Algis Uzdavinys. *Philosophy as a Rite of Rebirth: From Ancient Egypt to Neoplatonism* (The Prometheus Trust, 2008), 331 pp. ISBN: 978 1 898910 35 0

The Archaic Greek poet Archilocus noted that “the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” Isaiah Berlin playfully crafted this observation into a typology of thinkers. Foxes are drawn to details in the service of analysis; hedgehogs lean toward synthesis, assuming that similarity reveals common deep structure and that difference is superficial. Their perspectives can complement, of course. Both foxes and hedgehogs have given us works of erudition and value. The book under review appears to be the work of a hedgehog. This text certainly does not lack in detail, but its thrust is toward the celebration of commonality. In the Introduction, Dr. Uzdavinys states the aim of his book: “our purpose is quite humble: to discuss certain parallels between ancient Egyptian and Hellenic thought, and to show that *philosophia* (apart of other important aspects) is directly or indirectly based on the hieratic patterns of ancient cults and may itself be regarded as a rite of transformation and noetic rebirth” (p. ix).

The author’s approach can broadly be classed as ‘Perennialist’, and he quotes with approval the major Perennialist writers (Coomaraswamy, Burkhardt, Guenon, Schuon) more than any others. He does not claim a strict equation of concepts across traditions, and does not try to prove the cross-cultural transfer of specific ideas. His stated method is to present what he describes as “rather loose comparisons” (p. ix) of elements from Egyptian hieratic theology and Greco-Roman philosophy against a background of assumed common ontological structure—in particular, an ontology of hierarchy. By setting aside “the morbid question of historical influences” (p. 153), the conclusions reached with such a method are sometimes rather vague. For instance, when summarizing features shared by Iamblichean theurgy and the *Pyramid Texts*, he carefully disclaims any “direct dependence” of Iamblichus on the pharaonic material, but states without elaboration that the similarity “has relevance for the tradition of *philosophia perennis*” (p. 216). Dr. Uzdavinys departs from standard Perennialism on some points. He veers from Guenon’s position (who follows Aristotle) that *philosophia* began with Thales, holding that the term legitimately applies to far earlier activities in Egypt. And, unlike most Perennialists, he does not bracket ritual practices as just ‘exoteric’; instead, as the book’s title indicates, philosophy for him cannot truly be parted from ritual without aborting its true purpose, which is the rebirth of the philosopher—“rebirth” here meaning “the soul’s unification with divine Intellect” (p. 254).

This of course raises the question of the author’s definition of philosophy. Here he follows the salutary trend set by scholars like Armstrong and Hadot

to frame the discursive aspects of ancient philosophy within the broader aims and activities of 'ancient philosophy as a way of life' (Hadot) leading toward wisdom, variously understood. For Dr. Uzdavinys, "philosophy is part of a complex of much wider religious and aesthetic aspirations" (p. 65). Such a focus gives more scope for comparison between Egyptian and Hellenic materials, which can be paralleled not only in terms of concepts but of spiritual exercises and of the self-transformative goal. At times, though, laying the snare for the "one big thing" might stretch an elastic definition too far: "the term *philosophia*, as we have said, covers all forms of religious thought and hermeneutics, all theological attitudes and related ways of life" (p. 15). Over-inclusivity can be a hedgehog's pitfall. Some readers may find evidence for this hazard in the fact that the author does not limit his comparisons to Egyptian and Greek traditions, but weaves in quite a lot of Hindu and Sufi content too. Many sentences in the book contain technical terms in two or even three languages (eg. Egyptian, Sanskrit and Arabic), deriving from different cultures separated by thousands of years. A glossary at the end of the book helpfully defines a selection of these terms.

The author positions himself contra Charles-Saget and others who tell the tale of philosophy as an initial rise from mythic murk to reason led by the Ionians, followed centuries later by a regrettable slump back into myth at the hands of Iamblichus and his ilk. For Dr. Uzdavinys, the latter development was in fact a return to the kind of matrix of symbol and ritual found in ancient Egypt that comprised philosophy in the first place. He discusses a "proto-Hermetic and proto-Neoplatonic strand" (p. 86) that formed in Egypt during the New Kingdom, but with clear ancestry traceable to the Middle and Old Kingdoms, featuring: a single, inconceivable, all-embracing, transcendent divine reality; a hierarchy of being with vertical chains of manifestation linking higher unity and lower diversity, the latter encompassed by the former; and the cosmos as a theophany. Entities of Egyptian myth were precursors of Platonic metaphysics, suggests the author: the One corresponds to Nun, the waters from which the primordial hill rose in the Heliopolitan cosmogony; *Nous* matches the god Atum-Ra; and *Psyche* is the realm of Osiris. The material world and its images reflect immaterial archetypes. Egyptian priests ritually invoked these archetypes and identified with them, thus participating in Ra's demiurgic movements.

From this angle, Greek philosophers were newcomers compared with the venerable Egyptians. Despite his disavowal of the "morbid question" noted above, Dr. Uzdavinys often casts the story as one of Egyptian influences on the Greeks. For instance, the main ideas of Thales, who is said to have toured Egypt, "are no more than the Egyptian mythological and theological motifs

released from their initial theological contexts for the purpose of philosophical *paideia* among the less educated Miletians (*sic*)” (p. 36). And it does indeed seem that Thales’ watery principle is more like the Egyptian Nun than the Aristotelian *hudos*. Egyptian doctrines were “transmitted to the Hellenic world” (p. 277) via Orphic, Bacchic and Pythagorean channels, to be “transposed” (p. 277) by Plato into Greek philosophy. Hence, “The so-called Platonic theory of Ideas is not Plato’s invention; the concept of the relationship between intelligible archetypes and their images has been central to Egyptian and Mesopotamian thought from its early beginnings” (p. 134). Plato, by demoting the image from the status of hieroglyphic symbol to mere sensory representation, turned away from the Egyptian legacy. But Middle Platonists and Neoplatonists effected “(t)he rehabilitation of images” (p. 285), recreating a theurgical praxis analogous to the hieratic rites of Egypt. The author extensively surveys the congruence between Egyptian methods and those of Neoplatonic theurgists, from statue animation to visualized ascent.

The text is peppered with fulminations against “the sinister ideology” of “academic scepticism” (p. 2), “(m)odern scholars, deprived of all theurgic imagination and grace” (p. 21), “those who are obsessed by one-sided positivist classifications” (p. 153), “an irremediable modern nominalist of the worst kind” (p. 154), “the Protestants and their modern followers” with their “rites of rationalistic exorcism” (p. 179), the Postmodernists for whom “there is no hope of awakening” (p. 180), etc. These polemical pot-shots are not developed into actual arguments, and strike an uncongenial note—such is not the way to invite scholarly dialogue. It should also be mentioned that the text has rather a lot of typographical errors, especially unclosed quotations. The lack of a subject index further limits the work’s usefulness for scholars.

The centuries have witnessed the cyclical popularity of an ‘Egyptomania’ according to which all ancient wisdom flows from the Land of the Sphinx; recently we have had the controversial efforts of Martin Bernal to derive Greek thought from ‘Afroasiatic’ roots. The pendulum has swung rather far in the other direction now, and we should guard against reflexively dismissing the possible importance of such links. Dr. Uzdavinys reminds us about the many antique voices that claimed an Egyptian source of classical philosophy (Isocrates, Plato, Iamblichus, Proclus, etc.). The greatest value of his book may be in pointing out that even if discrete pathways of transmission might never be mapped, the structural resonances between Egyptian and Greco-Roman philosophical aims are striking. Now, send in the foxes! The intriguing grand thesis presented by the author can be further probed by researchers who bring their scholar’s tools more to bear on particular details and instances. The recent article in this journal (vol.2, no.2, pp. 164-205) by Dennis C. Clark on the

survival of Egyptian theological content in Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis* is a fine example of such an approach.

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