

# Psychic Energy before Psyche: Resilience and Void in Ancient Egypt

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## ABSTRACT

The power of the psyche is a still an under researched topic in the anthropological disciplines, primarily in psychology, psychiatry and metaphysics. The author, a philosopher, aims to explore the role of psychic energy in Ancient Egyptian civilization, when the idea of psyche – coined by Greek poet Homer and developed by philosopher Plato – was yet to come. Through the lenses of systemic thinking, recognized as the best interdisciplinary approach to complexity, the author strives to show how relevant the power of the spiritual component of the person was for Ancient Egyptian by focusing two related phenomena: resilience and the experience of existential void. On one hand, the interrelations among different parts/functions of the human person in consequence of a perturbation (the death) were perceived as a source of a new beginning. On the other hand, two texts from Middle Egyptian literature reveal that Egyptians had a finely grained idea of derealization and void. This contribution is intended to minimally fill the gap between contemporary idea of ‘psyche’ and a previous concept of it, by suggesting a new, valuable path for either historical perspective in psychology/psychiatry and the clinical approach of psychological discomforts.

**Key words:** psyche, psychic, perturbation, systemic thinking, spiritual power, Ancient Egyptian thought

## BEFORE PSYCHE AND BEYOND

**A**t the core of the transformations that occurred in the Egyptian afterlife, collected in the Book of the Dead (1), the repetition of the very ‘first time’ played the main role.

The terms *sp tpy* (ꜥꜣ ꜥꜣ) indicated the process of creation consisting of the perennial reply of the original act of being. This complex post-existential phase entails an extraordinary interest for existential philosophy, psychology and psychiatry because it offers a lens through which the power of the psychic energy has revealed far before the notion of psyche was coined by Greek civilization.

To understand the original approach of Egyptian civilization, a short account of psyche’s semantic roots is needed.

A multifaceted principle of life, in Homer’s poems Iliad (2) and Odyssey (3) the psyche (ψυχή) was described to leave the body after death and fly away like a ghost. Differently from thumos (θυμός), a sort of spiritual activity much more implicated with emotions/perceptions, the psyche could be equated to the breath that lasts until life occurs. A step forward into the direction of a spiritual identity of this anthropological component was made by philosopher Plato, who assigned to it a multifaceted profile, intellectual, metaphysical, and ontological. Individual or universal, the Greek psyche is equated to the soul. Considered the eminent spiritual principle of life, it is also the very source for logos/intellect: in his dialogue Phaedrus (4), Plato explains that individual soul consists also of three parts, and, after the death of the body, it is continually reborn.

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Christian thinkers of Late Antiquity (the Holy Fathers of the Church, theologian and philosopher Augustin of Hippo) and Medieval Age (Thomas Aquinas) equated the psyche to the spiritual soul created by the Almighty God. In modern times, Descartes's idea of *res cogitans*, opposite to *res extensa*, linked the psyche to the intellectual domain. This conceptual shift should be always taken in consideration for understanding why, when psychology moved its first steps in 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the very idea of psyche was related to the mind/body synopsis and hence, it was abruptly detached from the domain of spiritual soul.

According to the frame of systemic thinking, the contemporary, interdisciplinary approach to complexity, psyche could be interpreted as a II type systemic property of the person (5) that results from the incessant interactions with capabilities, intimate desires, emotions, spiritual beliefs and the environment. Also psychic energy is a concept that is going to be fully revised, being not satisfactory the traditional interpretation of psychoanalysis.

Connelly recently stated that «the governance of energetic mechanisms in the psyche (including affect and behavior) does not serve a principle of constancy or discharge as Freud suggested, but rather serves the principle of maintaining systemic organization» (6). Psychic energy, within the frame of psychoanalysis is a dynamic force that belongs to the mental processes (7). For Freud (8) this source, according to the pleasure principle (1955), is directed to grasp pleasurable gratification and should not be described «in terms of the theoretical laws of physics» (9). For Jung (10) psychic energy is not limited to the instincts but plays a main role in the development of the whole person. In my paper I wish to highlight that a systemic idea of the psychic energy – as the result of multiple level of interaction between the individual's subsystem and the environment – already belonged to Ancient Egyptians.

I'll briefly give some accounts of systemic thinking before applying them to the topic of the present paper

## A SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE

Systemic thinking (11, 12) assumes that living entities and phenomena of the world of life are open systems. In plain words, they are not mere aggregations or sums of parts, but primarily dynamic units, to which pertain qualities that depend upon many interactions and processes, internal or external to the system, within the frame of a continuous exchange with the environment that gives rise to systemic properties or second-level systemic properties.

Scholars can properly speak, according to Agazzi of «an

ordered of interrelated parts whose characteristics depend both on the characteristics of the parts and on the web of their interconnections» (13). Each system, then, can be seen as a simple and a complex unit that interacts with the whole.

Like a veritable rock in the pond, in virtue of its non-linear approach, systemic thinking offers a valuable key to understand phenomena that pertain to multiple levels of the human experience, from natural science, medicine, biology to politics, philosophy and, recently, also to highly debated issues like anthropology. The theoretical tools gained by system thinking from biology and physics (dissipation and balance of systems, coherence, co-variants etc.) that could be highly useful in understanding the anthropological frames, are rarely applied to scholarly investigations. Differently from the 'first systemics', especially aimed at exploring organization of complex systems, the 'second systemics' throws light on coherence and dynamics of aggregations warning the risk of systemic reductionism (12). The concept of emergence, which is a crucial topic also for understanding the Egyptian anthropology, is at the core of the systemic theoretical perspective. It primarily concerns the origin of systemic properties (or second-level systemic properties), which result from the interactions within systems and between systems and environment.

Psychic energy is a paradigmatic case of it: it cannot be reduced to the chemical processes of the brain or to a sort of bridge between the physical and psychological domains, nor its functions and activities, and can be explained according to the environmental interactions with the neuronal cells (12). At this point of the investigation, we can get back to the process of recreation in the Egyptian thought, focusing on the psychic domain before the notion of psyche was coined. As it will be noticed, the results are surprisingly close to the systemic view.

## FROM LIFE TO AFTER LIFE, A SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE

The first step of this paper is to argue that 'resilience' was, for the Egyptians, a systemic experience resulting from the response of the whole person to perturbation/dissipation.

It's the death that highlights this dynamic. When the biological existence comes to the end, finally the multiple components of the human are displayed. In Ancient Egyptian civilization the dead body (h3t ꜥꜣ) mummified (wi ꜥꜣ) was thought to assume god Osiris' image and his noble shape (mummy is also given by the term sꜥh, in hieroglyph ꜥꜣꜥꜣ or ꜥꜣꜥꜣꜥꜣ followed by determinative ꜥꜣ), thus becoming the barycenter of the individual's multiple parts, as the Lord of life (nb ꜥnh).

The mummified body, systemically speaking, represents the very center of the subsystems' constellation belonging to the human person, in which we can include the corpse (ḥꜣt), the ka (kꜣ), the ba (bꜣ), the shadow (šwyt), the glorified individual (ꜣḥ). Differently from Homer's anthropological frame, where no term was related to the «“idea” of the body that coincides with the modern meaning in the sense of “organism”» (14), the Egyptians saw in the mummy the point of departure of any operation providing the individual with the possibility to recollect and reconnect several components: material, spiritual or spiritual and material. Within the afterlife, Egyptians intellectually grasped the very idea of the human being as an interacting system of processes, not mere components. Furthermore, they understood the role of perturbation as the main source of existential changes. In systemic terms, we could say that a perturbation – death for instance – functions as a change enabler, an activator of emergences, of new states of being. Precisely, the mummified body operated as a magnet that attracted the multiple parts of the individual and gave rise to the new integrity of the whole, according to the proper name (rn) of the deceased. After the deceased was called to existence through his/her name and according to the ritual of wp rꜣ, the opening of the mouth, the cosmic balance was restored. The voice, through the words pronounced by the priests of other individuals on behalf of the dead, functioned as an activator of the afterlife processes. A crucial phase for achieving the spiritualized condition of the akh, it has to be taken carefully into consideration for having a better understanding of how the afterlife dynamics works.

In the Memphite cosmogonic tradition, one of the three on which Egyptian religion is rooted, it was the god Ptah to give birth to the universe through his shout, his words. Hence, the deceased was expected to have control over his existence as long as he could use the voice, according to chapters 21 and 22 of the Book of the Dead (1).

The different processes of spiritual/corporeal subsystems are deeply revealing of their peculiar activities: the ka never abandoned the mummified body; the ba maintained a drive to mobility by flying away like a bird and coming back to the coffin at night.

## **PERTURBATION AND DISSIPATION. THE SURGE OF THE AKH**

In the Egyptian afterlife changes and transformations recall the dynamic of a dissipative structure, a concept that systemic thinking gained from thermodynamics and quantum physics. What denotes a dissipative structure is the coexistence of

change and stability. The latter condition, stability, depends upon the ability to transform a large amount of entropy to the environment (15). In this perspective, death could be seen as the primary perturbation for a human individual/system.

Perturbation is the process that derives from a shock inflicted on a living organism (death is the highest grade of it). When a perturbation occurs, it is properly the balance of the system to be fractured: in the case of chronic situations, the general instability is amplified. The long-term unpredictability, in physical dynamics as well as in fluid dynamics – two domains from which systemic thinking borrowed the term perturbation – is the typical behaviour of deterministic or non-deterministic chaos.

The biological body, while is dying, could be at the origin of a dissipative, highly energetic process.

With dissipation - a term that systemic thinking has received from the “dissipative structures” introduced in thermodynamics by the Nobel Ilya Prigogine - a double simultaneous movement occurs, characterized by the coexistence of change and stability. This process is strictly linked to perturbation because it originates in non-equilibrium conditions, that's to say in systems where a shock (or another cause) gave rise to instability. In classical thermodynamics, the typical movement of dissipative systems is rooted in the ability to transfer a large amount of energy to the environment. It's properly the production of entropy to guarantee the stability of such systems. It's properly in the process of releasing energy that new configurations or “emergent properties” develop and reach the surface. As Minati notes: «The attribute dissipative refers to systems where energy dissipation in non-equilibrium conditions allows the emergence of ordered structures» (15, 16).

On a systemic ground, dissipation is an event that allows the surge of emergences, or properties that cannot be reduced to any singular component of the constellation.

If we come back to Ancient Egyptian afterlife, the glorified individual or akh recalls directly to what systemic thinking describes as a second-level or systemic property that follows dissipation/perturbation. Differently from the ka, the ba and the shadow, which are subtle and autonomous components of the biological individual, the akh is a completely new creature, systemically born.

This anthropological frame may also clarify why transformations are part of the afterlife, not simply in virtue of the analogy to the biological condition. For being established, the processes of emergences – in the systemic view – deal

with a huge variety of ‘modalities’, and especially with incompleteness. Energy needs to be constantly fuelled. This explains why Egyptians were so concerned with the deceased’s nourishment. Not simply symbolic rituals, the courtesy for the dead was essential to supply the *akh* (17) with energy for allowing the person to dissipate matter again.

## LOSS OF PSYCHIC ENERGY IN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN LITERATURE

Egyptian texts witness a deep understanding of anthropological phenomena characterized by the loss of psychic power: void, derealization, depersonalization, feeling of emptiness, depression and spiritual discomfort at large.

The Tale of Sinuhe (1875 BC) (18) describes anxiety as an emotion due to a temporary loss. What is lost, by the main character of the novel, is the heart itself. I quote the full passage (lines 256-257), in the hieroglyphic transcription of the original hieratic text: *ḥ3ty.i nn ntf m ḥt.i rḥ.i ḥnh r mwt*, «my heart was not in my body, I did not know (I could not distinguish) life from death» (Parkinson translates: «my heart was not in my body, / I did not know life from death») (19). Very popular among the Egyptians of the élites, a masterpiece of Middle Egyptian literature of the XII Dynasty, the story tells about the adventure of a distinguished man, a servant in the private apartments of the queen Nefru.

A night Sinuhe overheard about the death of king Amenemhat I, presumably killed in a court conspiracy. Shocked and terrified for the consequences of that unexpected news, the man fled away into the Lybian desert for an exile that lasted for years, until king Senwosret invited him to come back home. The aforementioned passage has a relevant interest in psychiatry because it sketches a realist description of a mind/body shock, where symptoms of a panic attack are also evident. When Sinuhe warns he no longer has the heart in his chest, the situation recalls Heidegger’s *Angst* (20): Sinuhe runs away from the court for he feels menaced by something that is nowhere; it is the pure void that threatens him, an emptiness that corresponds – on the physical side – to the appearing loss of his heart.

The narration shows, according to phenomenologist Nyord (21), that the Egyptian term used for heart (*ḥ3ty*) translates an embodied experience of the highest interest. Egyptians expressed their idea of the heart in two different terms: *ib* and *ḥ3ty*. The second word is attested in the Coptic, the final stage of the language of Pharaonic Egypt. In the texts, *ḥ3ty* is also translated as “front” and may indicate, nonetheless, a leading figure in the administration. It is also worth noting that anguish, as well as wellness, were expressed in relation to

the heart, precisely by referring to the contraction/distention of it. Middle Egyptian literature also offers another example of the existential discomfort related to a loss. It is the case of The Dialogue (or The Dispute) of a Man with His Ba (22), where a desperate man has a conversation with a spiritual component of himself, the *ba*, generally translated with soul. Worth noticing that this component of the human Self was believed to leave the person at the moment of the death; on the contrary, in the poem dating the Middle Kingdom, the *ba* is described outside his owner, who nevertheless is still living his biological life. The two subjects hold different views about life and death; while the man is tired to live a life among pain and suffering, his *ba* urges him to appreciate life. In the perspective of the current investigation about the void, what is worth noting in The Dialogue is the disease due to the detachment of the *ba* from the body of the desperate.

Psychologist Jaynes, the author of the neurological model for the bicameral mind, in his *The Origin of consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (23) holds that the *ba*’s voice is a clear symptom of hallucinations. I do not agree with this interpretation primarily because of the genre of the story, a lyrical composition (not a medical text); however, as Parkinson notes, «the Dialogue is inspired by a wise man’s alienation from the world around him» (18).

What the text reveals is a fine comprehension that Egyptians had about spiritual discomfort in terms of a lack of intimate energy, due – in the case of the desperate – to the separation from his own *ba*/soul. A further example, taken from the aforementioned story of Sinuhe, supports such a consideration. Except for the Dialogue, we know only another reference to the escape of the *ba* from the human body, which is a passage from the adventures of Sinuhe. In line 255, in a verse that introduces the short Egyptian text quoted in the previous paragraph, we read *b3.i sbw ḥw.i 3dw*; «my *ba* went away, my limbs trembled».

In a systemic perspective the loss of spiritual power, as it happens in experience of derealization, depersonalization, existential void (24) and anxiety could be interpreted as a failed form of balance between change and stability (24, 25, 15). What is lost is the capacity to restore coherence, making really hard for emergences – or new property – to emerge.

The search for coherence is typical of perturbed systems in the process of self-organization. This phase supports the unitary and integrated response of the system to disturbances/perturbations, avoiding isolation or the independent organization of some parts or functions. The loss of coherence clarifies why a process of emergence may be extinguished as the consequence of an inconsistent organization.

## CONCLUSION

Egyptians had a deep intuition of the spiritual power of the human person, as the result of multiple processes of the individual (physical, physiological, psychological) in continuous interaction with the environment (26). Of course, the notion of psychic energy does not belong to that civilization, primarily because psyche was a Greek coinage, secondarily because psychic energy is a concept elaborated by psychoanalysis, namely by Freud and Jung. However, Egyptians' view of the spiritual strength as circular energy (27) proves how close they were to the systemic view of the living phenomena, a relatively recent approach to complexity which is going to reframe the pillars of psychoanalysis.

In this article, the author sought to sketch a short account of the psychic power before the psyche entered the classical Western anthropology focusing on two opposite phenomena: resilience after a shock (rebirth after death), and depressive states (feeling of void, de-realization, panic attack).

The capacity of restoring psychic energy was, for the Egyptians, the result of a new coherence reached after perturbation (the death) and dissipation (the loss of human capabilities): as systemic thinking put in evidence, these dynamics are highly valuable for the surge of new properties/entities, aka emergences. The akh or the 'glorified person' was precisely, for the Egyptians, an emergence from the interaction of multiple processes related to the various component/functions of the human being. Resilience may be equated to the activity of the akh, an emergent entity not reducible to the different components of the biological body newly reconnected in the mummified body. This 'emergence' has nothing to do with the soul, nor it was simply a bridge entity between the physical and the psychic. In the original texture of the akh lies the most relevant interest for contemporary anthropological disciplines.

The loss of being, the essential trait of depressive states (24), so finely grasped by Egyptian literature, in a systemic perspective, depends upon the lack of coherence in the interaction among systems and subsystems (15, 16). This frame reinforces the systemic stuff of psychic energy, whose impoverishment seems to ascribe to the failed rise of emergences. What is missed is primarily coherence, the dynamic with which changes are driven into stability.

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