises in the East again.

It is telling, that Apep’s main adversary during these fights is the god Seth. Seth stands at the prow of Re’s nightbark, acting as his champion.

During the Late Period, Seth’s character changes drastically, from god to devil. But before this, he was as much a “value-free” god as any other. What his original domain was, can no longer be determined, but from the moment on that we have enough texts at our disposal for an assessment, he is associated with the desert, tempests, the foreign countries, and brutal strength. In myths, he is the Opponent par excellence: he kills Osiris, and fights Horus. He is a god of unrule, upheaval and strife. But he is no more evil, than e.g. Osiris is good. (The many hymns for Osiris stress his might and strength, not his goodness.)

It seems that the Egyptians recognized that a viable universe needed some strife, some contained measure of disorder. From there comes strength: Seth was one of the four champion gods of Egypt’s hosts in the 19th dynasty, together with Amun, Re and Ptah. And that is why Seth was the perfect champion for Re, in his ever continuing battles against Apep.¹⁴⁹

3.7 The concept of Nun

In an immanent worldview, nothing exists outside “the box”: there is no transcendence, there is only one reality. In the main Egyptian creation myth, creation starts when for the first time something (a small hillock, a lotus flower, or the first god) emerges out of the Primeval Waters. The name of these waters is Nun. As early as the Pyramid Texts, Nun is addressed as a god.¹⁵⁰

According to some authors,¹⁵¹ Nun is the only matter in the Egyptian universe that was truly eternal. Nun existed before creation, and it will remain after the world is destroyed. In this sense, Nun is not part of “the box”: not part of “this world”. In this view, Nun is the only completely transcendent element in the ontology of the ancient Egyptians.

Unfortunately, most of the more substantial material about Nun is from the Late Period. The eschatological aspect of Nun appears so late, that it may well have been brought in from abroad – from Greece, Persia or Mesopotamia. I would say that we need more restraint in reading the meaning of Nun – especially during the earlier phases of the Egyptian culture.

¹⁴⁹ For more about Seth, see the article “Seth” by Herman te Velde in the *Lexikon*, Band V, 908-911 (1984).

¹⁵⁰ See in particular §§ 1039-1040.

¹⁵¹ See e.g. Hornung in *Eine*, pages 166-179.

Nonetheless, it is evident that the concept of Nun was highly suited for further development into an element of another reality. As I have said elsewhere,¹⁵² for the Egyptians Nun was the frame that creation was set in. At first, this frame was part of “the box”: the outermost part of the one reality. Later, with the growing of transcendence, the idea of Nun provided a perfect vehicle for its further development.

3.8 Magic after the gods: the influence of myth

Ancient Egyptian magic was not really affected by the development of the gods. It was however thoroughly influenced by the introduction of myths. Two magical mechanisms proved to be very suited for use with the myths. The first is that of the linkage of cause and effect: like causes produce like effects.¹⁵³ Or, slightly more specific: if a given cause has once produced a certain effect, it will inescapably do so again. The second is, that analogies signal the existence of meaningful connections.¹⁵⁴ Combined, these two mechanisms prescribe that mythical precedents will be repeated.

Let us consider a typical example. According to the myths, young Horus was raised in the Delta marshes: an area full of snakes. Being bitten, he was saved from a certain death by the magical skills of his mother Isis.

Now when a child was attacked by a snake, a magician would begin with pointing out that this incident closely resembled what happened to Horus in the myth. The current situation was analogous to the mythical precedent. This means that the magician could make use of a connection between the two instances. To further strengthen this connection, he equated the child with Horus. He declared that this child was “like Horus”, or even: *was* Horus. Now that the connecting string was strong enough, he would bring force in play. Horus, when bitten, was saved by Isis – so this child, that was bitten too, would also have to be saved by Isis. Isis did not have a choice in the matter: she *had* to act in favor of the child. After all, this child was Horus: not acting would mean that she forsake her own child.

In the later periods of ancient Egypt, we come across spells in which the gods are downright coerced into compliance, under the threat of all sorts of sacrilege. At times, the gods are even threatened with the destruction of the whole universe, if they do not deliver.¹⁵⁵ That this was possible – in the eyes of the Egyptians – proves, how strong these links were, that connected the elements of the universe. The strings of Heka were unbreakable, and totally inflexible.¹⁵⁶ When a man of knowledge had identified such a link, every ounce of power that he could muster on his side, would inescapably come to bear on the other side.

Magic has sometimes been dubbed the atomic force of primitive man,¹⁵⁷ but there is also a parallel with another modern science: that of genetic engineering. In genetics, a trait that is available in a certain species will be transferred to another species in which it normally is not present. In the type of ritual described above, the outcome of a mythical event is transferred to the current situation. In genetic engineering one mostly uses a bacteria for the transfer; in magic, the magician demonstrates an analogy for the same purpose.

¹⁵² See my website “Ancient Egypt: Elements of its Cultural History”, the section on Religion.

¹⁵³ See page 42.

¹⁵⁴ See page 42. See also the chart on page 78.

¹⁵⁵ See *Sauneron*, 40-42.

¹⁵⁶ It also underlines, that Heka was totally free of moral aspects: see also page 41.

¹⁵⁷ See e.g. *Eine* 205.

4. The development of valuation

So far, we have focussed on the thinking of primitive man, up to and including the ancient Egyptians. But for a correct understanding of the *differences* between their thinking and ours, we must also give some consideration to later developments, that ultimately led to our own way of thinking.

Before we endeavor along this road, it must however be stressed that an ontology is a *cultural* factor: not a personal one. The cognitions that together form such an ontology, should not be mistaken for personal opinions. It is true that these cognitions can be stated in the form of simple, straightforward notions, but they can not be changed as readily as opinions.

The carrier of culture is the Group. Culture can therefore only change group-wise. This is a process that must be measured in generations, not in moments, or even years.

As the ontology is the basis, the fundament, of the attitudes and beliefs that together form a culture, it seeps through all our ideas and notions, all our ways of responding to the world around us. It influences us in an extremely profound way – even if we are usually not aware of it.

Let me give an example. I may e.g. hold the personal opinion that god does not exist, but I am the product of a culture that for the last two millennia firmly has believed that he *does*. This belief (in the eternal, all-knowing, all-powerful and all-good god of Christianity) is dependent on an ontological framework that allows for both a fully developed transcendence, and an all-pervasive opposition between Good and Evil. Even if, after serious consideration, I would come to the conclusion that there is no god, then I would still be stuck with these ontological premises – premises that form the very foundation of my mental make-up. Because of these, I would still expect the existence of a separate reality, and of an infallible system of retribution. But without a god to give meaning to these premises, I will feel distinctly uneasy. An imbalance, a feeling of incongruity, enters my mind. To ease my discomfort, I may then try to fill the void with notions such as:

- “But there must be something else, there must be more...”
- “But there still is a very real struggle in the world between Good and Evil...”

And so I may turn to Wicca, or Wholism, or Whatever...

When hereafter I speak of “modern” thinking, I refer to these ontological premises that today still dominate our beliefs in the West. Whether we, as individuals, still want to adhere to these premises is irrelevant: we are determined by them, whether we like it or not.

Likewise, I will speak of Christianity as if it is still *the* determining factor in western culture – because I am convinced that it still *is*. The profound effect of 2.000 years of history can not that easily be eradicated.

4.1 Summary of what went before

As we have seen, in the ontology of primitive man, all that exists belongs to one sphere: the sphere of matter. This includes things like thoughts, ideas, emotions, dreams, as well as concepts such as Order and Intelligence. With the birth of the gods, a membrane appears in this one sphere. Slowly, the gods permeate through

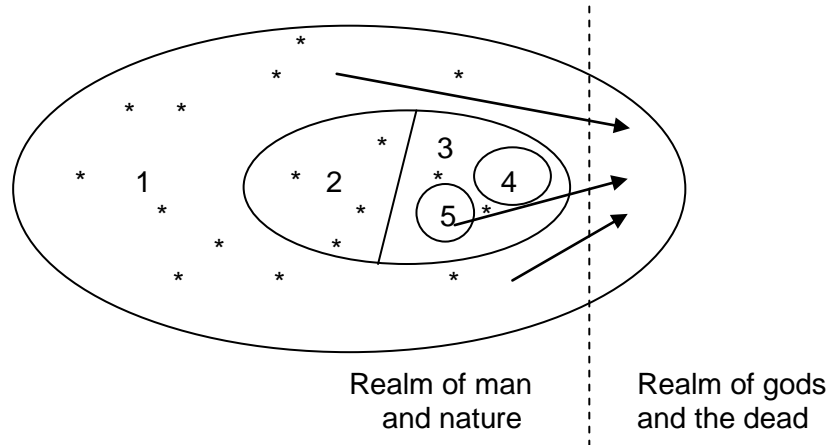
the membrane, into an area that still lies within the one sphere, but that will be exclusively theirs.

When the king becomes a god, he receives the keys to a door in the membrane, that at first only he can pass through, after death. Soon however, all the dead follow suit.

For quite some time, this remains the position:

- All that exists, belongs to one sphere: the sphere of matter.
- Within this one sphere, a semi-permeable membrane isolates a separate area. This is the abode of gods and dead. Gods and dead can freely move to and fro through the membrane, but man has to stay on the other side.

Reverting to the last ontology diagram (see page 39):

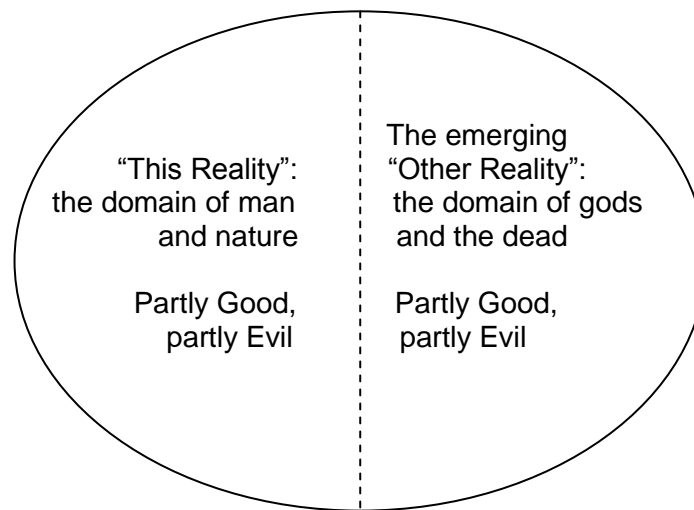


- 1. Matter
 - 2. Plants
 - 3. Animals
 - 4. Man
 - 5. The dead
- } living matter
- The * are the gods.

The arrows indicate, that the gods (formerly the powers) and the dead migrate to their own domain, behind the membrane. That area is the first kernel of an emerging “Other Reality”. As this is a world-view of partial transcendence, the gods only live behind the membrane part-time. They are still active in their original domains, too – where they once started their careers as the immanent powers.

Good and Evil are still evenly distributed over both areas. They do not yet stand in direct opposition to one another – let alone in the all-encompassing antithesis of Christian morality. Both gods and dead may act for good or evil. As we saw (§ 3.6, “The ethics of early man: Order & Disorder outrank Good & Evil”) Seth and Sachmet are fine examples of gods with both positive and negative features. And the dead can be quite unpleasant, too. So in the mind of the ancient Egyptians (as in that of many other primitives), good and evil are just “part of life”, as are the gods and the dead.

We can therefore summarize the last ontology-diagram in the following format:



In its totality, this is still One World. Both areas are part of "the box".

4.2 A new element: the Great Divide

What are the distinctions between primitive and modern thinking?

This question can be approached from many directions. In the current paper, we have so far encountered the following differences:

- Primitive thinking is less differentiated than modern thinking. Primitive man sees more unity, and less discreteness around him.
- Primitive thinking does have recourse to the concept of transcendence, but only in the sketchiest of ways. Modern thinking is characterized by a belief in a full-fledged transcendence.
- In primitive thinking, the concepts of Good and Evil are known, but they do not stand in direct opposition to one-another to the same extent as in modern thinking. Modern thinking is far more moralizing than primitive thinking.

We are now about to add a fourth difference.

When we look at the history of western culture, we can see that one of its main themes has been that of a dichotomy, a Great Divide, in the valuation of the phenomenal world. Its influence has varied – but only between important and dominant. It consists of pairs of opposites, such as the following:

Matter	↔	Mind
Body	↔	Soul
Sensual	↔	Spiritual
Emotional	↔	Intellectual
Banal	↔	Lofty
Transient	↔	Eternal
Profane	↔	Holy
Human	↔	Divine
Mortal	↔	Immortal
Measurable	↔	Immeasurable

This divide is so thorough, that it amounts to the notion that all that exists can be allocated to either of two separate spheres: a lower (earthly, trivial) sphere (left-hand column), and a higher (heavenly, spiritual) sphere (right-hand column).

I have allocated Thinking (“Intellectual”) to the higher sphere, and Feeling (“Emotional”) to the lower sphere. This is the classical Christian position, based on associations of Feeling with “animal lust” and of Thinking with “noble abstinence”. Today, science is in some quarters perceived as predominantly a tool of evil; in reaction, the New Spirituality assigns the Intellect to the earth, and Feeling to the sky. This swapping of places does however not alter the principle of having a higher and a lower sphere. In the total context, it is just a minor allocation-matter.

The first decisive steps from the primitive to the modern were (in the West) set by the ancient Greeks. The development of valuation in the phenomenal world, as exemplified in Table 1, was a key factor in this process. It was inaugurated by a group of men with a brand new profession: that of philosopher (“lover of wisdom”).

4.3 The contribution of Greek philosophy

Tradition points at Miletus, a city on what is now the westcoast of Turkey, as the place where Greek philosophy was born, early in the 6th century BC. The main concern of those first philosophers was with the origin and character of nature (in the sense of all that exists), and for that reason they are known as “the naturalists”.

As all peoples, the ancient Greeks were intrigued by nature. Nature presents us with so many marvels, that one can not help but wonder about it. But where other peoples contented themselves with the traditional answers that come from an experience of intimacy with nature, these men explored new avenues.

The first was a man called Thales. From the Babylonians he had learned mathematics, which he further sought to develop, mostly for the solving of practical problems. Concerning the cosmos, Thales maintained that “everything had come out of water”. In his opinion, water was the original, or first, substance, and everything else had come forth from this primary matter.

His successor Anaximander proposed, that the cosmos originated in the Apeiron (ἀπείρων): a substance without distinguishable qualities. Within the Apeiron arose the opposites of hot and cold, and from their struggle came all that exists.¹⁵⁸

A bit later still, Anaximenes taught that the first sole substance was air. All other types of matter had come forth from air by the processes of condensation and rarefaction.

These views dispensed completely with the supernatural. This was revolutionary: one meant to understand the world without having recourse to religion or mythology. This does not mean that these men no longer believed in the gods; on the contrary: they considered themselves pious people. But instead of explaining the creation of the world as a series of ongoing acts by the gods, they attempted to describe it as a series of natural events (such as condensation and rarefaction, or the interaction between hot and cold), happening to an original primary substance or Archè (ἀρχή): water, air or the Apeiron.

The exact line of reasoning that they followed in these explanations is not so important. The importance is, that they *followed a line of reasoning*. For the first time we can witness a people consciously trying to construct a speculative theory, as a means to understand the universe.

Greek philosophers also started to formulate *requirements to knowledge*. To be valid, they argued, knowledge must be able to survive a thorough examination. It should therefore be tested against the wit of the whole community, in public debate.

This was no less than the birth of scientific methodology. Today, scientists still put their ideas to the test in dispute. This is now highly ritualized, with scientific magazines largely taking the place of forum discussion, but essentially it is still the same. And although laboratory experiments have now mostly superseded the “thought experiments” of the ancient Greeks, we still feel that an orderly sequence of axioms, hypotheses and theses, after sufficient confirmation by experiments, must lead to a logical, “indisputable” truth (although we will still cautiously call it a theory).

The philosophers of ancient Greece were declared disciples of the intellect, the *ratio*. They were in fact (in the West) the first rationalists, ever.

This choice for rational reasoning as a means to find truth constituted a radical break with the past, but how and why this choice was made is not so evident. It may have been in reaction though, to the very diverse religious beliefs of the peoples surrounding them. The Greeks were a restless, trading and traveling people, with a keen interest in every new place that they visited, and every new people that they met. They soon learned that other nations had very different ideas about mythology and religion - different from theirs, but also different amongst themselves. And being open-minded, they had to admit that their own beliefs were by no means superior to those of the others.

Their reaction appears to have been simple, but radical: “These mythological explanations can not *all* be true, therefore we should not assume *any* of it to be true without some *proof*. We can no longer rely on belief: we must turn to the reasonings of logic to discover what is true.”

It did not take long before this way of thinking showed its full potential. In the first half of the 5th century BC, a man called Parmenides of Elea, through thorough reasoning, arrived at some very bold statements. He declared that “all that exists” cannot have come into being, and cannot pass away, because it would have come out of “nothing”, or become “nothing”, while “nothing” by its very nature does not exist. Therefore, everything that now exists has always existed, and will always exist.

¹⁵⁸ This comes unnervingly close to modern Big Bang theory...

For similar reasons he maintained that there could be no movement. But what then of the familiar world, in which things move around, come into being, and pass away? That world, Parmenides declared, can be nothing but a world of make-believe. We see the world like this, only because we *believe* it to be like this.

For the first time, a thinker found his thinking more relevant than the evidence of his senses. Rather than consider that his logic might be invalid, he declared the world invalid.

Parmenides had an enormous influence on the further development of ancient Greek philosophy. His idea that the real world is different from the one that we perceive with our senses became for some time a common point of departure for the majority of Greek thinkers. Shortly after, it became an equally common subject for debate. For opposition arose (notably from the Sophists) but the damage was already done. A deep, ineradicable mistrust against the natural world had been sown, and like an obnoxious weed it was never to die completely again.

Before the philosophers entered the stage, the spectrum of thinking had consisted of an even distribution of ratio and emotion. Emotional knowledge (“I know that this is true because it *feels* true”) and rational knowledge (“I know that this is true because $a + b$ equals c ”) were not yet seen as incompatible. In the same way, mind and matter were not yet clearly distinguished¹⁵⁹ – let alone contrasted. And even the first of the Greek philosophers did not yet distinguish warmth as an emotion, from warmth as a physical property.¹⁶⁰ But with intense and conscious probing, the philosophers were starting to analyze every subject that presented itself. Arranging matters into pairs of opposites was a favored tool in this process. For the sake of clarity, for the express purpose of finding truth, they deliberately contrasted matters to one another, magnifying any differences to define their outlines.

At first, these pairs of opposites were non-normative: just opposites of equal value. But soon, some pairs were getting a slightly positive and a slightly negative side. The gratifying experience of the accomplishments of rational thinking no doubt was responsible for raising the prestige of the ratio against that of emotion. And if the “real world” was hidden, not visible, then the value of visible or earthly matter had to be less than that of invisible matter or heavenly ideas.

Like iron filings in a weak magnetic field, these pairs of opposites were slowly getting oriented along the force lines of “favored” and “rejected”.

With Socrates, Plato and Aristotle (the three of them spanning more or less the 4th century BC), the emphasis of Greek philosophy shifted from “nature” to “ethics”. Unlike nature, ethics is inherently oriented: ethics is all about right and wrong. These new philosophers wanted to know how one could determine what course of action to follow: what was good, what was bad? As this is not a particularly easy question,¹⁶¹ they were in dire need for some clues.

To this end, the pairs of opposites that had already been formed, were examined anew, and now subjected to the more intense force field of ethics. This process added to the weight of the “lesser” sphere, as a result of which it sank deeper, and it elevated the “higher” sphere, so that it went further upward. “Higher” became “Good”, and “Lower” became “Evil”. In this way, what started as a fairly straightforward exercise in dissection, gradually led to the development of a major valuation-schism in the phenomenal world.

¹⁵⁹ As we have seen, mind was material (§ 2.4 “Materialness”), and matter could harbor a mind (§ 2.8 “The immanent powers”).

¹⁶⁰ See page 17.

¹⁶¹ Which is probably why it still is so unpopular.

4.4 Valuation and transcendence

In the meantime, by stressing the importance of natural phenomena, the philosophers were more and more drifting away from the traditional mythological descriptions of the universe. The activity of the gods was gradually being pushed back.

For the time being, the effect that this had on the level of religiosity of society was very limited. The great Greek gods received undiminished worship. Yet some signs of criticism were appearing. Mostly, this criticism was directed against the practices of man with respect to the gods, not to the gods themselves. Xenophanes of Colophon (later 6th century BC) criticized the popular conceptions of the gods, saying that men “made their gods after their own image”. In anticipation of Parmenides, he also argued that there could be only one god, who must be eternal, because the strongest can not come from one less stronger than he. Therefore, there must be one supreme god, and he must have existed for all eternity.

In contrast to this, at the middle of the 5th century BC, the Sophist Protagoras was exiled from Athens on charges of impiety: he had openly questioned the very *existence* of the gods. So both the seedlings of monotheism and of atheism were now present.

The main reason why the ancient Greek philosophers by and large did *not* become atheists, was again their logic. Just *because* of their logical reasonings, they discovered that they still needed at least one god to have started it all. They needed a god as primary creator. Aristotle called this theoretically indispensable god the “Unmoved Mover”.

The concept of the “one-time god” was born. And it still is with us, today. In some quarters, it is still seen as the acme of elegance to devise a cosmology in which god only acts once: at the moment of creation.

On the one hand, dissecting, cataloguing and interpreting nature made it more manageable, but on the other hand, no philosophical concept could be really convincing without an “Unmoved Mover”. So while nature was getting more down to earth, god was getting more and more elevated and elusive. The gap widened, transcendence deepened.

If it were the Greeks who fathered the dichotomy that is so characteristic of western thinking, what then of the devotion of the Egyptians to the concept of duality?¹⁶²

In dichotomy, the emphasis is on differences between separate entities, in dualism on different aspects of one entity. Where the Greeks ventured into dichotomy, the Egyptians were experts in dualism. For them, it was a way of stressing unity by artificially splitting it in two.

4.5 The synthesis of Christianity

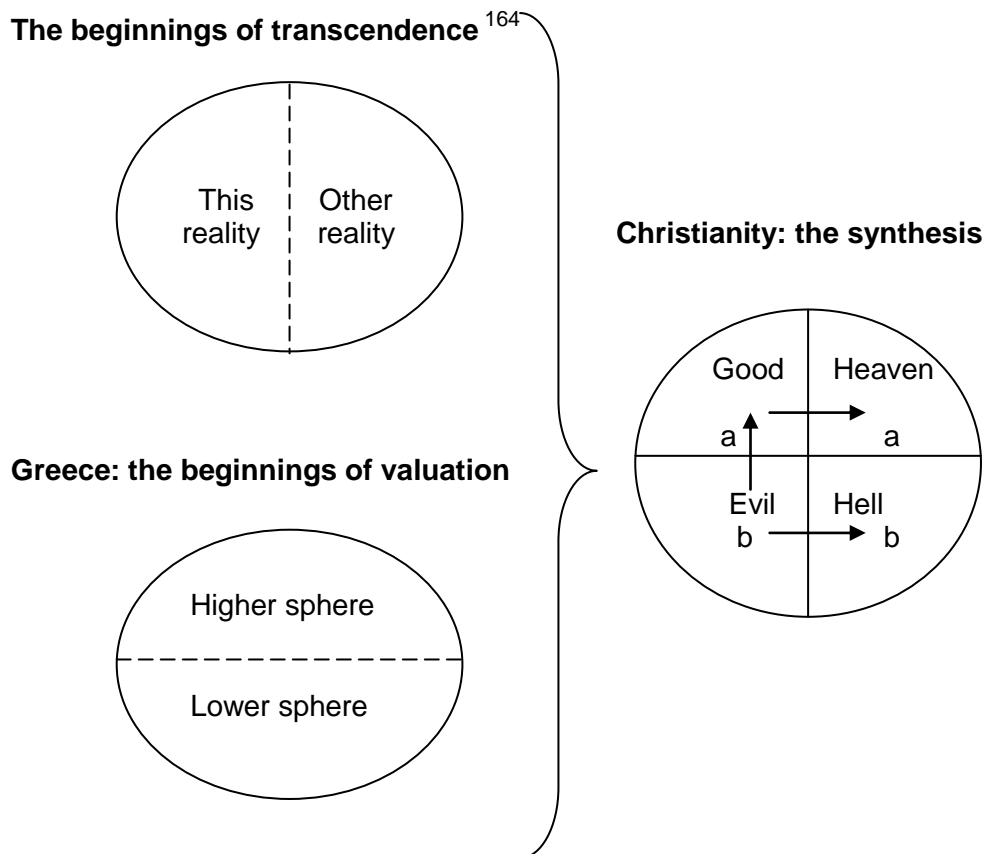
It still took almost a millenium before the dichotomy as we have seen it in Table 1 had completely materialized. Important subsequent steps were made by St. Paul (1st century AD) and St. Augustine (4th-5th century AD). These and other early Christian thinkers forged an ever stronger link between valuation and transcendence. After the first orientation based on preference, and the second based on ethics, our pairs of

¹⁶² Most conspicuous in the incessant contrasting of Upper and Lower Egypt.

opposites were now getting oriented on the spectrum of salvation versus doom. The higher sphere was not just the better, but the *essential* sphere. If one did not actively and consciously pursue it, one would be damned for all eternity. The elements in the right-hand column of Table 1 (on page 72) now served as beacons, guiding man to a safe haven. The elements of the left-hand column became warning signals: “Go Back!” Emotions, feelings, earthly pleasures: they all became suspect – works of the devil, meant to distract man from the right path, and lead him to his doom.

Valuation also changed the nature of the Afterlife. Originally, the Afterlife was free, and for all. Already in the course of Egyptian history, an ethical component was gradually emerging as a useful asset for safely reaching the Afterlife (see the Book of the Dead, Chapter 125). On some votive stelae from the 19th dynasty, we find prayers expressing god’s might and mercy, that are reminiscent of biblical psalms. These display an ethical orientation in religion that was not so apparent before.¹⁶³ It was however not before the introduction of Christianity, that the Afterlife became a reward for the just, after having lived a righteous life. Later still, in the Middle Ages, it became the sole purpose of life, reducing the earthly existence to a test to determine who would be admitted to heaven.

From a cultural point of view, Christianity’s main accomplishment was, that it forged a meaningful link between a deepening transcendence, and an ever further developing valuation in the phenomenal world. The following diagram illustrates this:



¹⁶³ See especially the magnificent translations by Miriam Lichtheim in *AEL-II*, pages 104-110.
¹⁶⁴ The beginnings of transcendence arise in most primitive cultures, not just in ancient Egypt.

The Great Divide between higher and lower sphere binds and confirms transcendence, by adding meaning to it. According to Christian teachings, man can choose in the new matrix either of two ways:

a: "the way that is hard, but that leads to life" or:

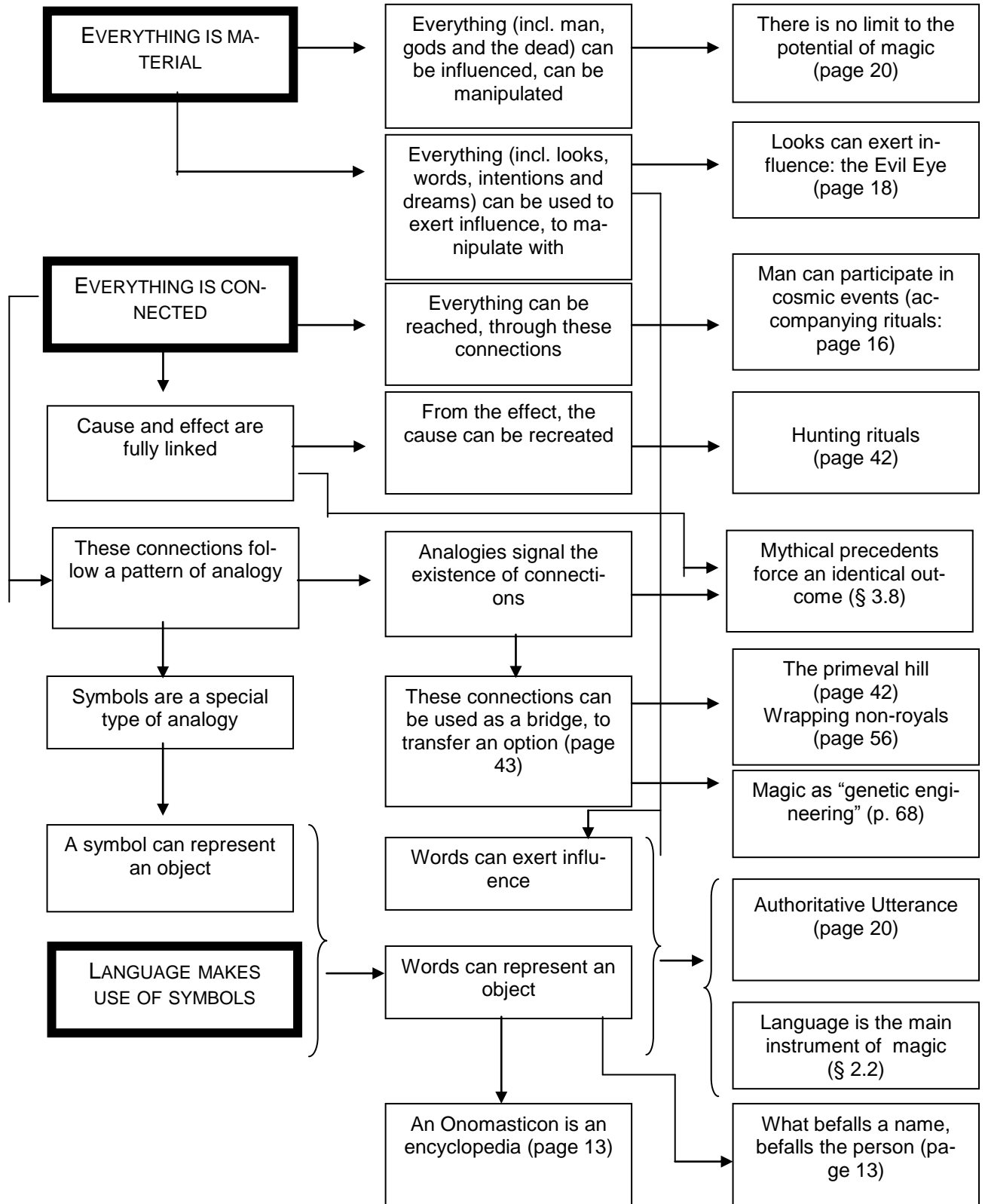
b: "the way that is easy, but that leads to destruction" (Matthew 7; 13-14).

Since the ancient Greeks, some 2.500 years have past in which the concept of a separate reality has been firmly stamped on our collective awareness. For the last 2.000 years, Christianity has further increased its effectiveness by adding the valuation-matrix to it. It is now one of the very roots of our culture.

No individual can erase from his mind, what history has branded there. As mentioned before,¹⁶⁵ cultural change can only come about for the carrier of culture: the Group. In the case of the lowest substratum of our culture, a substratum that is being shared by hundreds of millions, the Group equals Society. Therefore, Society has to change, before we can become free from the past, free from the concept of two realities. Alas, that kind of change takes generations, not years. We will not see it happen. This is not the time of Aquarius: it is the time of Moses. Like Moses, we may see the Promised Land from afar, but we are not to enter it.

¹⁶⁵ See page 69.

Chart # 1: The principles of ancient Egyptian magic

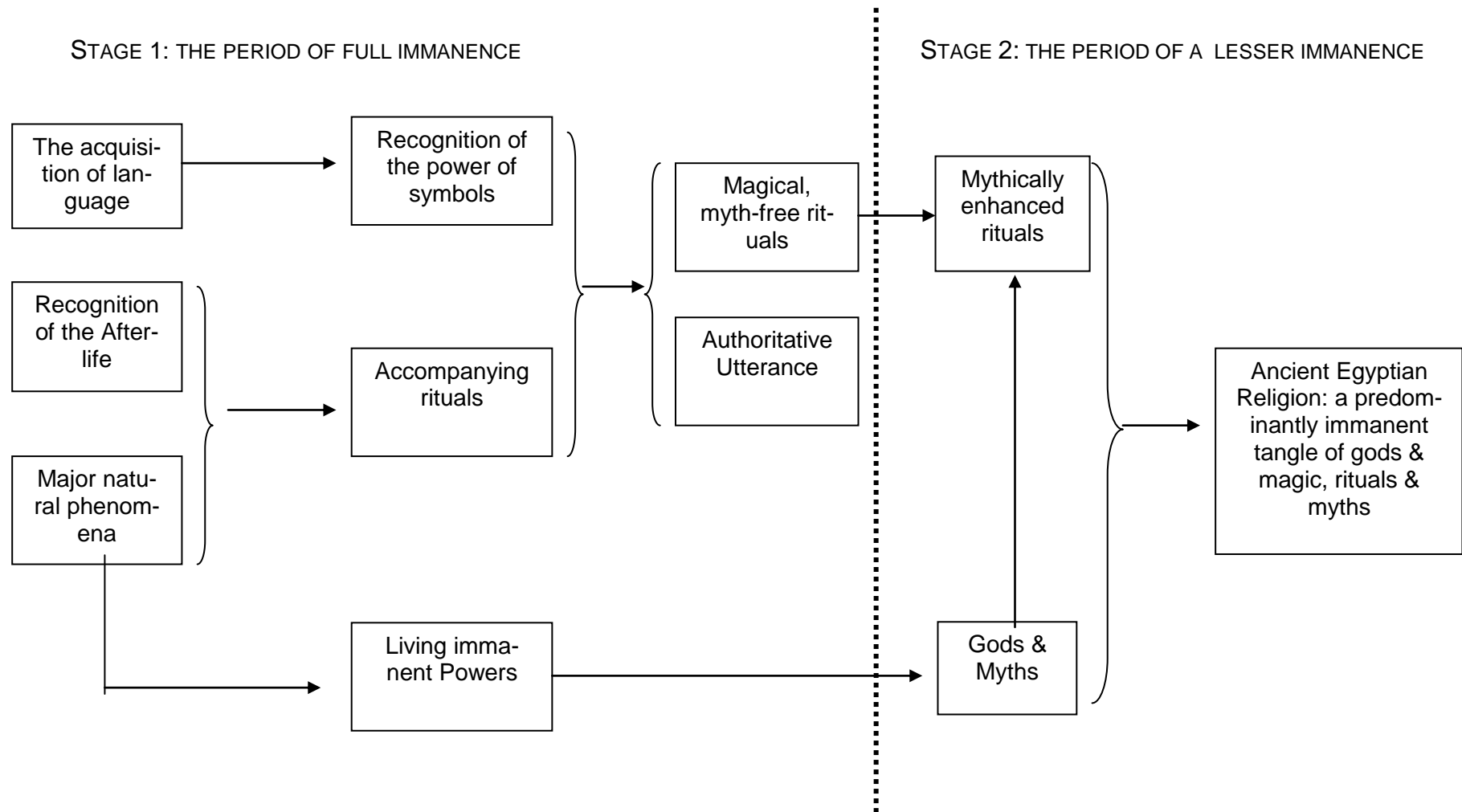


This was in fact how the theory was first devised. I started with analyzing specific Egyptian rituals, to find their implicit points of departure, or axioms. Those axioms could be traced back to the three that are here marked with a thicker line:

- Everything is material.
- Everything is connected.
- Language makes use of symbols.

As these are so basic, that they amount to an ontology, the next step was to study how such an ontology could have come about.

Chart # 2: The roots of ancient Egyptian religion



All elements from the fully immanent period, such as the accompanying rites, the magical myth-free rituals and the principle of Authoritative Utterance, remain fully operative during the following period of lesser immanence. The same is true for the perception of living, immanent powers in natural phenomena.

May 2005

It is finished.

May the spooks leave you alone ;-)

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