NewAcropolis

Philosophy and Education for the Future

Bi-Monthly Magazine

Philosophy in ancient Egypt
Page 2

Initiation and Shamanism
Page 5

The Brilliance of the Bard!
- Page 8

Upcoming Events
page 8

How can we humanize the world we are living in?

Page 3

By Pierre Poulain

What's Inside

EDITORIAL

Data is the commodity of the 21st century. Every day (as of 2012), we create about 2.5 exabytes (2.5×10^{18}) of data. We have also created an unprecedented technological ability to collect, store, analyze and transmit data. These data are mined to extract useful information which is then used to spot business trends, predict the outcome of elections, combat crime, prevent diseases, target customers, etc. Walmart, for instance, handles more than 1 million customer transactions every hour, which feed gigantic databases. "Data exhaust" - the term for the trail of clicks that we leave behind when we use the internet - is of enormous value for the internet economy, such as Google's search engine. The data economy is big business and there is no aspect of life that is not being exploited for data.

This ever-growing demand for data creates a thirst for the digitization of everything. Even organizational processes are digitized and as a result any use of time and resources, which does not lead directly to creating a product is considered as "waste" and therefore a target for elimination [1].

This value metric also extends to customers and marketing uses the term *customer lifetime value* in order to predict the net profit attributed to the entire future relationship with a customer. The US company Acxiom collects data about consumer behaviour and differentiates customers into 70 categories from a purely economic perspective. The group of people with the least customer value is called "waste".

As the vocabulary already suggests: the digital approach so easily degrades human beings to objects and reduces them to binary numbers. But the Big Data industry not only calculates the outcomes of human behaviour. It is also a psycho-political instrument that makes it possible to manipulate human beings and to exploit them economically. Because the more we share about ourselves, the better the marketing business knows how to trigger our desires.

I know that we all think: "This does not apply to me. I am unaffected by these marketing ploys." The profits certainly show otherwise. However, the greatest danger of digitization perhaps lies in its potential to impoverish our thinking and feeling and thus our experience of everything. Life, love, relationships, beauty, etc. cannot be reduced to algorithms and purely economic value. Every time we digitize something, we lose something subtle, yet important. If you have ever listened to the same recording in analogue and digital, you will know what I mean.

[1] See "Lean philosophy"

Sabine Leitner

About Us

Editorial Team

Philosophy
Culture
Volunteering
NEW ACROPOLIS

Philosophy in ancient Egypt

It is a commonly held view that 'the Egyptians had no philosophy' and that philosophy began with the ancient Greeks. However, some of the major Greek philosophers, including Thales, Pythagoras and Plato, recognised their huge debt to the sages of Egypt for their knowledge and ideas. Plato, for example, spent 13 years studying with the Egyptian priests at Heliopolis.

The difficulty scholars today have with this is that we have no records of a discursive Egyptian philosophy, in other words, philosophy in the form in which we are used to thinking of it today. But according to Pierre Hadot, author of *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, philosophy was seen in a very different way in the ancient world to the way it is perceived today. It was characterised, he said, by two formulas: learning to live and learning to die. In other words, it was eminently practical, on the one hand and metaphysical on the other. We find both of these poles in Egyptian philosophy: their 'wisdom literature', or moral philosophy, dealt with how to live; and their 'funerary texts' concerned 'learning how to die'.

One example of an Egyptian moral philosopher is Ptah-hotep, who wrote his book (*The Wisdom*) at the age of 110! According to Will Durant, Ptah-hotep is probably the world's first philosopher (and perhaps the oldest too).

The principle on which the moral philosophy of the ancient Egyptians was based was called *Maat*. Maat was personified as a goddess, whose symbol was the feather. She represents the universal order of the Cosmos, the law of life. Human beings, too, are subject to this law: we must learn to live in accordance with the dictates of our higher intelligence, what the Greeks called *Nous* and the Egyptians *Ba*.

This principle of Maat resulted in a strong ethic of public service and responsibility, flavoured with an attitude of benevolence. We also see a concern for self-cultivation and an admirable humility which Ptah-hotep expresses as follows:

Don't be conceited about your knowledge or about how learned you are, because art has no limits and no artist ever reaches perfection.

Regarding the second aspect of ancient philosophy – learning how to die – Plato refers to this more than once in his dialogues, when he refers to philosophy as a training for death (*Phaedo 67e*). Although we have a predominantly negative attitude to death today, it can also be seen in a positive light: as an opportunity to come into contact with the invisible world, where truth, beauty and other archetypes may be perceived more clearly. This was definitely the view of Socrates.

Thus, although texts like *The Book of the Dead* undoubtedly deal with the passage from this world to the next, there are parts which were clearly written for the living. That is to say, it is possible to enter into contact with invisible realities while alive; it is not necessary to wait for the

imperious necessity of death. This process of attaining to higher knowledge was known in antiquity as 'initiation into the mysteries'; and philosophy itself, as Algis Uzdavinys has pointed out, "was regarded as a mystery into which one may be initiated."

To be initiated is to die to one's attachment to the physical body (*Khat*) and to the personal ego (*Ab*), in order to be reborn as a spiritual being (*Akh*, symbolised by a bird). In this way, the Book of the Dead can be seen as a book of metaphysical philosophy which teaches the philosopher to pass through the trials of initiation.

As the Greeks knew well, the immortal divine nature is achieved not only through *theoria* (contemplation) but also through *praxis* (practice), the ordering and harmonisation of one's life, the purification of defects and impurities - so that one's heart will become as light as the feather of Maat, in the Egyptian symbolism. Hence the importance of moral life as the indispensable basis for higher wisdom.

In this sense, to philosophize is not only to think, it is primarily to go towards the knowledge of being, of what truly is, symbolised in Egypt by the Light.

Julian Scott

How can we humanize the world we are living in?

When I was a child I was a fan of science-fiction books. I remember especially some classics such as the Foundation series by Isaac Asimov, and books written by Van Vogt, Philip K. Dick, Robert Heinlein or Philip Jose Farmer, to mention just a few. While reading those books I was dreaming of the future. Some writers imagined a post-apocalyptic world, the result of a nuclear conflagration or something similar, but most imagined a better world where the problems of humanity would be solved by science and its applications.

The future we dreamed of is not the present we are living in. We dreamed of a future where science and technology would serve humanity, and it appears that what has happened is exactly the opposite. Let's take "Facebook" as an example. It is presented as a tool that allows each individual to build and maintain their "social network", which is in fact their relationships: family, colleagues and friends. The idea seems, and is, genuine, but one cannot be reduced to a title of "friend", "relation", "partner", etc. A human being is much more than a title and a category. He has his own feelings, opinions, imagination and questions, and this wide range of expressions is today reduced to a "Like" option, a push-button on a screen.

The main problem with Facebook, Google+ and the "social network" phenomenon is the globalization mentality and its use of technology in general, which lies in the choice of a non-philosophical and materialistic approach, because the unification is achieved by reduction instead of the management of complexity.

Let's explain this last point. From a classical philosophical way of thinking, unity is always better than separation. But in this unity we must be able to recognize, understand and accept the reality of diversity. There are two possible ways to reach unity: either by eliminating the diversity and making all the parts identical… or by understanding that diversity is the source of enrichment of the union.

To reach union by eliminating the differences is the choice of Facebook and of globalization. Of course there is the option to "comment" on your Facebook wall to show your difference… but will it be really different? The syncretic messages we read on walls are usually built from the same mould, and it is hard to see cultural enrichment and dialogue between a "LOL" comment from Asia and the same from the US. Our world has chosen the way of uniting by simplification and reduction; don't be different… or if you are different, show your particularity in a controlled and accepted environment… like your Facebook wall.

So what can we do? Has this situation reached a point of no return? It is obvious that nobody is going to stop the development of technology, and that Facebook, Google+, and other social networks are here to stay as long as the Internet remains in place. It would not be wise to refuse to use these tools, but we have to learn to use them wisely; to use them for showing our difference and our specificity, to enrich the web instead of confirming that we are just like anyone else, by pushing a button on a screen.

Philosophy is about discernment,

and we have to find ways of using technology to enrich us as human beings, instead of entering a stream of simplification and reduction. "Like" if you want… but only if you can express, show, publish, and demonstrate WHY you like something. Publish something on your wall if this act has a meaning, a message to transmit, be it through an image, a symbol, a video, text or music. Have the pride not to accept the reduction of your presence on the web to a simple "Like". Be there for something… or don't be there.

See you on Facebook… I have my page at **www.facebook.com/fifoblog** and you can comment… but I only publish pictures… don't expect me to respond with a "like".

Pierre Poulain

Freelance photographer and Coordinator of New Acropolis in Asia, Africa and Oceania

www.photos-art.org

Initiation and shamanism

According to Mircea Eliade, the philosopher and historian of religion, shamanism is a technique of religious ecstasy. The word shaman is probably derived from the Tungusic root *saman*, which means 'knowing'. What does the shaman know? Basically, shamans are priests, medicine men, singers, dancers, drummers, and they have many other skills as well; but what makes them different from other people is that they are able to connect with the invisible realm. In other words, they have the keys to the sacred and they get this knowledge by initiations.

Becoming a shaman can happen in two ways: either by inheriting the position from an ancestor or by a vocation or call. At first, it is very common that they suffer some illness for which there is no cure. Or they have a recurring dream. So they need to meditate and find out the reason. In general, the cure consists of accepting the need to become shaman and making offerings. Often, the person will reject the call at first, as the shaman's lifestyle requires renunciation of normal life and complete devotion to the sacred. Those who decide not to respond to the call will suffer more, their sickness can get worse and they might even die. But those who finally decide to become shamans will study with a master (an older shaman). During their training they pick up all the knowledge they need for their role, such as drumming, which is a tool to ascend and descend to the higher or lower levels, or the skills needed to heal the sick and perform ceremonies.

After a certain period the candidate takes an "exam". For instance, in the Tungusic tradition the candidate is attacked by evil spirits, who cut his body into pieces and drink his blood. Then they throw his head into a cauldron, where they cook it with metals, which will become part of his shamanic clothes. Sometimes the master who is looking after the young candidate puts magical crystals into his body to make it strong. When the candidate awakes, he is not the same as before, he is reborn as a new being. He has passed through a symbolic death and resurrection, an initiation, which makes him a shaman and gives him power over souls and spirits. Only those who have succeeded in conquering themselves and mastering their thoughts, feelings and instincts can survive this process. If we look for similarities in the ancient civilizations, we can see the same pattern repeated in Egyptian mythology, where the body of king Osiris is dismembered and dispersed by his brother, Seth, and later reassembled by his wife Isis, and embalmed, mummified and brought back to life as king of the afterworld by Anubis.

Not every ecstatic can be considered a shaman: the shaman specializes in achieving a trance state during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld. One of the main differences between him and other enraptured people is that whereas the shaman is in control of himself and the spirits he gets in touch with, the medium who is taken over by a spirit is not in control of the process.

During his journeys to the other planes the shaman makes a connection with the invisible realm to get help or healing for the members of the tribe. With this contribution, the community can become aware of their divine roots and understand better the connection between generations, the world of gods and demons, and abolish the barriers between this world and the transcendent.

Istvan Orban

Renaissance art and the enigmatic genius of Giorgione

The Royal Academy of Arts has recently put together an excellent exhibition presenting some of the greatest painters of the high Renaissance (c. 1490-1530) in a single show. The main intent of the exhibition was to revisit in particular the enigmatic figure of Giorgione, considered by many to be the founder of Venetian painting of the 16th century. After breaking away from the more 'classical' representations epitomized in the works of his teacher Giovanni Bellini, Giorgione initiated an innovative pictorial style which became the foundation for the art of Titian, the most renowned painter of the Venetian school. As with all the great painters of the high Renaissance, we find in his works a great degree of idealization, beauty and balance and his poetic landscapes in particular are instilled with a rare sense of the mysterious and enigmatic.

Even though Giorgione had his own particular style, I believe that his artistic contributions shared the same philosophical principles as those that underlay the art of the Renaissance in general. Renaissance art was mainly founded on Classicism and Humanism. The former brought an appreciation of the arts of Antiquity (i.e. Greece and Rome) with its emphasis on mythological representations, proportion and measure, naturalism and 'realism'. Humanism contributed a 'rediscovery' of the belief in the nobility of man, the dignity and worth of the individual and the promotion of virtuous and ethical actions.

Because of the emphasis on Classicism, painting and sculpture saw the introduction of symbolic compositions from 'pagan' mythology, where the ancient image became the 'ideal form' or archetype to be contemplated. The aim of the artist became the creation of an art that could bridge the gap between appearances and ideas or 'essences'. The pure and unsullied reality of the 'archetypal world', once contemplated or intuited by the artist, had to be revealed (i.e. re-veiled) through a work of art. To paint what one cannot see became the artist's goal. Thus, Raphael once remarked *"...in order to paint a beautiful woman, I would have to see several beautiful women...but because there are so few...I make use of a certain idea which comes to my mind...and I work hard to achieve it"*.

As hinted at above, one of the characteristics of the visual art of the Renaissance was the use of symbolic and allegorical representations. And in many of Giorgione's works we find this characteristic emphasized (the painting entitled *The Three Philosophers* is a good example). Yet we should not confine his works to those aforementioned styles and characteristics. Giorgione's art brought something new to his contemporaries and 'looked' forward to the future. As a master of poetic and atmospheric moods, he became an early exponent of a 'romantic' style, where the artist is an intensifier of emotions, revealing the chiaroscuro of joy and pain, of light and darkness.

Agostino Dominici

Detail from *The Three Philosophers,* by Giorgione 1505CE

Lugus (Lugh or Lleu)

At the dawn of history the Celts worshipped a god connected with the development of civilization. He was widely revered and even Caesar noted that the Gauls worshipped above all one god whom they considered to be "the inventor of all the arts and the guide of their paths and journeys". He didn't provide the god's name, merely equating him with Mercury, but researchers agree that he meant Lugus (Lugos), known in the Irish tradition as Lugh and Lleu in Welsh. Inscriptions to Lugus have been found in Spain, France and Switzerland. Many places commemorate his name: the capital of conquered Gaul, Lugdunum (from the Celtic "fort of Lugus"), is modern Lyon in France, while Luguvalium is modern Carlisle in England, to mention just two.

Lugus is considered to be a triple god and his name is very often used in the plural - Lugoves. Indo-European society had a threefold structure (priests, warriors and farmers/ tradesmen) which corresponded to the three functions (sacral, martial and economic) to maintain a harmonious development of a community. The sacral element provides meaning and guidance, the martial safety and discipline, and the economic the maintenance of life. If one element is missing, a structure doesn't work. Lugus, as the patron of every element and a guide to all paths, also appears to be a threshold figure, facilitating the passage from one part/state to another and enhancing unity and coherence. In this way he can also be related to any person, regardless of their place in a community.

This threefoldness is present in both Lleu and Lugh. Their stories differ, but their symbolism is similar. Lleu had to overcome three curses/obstacles bestowed by his mother: he had to gain his name (name as an idea of one's being), his weapons (being able to protect and act as a hero) and marry (in union with the opposite there is fertility and continuation of life). They both appear as wise rulers, committed to their land, brave and victorious heroes, and are masters of all arts and crafts. In addition, Lugh is an ancestor of heroic families.

Another special feature of Lugh and Lleu is that both are young gods who are full of energy. They are part, though not the source, of a divine/heroic genealogy, and have teachers whom they honour and learn from. Mythology provides vivid details of their journeys to become who they are and to gain their symbolic weapons, which are manifestations of their virtues/powers. As a main weapon both gods have an invincible spear that pierces the darkness of chaos, bringing the light of life.

Nataliya Petlevych

The Brilliance of the Bard! History: his greatest ever play?

To consider Shakespeare's influence on modern culture, we need to first think of our words. Shakespeare combined words, re-shaped the meanings of words, used verbs as adjectives and created entirely new words of his own.

As we saw from our introduction in the last issue, Elizabethan England was awash with new concepts and ideas around philosophy, science and travel. Many writers set about creating English word-forms for these new and exciting ideas from Greece, Rome and further afield to inhabit.

If our words are the containers for our thoughts, we pour into the words that we have available the conceptual values we wish to convey. If we are in a foreign country with limited knowledge of the language, we will use the words we have available, to suit our purpose. Shakespeare, with his new words, expanded the Englishman's ability to express himself, to match the influx of civilised knowledge and culture arriving on English shores from the classical world.

The phrase "heart of gold" from *Henry V* holds the key to a sentiment, which is more than the sum of its parts. The phrase transmits connotations of kindness, innocence, purity and to some ears it may resonate with an aspect of the mystical. The simple phrase "in my mind's eye" from Hamlet is a container for vastly complex conceptual forms almost beyond rational thought. It has the gift of bringing intuitive sentiment into the here and now.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, speaking of Shakespeare in 1850, said "It was not possible to write the history of Shakespeare till now"; for Emerson "now" is the marker of the shifting category we call 'modern'. He continues… "Now, literature, philosophy and thought are Shakespearized. His mind is the horizon beyond which, at present we do not see. Our ears are educated to music by his rhythm… he wrote the text of modern life."

On how many occasions may we have thought to "break the ice"? Without this phrase/concept being there might we otherwise think of such occasions in an entirely different manner? It is not possible to reimagine English history without Shakespeare, but this is exactly the point. His work is ingrained on a very deep level into the English language and onto the English being.

Ernest Jones, friend and biographer of Sigmund Freud - the man considered the inventor of psychoanalysis in the Western world - declared in an essay that "Shakespeare was the first modern" because Shakespeare understood deeply the issues of psychology. And this, as Jones puts it, is "the essential difference between prehistoric and civilised man." Modern psychologists broadly know this conflict as neurosis and for Jones, Shakespeare's use of soliloquy anticipated the science of psychoanalysis and Freud's "talking cure". Shakespeare was indeed the first playwright to use the soliloquy for the discussion of inner thoughts and feelings, exposing a character's motives and 'neuroses' to the audience.
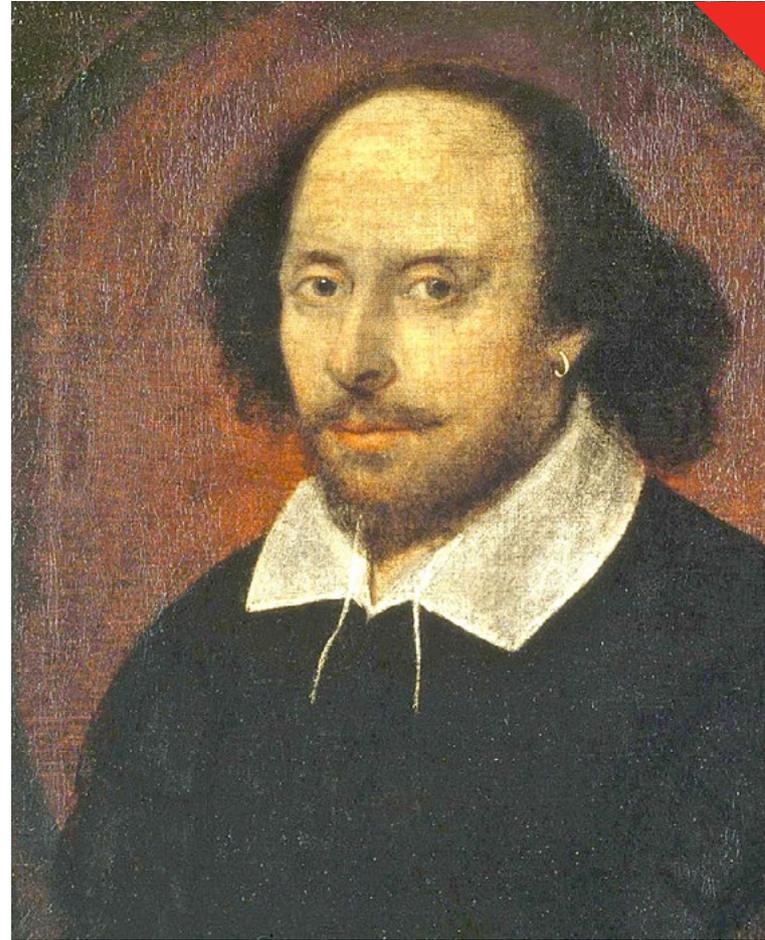
When reading Shakespeare we have to remember that we are looking back through time, obscured by layers of critical opinion and interpretation. As Marjorie Garber explains in her book *Shakespeare and Modern Culture*, "The modern versions of these figures (the likes of Romeo, Hamlet, Lady Macbeth) often differ from their Shakespearian 'originals': a 'Romeo' is a persistent romancer and philanderer rather than a lover faithful unto death."

There are many riches to be found in perusing a deeper understanding of Shakespeare's plays, poems and characterisations. They may lead to a deeper understanding of our modern "now", the problems that we face and the follies to avoid. After all, the ideas of William Shakespeare are very much within and pervading through our own culture.

"Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how. It is a part of an Englishman's constitution. His thoughts and beauties are so spread abroad that one touches them everywhere; one is intimate with him by instinct." – *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen.

Siobhan Farrar

Urban Wildlife

At the beginning of the 19th century three out of four Britons lived in the countryside, where they worked the land. By the end of the 19th century three out of four lived in the city. This was a result of the industrial revolution, which marks a turning point in history. The speed of urbanisation and technical development has changed people's lives immensely, though not always for the better.

Wages, food and life expectancy were all at very low levels and it took another century before the conditions of workers improved. With such an exponential growth in population driven by a competitive capitalistic marketplace there was little space to give any intrinsic value to nature, apart from its utility and profitability. Profit-driven companies and power hungry individuals have brought the environment into imbalance, and this has forced us to recognize the true value of nature today – we totally depend on it.

The process of urbanisation has never been so rapid and global as today. In the last hundred years the population increased from 1.5 to 6.1 billion. It is estimated that, since 2007, more than 50 percent of the world's population now lives in cities. It is a time for experiencing the phenomenon of the megapolis, cities of 20 million people and more living in one complex, but fragile system.

We have never lived so close together while at the same time feeling lonely. Another change in human behaviour is the so-called "nature-deficit disorder", a term coined by Richard Louv. It applies to young people who spend hours in front of their television or computer screens, rather than outdoors in natural surroundings. When future students of history and philosophy look back they will see a short period of time when people cut themselves off from the roots of tradition and isolated themselves from nature. What we see today as progress might look a bit different in the future.

In the first half of the 20th century the increase in population in Britain and the need for self-sufficiency during both World Wars fuelled a demand for food supplies. More land had to be cultivated. Many habitats were turned into farmland, which meant a loss of wildlife. By the end of the 1950s food production became more "efficient" with chemical farming and people were happy to have cheaper food – at any cost. The countryside became a green desert, sterile and managed to suit our needs.

While in the countryside there is a scarcity of wild areas with food, cities have grown into green areas with plenty of food in the form of waste. As 'nature abhors a vacuum', this didn't go unnoticed. Some species, which couldn't succeed in 'nature', found thriving habitats in the cities. When we speak of urban wildlife we mean foxes, badgers, parakeets, squirrels and many less noticeable animals. Of course there are mixed feelings about that, but we still have to learn to live with nature and see the immense beauty and powers it holds.

Miha Kosir