

Rhetoric: The Ancient Egyptian Origin of a Distinctly Human Trait

by

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Evil may indeed win wealth, but the strength of the truth is that it endures:

Instructions and Maxims of Ptah-Hotep (2540 B.C.)

Abstract

In this paper, my overall claim is that we can trace the origins of rhetoric as an ethical prerogative to the ancient Egyptians (hereafter aEs), and second, argue that rhetoric is a wholly and distinctly human trait not traceable to some speculative animal evolutionary heritage. This position follows, in part, from the emergence of humans before animals in ancient Egyptian mythology and also from the emergence of rhetoric as a feature of human life especially evident and characteristic of complex hierarchical societies such as the civilization of the aEs. In essence, I suggest that rhetoric stands as the original ‘third instance’ that resolves a thesis and anti-thesis rather than a focus on monuments or complex arts.

Rhetoric As A Feature of Early Civilizations

Christian Myer (2006:1) says “The scholarly myth of origin has it that “rhetoric” developed in Ancient Greece...” Why Meyer does not challenge what he acknowledges as myth is unclear, but this implication of the Greek provenance of rhetoric is demonstrably false. This is not to deny the Greek’s particular cultivation of rhetoric into a formal disputatious art suited to their emerging democracies, but there can be little doubt that the ancient Egyptians have a better claim to being the originators of rhetoric or what they called ‘good speech’.

109

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Complex hierarchical societies like the aEs have by definition dealt with the exaggerated and ineradicable duality of wealth - rich vs. poor - that they embody, and my claim is that the aEs invented amongst other kinds of rhetoric, a rhetoric of ethical behaviour directed at all in society - both rich and poor, in both speech and deed to nullify tensions engendered by rank and privilege.

In other words the aEs set out poetic and persuasive words in speech and writing - underpinned of course, by fantastic visual imagery - that claimed material wealth and at the same time encouraged the development of uprightness. It would appear that the ancient Egyptian rhetoricians were concerned above all to encourage ethical or good behaviour amongst all people, but especially good behaviour by the rich towards the poor - perhaps recognising that it was to both the Gods and the poor to whom they owed their privileges, and that just as nature in the Garden of Eden was the source of human wealth to which one owned a responsibility of benevolent stewardship, so to did the aristocracy of ancient Egypt owe something to the workers of Egypt - the source of their wealth, and it would appear that the idea that 'charity begins at home' was understood then.

Worldly Wealth is False Capital

Wealth for the aEs was as much an ethical as a material possession and there are several rhetorical instances of this perspective, particularly in the extensive *Instructions and Maxims* set down by Ptah Hotep, vizier of King Isesi of the fifth dynasty of the Old Kingdom (circa 2540 B.C.) In one especially relevant papyrus, the Egyptians are admonished thus:

If you desire your conduct to be good, to set yourself free from all that is evil, then beware of covetousness, which is a malady, diseaseful, incurable. Intimacy with it is impossible; it makes the sweet friend bitter, it alienates the trusted one from the master, it makes bad both father and mother, together with the brothers of the mother, and it divorces a man's wife. It is a bundle of every kind of evil, and a bag of everything that is blameworthy. Long-lived is the man whose rule of conduct is right, and who goes in accordance with his [right] course. He wins wealth thereby, but the covetous has no tomb.

Be not covetous regarding division, and be not exacting, except with regard to what is due to you. Be not covetous toward your kindred; the request of the meek avails more than strength. Just a little of which he has been defrauded, creates enmity even in one of a cool disposition...If you be grown great, after you were of small account, and have gotten you substance, after you were aforetime needy in the city which you know, forget not how it fared with you in time past. Trust not in your riches that have accrued to you as a gift of the god. You are not better than another who is your equal, to whom the same has happened (Kaster, 1968:170-71)

Ptah Hotep's rhetoric on the dangers of desire has hardly since been surpassed and yet it is perhaps best 'echoed' (to use Meyer's term) not far from the modern period in the admittedly fictive though nonetheless outstanding rhetorical narrative *Utopia*. In one especially sublime effusion of the deprecation of money as represented by silver and gold - gold, of course being man's supreme material possession - Moore writes that the Utopian's do not

...esteem it than the very nature of the thing deserveth. And then who doth not plainly see how far it is under iron, as without the which men can no better live than without fire and water? Whereas to gold and silver nature hath given no use that we may not well lack if that the folly of men had not set it in higher estimation for the rareness' sake. But of the contrary part, nature, as a most tender and loving mother, hath placed the best and most necessary things open abroad, as the air, the water, and the earth itself, and hath removed and hid farthest from us vain and unprofitable things.

Therefore if these metals among them should be fast locked up in some tower, it might be suspected that the prince and the council (as the people is ever foolishly imagining) intended by some subtlety to deceive the commons and to take some profit of it to themselves. Furthermore, if they should make thereof plate and such other finely and cunningly wrought stuff, if at any time they should have occasion to break it and melt it again, therewith to pay their soldiers' wages, they see and perceive very well that men would be loath to part from those things, that they once began to have pleasure and delight in.

To remedy all this they have found out a means which, as it is agreeable to all their other laws and customs, so it is from ours (where gold is so much set by and so diligently kept) very far discrepant and repugnant, and therefore incredible, but only to them that be wise. For whereas they eat and drink in earthen and glass vessels which, indeed, be curiously and properly made and yet be of very small value, of gold and silver they make commonly chamber-pots and other vessels that serve for most vile uses not only in their common halls but in every man's private house. Furthermore, of the same metals they make great chains, fetters, and gyves wherein they tie their bondmen. Finally whosoever for any offence be infamed, by their ears hang rings of gold, upon their fingers they wear rings of gold, and about their necks chains of gold, and, in conclusion their heads be tied about with gold.

And these metals, which other nations do as grievously and sorrowfully forgo, as in a manner their own lives, if they should altogether at once be taken from the Utopians, no man there would think that he had lost the worth of one farthing. They gather also pearls by the seaside, and diamonds and carbuncles upon certain rocks; and yet they seek not for them, but by chance finding them, they cut and polish them, and therewith they deck their young infants. Which, like as in the first years of their childhood they make much and be fond and proud of such ornaments, so when they be a little more grown in years and discretion, perceiving that none but children to wear such toys and trifles, they lay them away even of their own shamefastness, without any bidding of their parents, even as our children, when they wax big, do cast away nuts, brooches, and puppets (Moore, 1996:33-5)

Rhetoric as a Means to Resolve Duality

That life might precede with a minimum of conflict between the ruling and labouring classes, the leaders of ancient Egypt set forth various rhetorical ethical tracts that deprecated worldly wealth and recognized the inherent human dignity of all - regardless of rank - who lived according to God's laws. Unlike some of the slave owning societies in the modern world - particularly those of Europe and America during the so-called Atlantic slave trade, the aEs had no overt qualms and insecurities concerning the use of the enslaved. As Kings and their aids served the Gods likewise did the enslaved serve the Kings and other nobility. Moreover, unlike the enslaved Africans in the new world, through marriage or talent, the enslaved in ancient Egypt could rise in social standing.

That the aEs could express a more benevolent attitude towards the enslaved is shown for example in the *Book of Coming Forth by Day* where for example one of the negative confessions is that: ‘I have not vilified a slave to his master’. Recalling the aforesited passage from *Utopia* it will be seen that in this attitude towards the slave, the aEs were much unlike the nobility of Utopia who even as they would deprecate gold, would ‘*vilify*’ a ‘bondsman’ (slave) or criminal with gold itself.

To repeat, rhetoric for the aEs may well have arisen from their grasp of and attempt to deal with the dualities of human life as they perceived them. For the aEs, the duality of the rich and poor was probably one of many contradictions arising from the physical duality of the country itself, namely the Delta and Upper Egypt which upon unification was call the Two Lands, headed by the vulture-goddess Nekhbet of Upper Egypt and the cobra-goddess Buto of Lower Egypt. The royal treasures were ‘double’, Ra himself was lord of the ‘Double Horizon’ and judgement took place in the ‘Hall of Two Truths,’ on the dual scale. Hence I suggest that the dualisms permeating ancient Egyptian life were apprehended and mediated by what may be called the rhetorical ‘third instance’.

The rhetorical third instance as represented by the ‘antithesis’ was central to the works of Hegel and Marx. Marx’s antithesis was of course, ‘communism’ whilst Freud’s was the ‘superego’. As far as Marx’s and Freud’s intellectual ancestor, Darwin, was concerned, his rhetorical third instance was natural selection - the antithesis mediating between the environment and heredity. These are all in a sense, modern conceptions of Christianity’s Trinity, and all are ultimately indebted - in both complimentary and non-complimentary senses of this word! - to the original creationist rhetoric of the ancient Egyptians.

Contrary to popular Egyptology, the original Trinity does not start with the Greek named Osiris followed by Isis and Horus, but rather it began with Ra-Atum Khepri (Atum meaning he who completes) the self-creating anti-thesis whom upon emerging from the primeval waters, stood upon the Benben, the primeval hillock and there between the duality of Shu (air) and Tefnut (moisture) did insert his semen to create Geb (earth-god) and Nut (sky-goddess) who bore among others, the famous brother and sister pair, Osiris and Isis. In another ancient Egyptian version of creation it is said of the God Ptah - the embodiment of the primeval waters and so in fact the source of the self-perpetuating Ra-Atum Khepri - that all creation is but a manifestations of his heart and *tongue*.ⁱ Rhetoric as sent forth by the tongue is then the original counterbalance to the inherently conflictual duality that Levi Strauss says is characteristic of human thought.

Given the aEs pre-eminence as founders of the first complex human civilisation and considering the outstanding duality between nobility and enslaved that such a society embraced, the aEs are here acknowledged as the founders of rhetoric as a uniquely human capacity. This is not of course to neglect or minimize the role of rhetoric in ‘primitive societies’ or what I (Ababio, 2006) prefer to call technologically conservative societies.

Indeed, the exciting ethnographic work inaugurated by Strecker and Tylor in the *International Rhetoric Culture Project Rhetoric* (<http://www.rhetoric-culture.org/outline.htm>) bears testimony to the more than adequate focus on societies formerly referred to as primitive. In this paper one of my concerns with ancient Egypt is to push beyond the boundaries of the Eurocentric classical world - ancient Greece - to which the study of rhetoric has all too often been confined. In any case, rhetoric is practised in all societies inasmuch as it is a *human* trait, and yet because of the reduction in social stratification, rhetoric in technologically conservative societies such as the Hamar or the Kung! is probably less concerned with internal disparities of rank and wealth and more concerned with dealing with the dualities of peaceful and war-like neighbours - good and evil in the empirical world - as well as the good and evil in the unseen world.

The Negative Confessions

In ancient Egypt every mortal by means of magic words spoken (practice of rhetoric Bartoli, 2006) and magic things done (rhetoric of practice Bartoli, 2006), becomes the God Osiris after his death (Kaster, 1968:35). This is the original statement that whatever your station in this life you could after death enter the realm of beatitude. Unlike the later Christian rhetoric however, the after-life for the ancient Egyptians was not the classical Italian vision of a seated audience before God and his interminable heavenly orchestra, but rather life just as it was on earth, in ancient Egypt; fishing on the Nile, dancing with beautiful girls etc, all without the tedium of life on earth, or, as Genesis would have it, ‘the curse of work’.

Yet before passage to the naturalistic pleasantries of the after-life the ultimate rhetoric of the ‘negative confessions’ had to be declared and one’s heart was placed on one side of the scales of justice while on the other scale was placed a feather. In contemporary English ‘negative’ when applied to behaviour or speech denotes undesirability, the opposite of ‘positive’ but for the aEs *negative* confessions were positive declarations or declamations of evil-doing or unethical/immoral behaviour. Here let us consider the most well known of the negative confessions, Chapter 125 (as cited in Kaster, 1968: 138-9) of *The Book of the Dead* - more properly translated as the Book of *Coming Forth by Day* - as recited by Nu, the Steward of the Keeper of the Seal. Reflect in particular on the confessions which are clear ethical considerations of the enslaved and those of humble status.

Hail to thee, great God, Lord of the Two Truths! I have come before thee, O my Divine Lord, I have been brought so that I may behold thy beauties. I know thee, and I know thy name! I know the names of the forty-two Gods who are with thee in the Hall of the Two Truths, who live by guarding over evildoers, and who feed upon their blood on the day when the characters of men are reckoned up before the Beautiful Being.

*Lo, "The Two Daughters, the Two Beloved Ones, the Two Eyes, the Two Goddesses, the Two Truths" is thy name!
Behold, I have come before thee, I have brought the Two Truths unto thee! I have crushed evil for thee!*

*I have not done evil against people.
I have not caused misery to my associates.
I have not committed wrong in the judgment hall, the Seat of Truth.
I have not known evil and worthless men.
I have not done evil things.
I have not caused the first work of the day to be done for me.
I have not brought forward my name for dignities.
I have not deprived a humble man of his property.
I have not done what is hateful to the Gods.
I have not vilified a slave to his master.
I have not inflicted pain.
I have not made anyone hungry.
I have not made anyone weep.
I have not committed murder.
I have not commanded to murder.
I have not cause anyone to suffer.
I have not stolen the offerings of the temples.
I have not fornicated or masturbated in the sanctuaries of the God of my city.
I have not added to the weight of the scale, nor have I depressed the pointer of the balance.
I have not taken away milk from the mouths of children.
I have not driven cattle from their pastures.
I have not caught fish with [bait of] their bodies.
I have not held back water in its season of flowing, nor have I dammed up flowing water.
I have not extinguished a fire in its season of burning.
I have not driven off the cattle of the estates of the gods.
I have not turned back a god on his appearances.
I am pure! I am pure! I am pure!*

The confessions go on at some length; here it will suffice to note the genuine nature of the aEs approach to rhetoric. Unlike some of the Machiavellian uses of rhetoric to which later civilisations such as the Greeks and Romans were especially fond of, the aEs well appreciated the power of rhetoric over men and encouraged restraint in its use. One of the later negative confessions, for example, states: ‘I have not multiplied my words in speech’ whereas in the *Instructions*, Ptah-Hotep declares that

“if you are a man of note, who sits in the council of his lord, fix your heart upon what is good. Be silent - this is better than tefef-flowers. Speak only if you know that you can unravel the difficulty. It is an artist who can speak in council, and to speak is harder than any work” (Kaster, 1968: 171)

Can Rhetoric Be Traced to Animal Precursors?

Unlike Genesis of the Old Testament the much older ancient Egyptian story of creation from which Genesis is derived, tells us that mankind emerged before the animals and other life. This at least makes it clear that to the ancient Egyptian inventors of rhetoric, the capacity for rhetoric was uniquely human because humans emerged *before* the animal. There could therefore be no so-called progressive evolutionary emergence of rhetoric from the less complex sounds and behaviour of animals as some theorists of rhetoric have suggested. Meyer (2006) quotes at some length George Kennedy (1984) as a leading advocate of the animal, evolutionary basis of human rhetoric.

Given his somewhat abstract all-embracing definition of rhetoric as ‘energy’ even if expressible by ‘volume, pitch and repetition’ it is easy for Kennedy to see rhetoric in living organisms as far apart as ‘protozoa, plants and animals’. Leaving aside the incredible scenario of a rhetorical amoeba, let us consider Kennedy’s view of animal interactions such as the confrontations between two male deer in the mating season as a rhetorical struggle for the survival of the fittest. For Kennedy, the deer are engaged in attempting to rhetorically persuade each other either to fight or retreat, and this is said to be much like the sabre-rattling of hostile states.

Apart from the most superficial resemblance, the confrontation between red deer stags during their mating season can by no stretch of scholarly imagination be compared to the complexities of, for example, the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. It is absurd to think otherwise. Elaborating on Kennedy, Meyer goes on to cite his own impression of the behaviour of crows as rhetorical insofar as they periodically gather and ‘vocalize’ in a way which suggests to Meyer that they wish to “renew their crowness” (2006). This view is at best a kind of sympathetic anthropomorphism but I doubt that it reflects the reality of the life of crows.

Every evolutionary scenario for the emergence of some human attribute is based on the implicit assumption that the human manifestation of the attribute or trait in question is the advanced/superior version. So red deer and crows have a ‘rhetorical energy’ which for the want of the ‘advanced’ human capacity for speech dooms them to unsophisticated animal noise and gesture.

Animals are Better Off Without Speech

Yet it is never asked why a crow or a red deer should need or want the human capacity for rhetoric or its necessary and overrated foundation, speech. The assumption is that they should be better off with it because humans who evolved after them have it and of course humans are the most intelligent animals that have ever graced the planet, so why not?ⁱⁱ Human rhetoric then is fully developed or at least an advance on what is commonly regarded as the primitive, semi-articulate noises and gestures - the rhetorical energy of other creatures. The fact that human speech without gesture is empty and would certainly degrade any genuine rhetorical performance is seldom considered by theorists of the animal origin of rhetoric.

Nevertheless, if careful thought was given to this matter it may be realized that human rhetoric based by necessity on speech is often difficult to execute, is often distrusted, can readily be contradicted and as such is all too often contrary to harmonising inter and intra specific relations. This is why Carrithers - in his recent (2005) comment on *Why Anthropologists Should Study Rhetoric* - errs somewhat in drawing on Robin Dunbar’s idea of speech as the ‘functional equivalent’ of primate grooming. Despite his own statement on “the cultural and distinctly human character of rhetoric” (2005:578) Carrithers adds ‘sweet speech, poetry and song’ all constituting an additional “rhetorical edge” (2005:579) to Dunbar’s ‘human gossiping’ which Dunbar has claimed is a group-expanding, bond-creating equivalent of primate grooming. The idea of a ‘functional equivalent’ is merely a more sophisticated way of tracing speculative evolutionary links and whether or not human gossiping is a causal or consequential factor of human group sizes, it is clear that gossiping ruptures as many intra-specific bonds as it can hope to create so that from this perspective alone gossiping has doubtful survival value.

Compared to humans, animal relations in their natural contexts are paragons of peaceful co-existence, punctuated of course by unavoidable conflicts which are nonetheless quickly resolved. As far as we know, revenge does not exist in the animal world. Unlike gossipy humans, primates as with other animals retain no lingering enmities leading to endless, destructive cycles of revenge and counter-revenge. Yet can it really be the case that the more harmonious animal relations arise from their possession of an inferior capacity for rhetoric/communication?

Rhetoric at the center of human life as it is, has not, at least in the modern world done much to ameliorate the growing conflicts that bedevil us. Indeed, it is arguable that in the modern era, it is rhetoric itself that is the source of our problems. Consider for the example the implications of the rhetoric and counter-rhetoric surrounding the so-called ‘global war on terror’ A rhetorician is nowadays instinctively, and I think, rightly so, distrusted; especially politicians, academics and priests - the order is irrelevant!

Rhetoric then can not be an original animal trait best developed in humans through the evolutionary progressive acquisition of speech. Rather it would seem that rhetoric is a unique human deficiency that we unavoidably try to employ in mediating the social world as we experience it. Recalling the ancient Egyptian context where I suggested that rhetoric is the third instance by which oppositions are reconciled, our contemporary world’s artificial and exaggerated distinction between matter and spirit, body and mind reveals a greater reliance on our expression of the ever less socially fulfilling human trait that is rhetoric. Carried forth on the global digital revolution, there is probably more rhetoric in the world today than ever before and yet the discrepancies between rich and poor, the haves and the have-nots, the developed and the underdeveloped etc, grow ever more stark.

Questions Evolutionary Theorists Should Consider

Rhetoric is the distrusted thing it is today primarily because it is divorced from practice. Animals can not be rhetoricians like humans simply because they can seldom deceive their con-specifics in a sustained way. Human speech without which there could be no rhetoric is based on continuously hiding or editing your thoughts. In so far as animals can not speak, I assume that they can not hide their thoughts from one another and as a consequence can better harmonise their social relations.ⁱⁱⁱ Speaking humans on the other hand - who from childhood must with some effort (which becomes more tedious with development) learn to adapt a major digestive organ (the tongue) to the sound patterns of their culture - are set to relate to each other through the deception of hiding one’s thoughts through speech/rhetoric.

Rhetoric, then, although more or less beneficial to society as a whole (depending on the society) is in essence a defect unique to humans and without which animals appear to be better off. Animals for example can carry out the most complicated tasks in efficient and timely coordination without uttering a single sound. Consider on the other hand the smallest human group, the typical, presumably highly intelligent Western nuclear family for example, out on a simple occupation, like going for a walk in the woods. This undertaking is frequently given - often prior to departure! - by disagreements and rhetorical disputes that can result even in disastrous outcomes like losing children! - and what could possibly be more anti survival of the fittest than losing your children whilst taking them out!

University academics are supposedly the most intelligent of speaking human beings yet who has not been present at staff/committee meetings rent with rhetorical discord, and mutual misunderstanding. What about the nonsensical long-standing debates in academia between for example nature and nurture? Is that an example of the effective intelligence of human speech/rhetorical communication? Animals are commonly said to have a rudimentary human capacity for speech and yet obviously intelligent animals like chimpanzees are capable of far fewer human speech sounds than animals like parrots whom we assume are less intelligent than chimpanzees. Why, moreover, do many baby animals make a far wider range of sounds than human babies of equivalent age? Finally, why in the advance of adult years do many people become less efficient speakers/rhetoricians? And finally ask, why with the presumably developmental advance of brain does so-called ‘stage-fright’ render most people incapable of saying more than ‘hello’ to the smallest gathering?

Conclusion

It is easy to speculate on evolutionary scenarios for human attributes and yet when rhetoric is properly considered, however we judge its effects on human society that can not with profit be seen as an outgrowth of animal life. It would appear that the ancient Egyptians were right after all to see rhetoric as a distinctly human trait, given, as I said, that in their creationist story, humans emerged before animals. For the aEs rhetoric, richly supported by visual imagery was applied to all aspects of their dualistic world, but especially, as I have suggested to the opposition between rich and poor, noble and slave. Unlike Karl Marx, the aEs had no rhetorical discourse on the final Utopian ending of the distinction between classes. It appears that an enslaved person was still a slave in the after-life, though it would seem that an enslaved person in heaven had no actual tedium of work to perform (life on earth however was different). Despite its contradictions, the complex civilisation of the aEs enjoyed a remarkable coherence and stability, and it may well be their creative and eloquent approach to rhetoric that in part accounts for their historical longevity.

Notes

1. In ancient Egypt and other parts of North East Africa - the ‘middle’ or ‘near east’ - the heart was the locus of the intellect or mind. Did this mean that those ignorant and superstitious ancients were without our contemporary scientific understanding of anatomy? I think not. The ancients were probably well aware that substances within the skull were essential to cognition but identifying the heart with the intellect i.e. sentiment with knowledge was their special insight that knowledge (embodied as good speech) without the sentiment of philosophy (wisdom also embodied as good speech) - the defining condition of our so-called scientific age, one could say the age of vivisection was useless if not in fact detrimental to human existence. Interesting reversal that we in the West should today identify the heart not with wisdom but with the irrational exigencies of blind, romantic (foolish) love!
2. This idea of human superiority over animals and nature is probably the most outstanding rhetorical assumption held by most members of our species.
3. If as I earlier tried to suggest, the idea of civilization has less to do with monuments or arts, then from this perspective it emerges that animals are more civilised than humans.

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