UCLA
UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology

Title
Ethics

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9q57q53s

Journal
UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology, 1(1)

ISSN
2693-7425

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Publication Date
2024-10-25

DOI
10.5070/G9.4323

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ETHICS

الأخلاق

Nikolaos Lazaridis

Version 2

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Lazaridis, Nikolaos, 2024, Ethics Version 2. In Jonathan Winnerman and Willeke Wendrich (eds.), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, Los Angeles. ISSN 2693-7425. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5070/G9.4323

[DOI Ethics, version 1 https://doi.org/10.5070/G9.3950]

ETHICS

الأخلاق

Nikolaos Lazaridis

Ethik
Éthique

Ancient Egyptian ethical thought and action revolved around the notion of maat. *Although there are no traces of a standard moral code surviving from ancient Egypt, moral principles were often reflected in the literature—especially works of wisdom literature, funerary books and songs, tomb biographies, and literary narratives. In these sources moral principles were mostly expressed in practical admonitions and general observations on everyday conduct and were voiced by authoritative sages. Through the study of these sources one can observe the occurrence of a major change in ancient Egyptian ethical thought during the New Kingdom, when piety and religiosity became significant criteria for the judgment of the individual.*

الفكر و الأفعال الأخلاقية المصرية القديمة ترآزت حول مبدأ ‹‹ماعآت .››بالرغم من عدم وجود آثار لنظام أخلاقي محدد من مصر القديمة، تظهر الأخلاق بالأدب الفرعوني، خصوصًا نصوص الحكمة، الكتب و الأغاني الجنائزية، السير الذاتية بالمقابر، و الروايات .عادة ما يعبر عن هذه الأخلاق بالمصادر بالتحذيرات العملية و الملاحظات اليومية العامة و يرويهم الحكماء .من خلال دراسة هذه المصادر يمكن ملاحظة حدوث إختلاف آبير بالفكر الأخلاقي لمصر القديمة خلال الدولة الحديثة حين أصبح التدين عامل هام فى تقييم الأفراد .

Ethics can be defined as a network of interrelated moral values whose content touch upon all social roles that can be played by a member of an organized community and whose aim is the practice of good. The term is often confused with that of "morality." Although scholars have attempted in the past to define these two terms and distinguish them from each other, from the perspective of philosophy, sociology, and other related disciplines, no overall agreement has ever been reached (Blackburn 2001: 3–4; Oswell 2006: 210). Practically speaking, "ethics" usually refers to a system of communal values and codes of conduct, while "morality" denotes the values and conduct of an individual.

The concerns of the moral values that comprised the system of ethics in ancient Egypt resembled themes of a code of conduct, for which the closest Egyptian term would have been ***mṯn n ꜥnḫ*** ("a way of life"). The main difference between the Egyptian system of ethics and Western traditions is that the former did not include a self-reflective, theoretical discussion of the essence and purpose of its moral values (compare Bilimoria 2005: 43) the way the latter do, following the archetypal example Aristotle set in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Natali 2014: 184–185). Put in modern philosophical terms, ancient Egyptian ethics were "practical ethics"—that is, moral values linked to practical matters and expressed in the form of personal, down-to-earth observations and

admonitions, emanating from the speaker's everyday life or professional experiences and meant to apply to the originally targeted audience's comparable experiences.

Ethics and Maat

In contrast to the multitude of debatable terms used in modern ethics, the only Egyptian term evidently employed in association with a body of moral values and their application was *maat* (for *maat* in general, see Helck 1981; Hornung 1987; Assmann 1989, 1990). *Maat* was the name of the goddess of "justice" and "cosmic order," but was also an abstract term for "justice," "truth," and "balance," embodying the gist of a proper code of conduct (see the lexicographical survey of this term in Mathieu 2022). That ethical code was challenged by the presence of *isfet* ("sin, wrongdoing"), as well as by other kindred notions, such as *gereg* ("lie") (on *isfet*, see Parys 2024, while on evil-related Egyptian notions, see Kemboly 2017), and its application was often ritualistically paused during religious festivals, such as the festivals of drunkenness (DuQuesne 2005). The goddess *Maat* was the daughter, and an essential aspect (*Teilmacht*), of the sun god; she was featured in a wide range of religious and mythological works and was the focus at several cultic sites (Bárta and Duliková 2017). As an abstract concept, *maat* personified the divine and cosmic order and was included in the epithets of several gods—for example, Ptah (as Creator), Horus (as a sky god), and Thoth were often granted the epithet "Lord of *Maat*" (Helck 1981; Hornung 1987).

Sources

The exultation of *maat* and its associations is a central theme in tomb biographies that were inscribed on funerary objects, such as stelae and statues, or on tomb walls. In these works, the life and accomplishments of the tomb owners are described in glowing terms, including praises for their character and conduct, inasmuch as they reflected *maat* and the various existing moral standards (Baines 2020; Lichtheim 1992). Thus, for instance, Qedes and Merer, who bore the title "the king's sole companion," praised themselves as such:

I was a worthy citizen who acted with his arm, the foremost of his whole troop. I acquired oxen and goats. . . . I made a boat of 30 (cubits) and a small boat that ferried the boatless in the inundation season. [Berlin stela 24032, lines 2–4; translation: Lichtheim (1975: 90)]

I was the priest for slaughtering and offering in two temples on behalf of the ruler. . . . I was not robbed. . . . I did what the great ones liked, what my household praised; a person beloved of his companions. [Cracow National Museum stela, lines 2–5; translation: Lichtheim (1975: 87)]

From such texts, one can possibly determine what the Egyptians probably considered to be good and bad in relation to a man's character and social status.

A similar set of principles of good and evil/right and wrong can be identified in the works of wisdom literature, a literary macrogenre that, according to the current consensus among Egyptologists, mainly includes the two genres of "Instructions" and "Lamentations" (for these, see Adams 2020; Parkinson 1991; Vernus 2001: 9–33). The Instructions contained short sayings and admonitions, in addition to elaborate ethical statements on general matters of human conduct. The moral principles reflected in the Instructions related to the social life and status of the individual (compare the notion of "connective justice" elaborated in Assmann 1990) and thus resembled moral reflections in tomb biographies (the relationship between sayings in biographies and in wisdom works is illustrated in Gnirs 2000). However, the Instructions also presented a small number of ethical statements regarding more theoretical/philosophical matters, such as the nature of the Divine or the creation of the world (examples of this sort are found primarily in late, post-pharaonic Instructions, such as the Instruction of Papyrus Insinger, discussed below). Conversely, the genre of "Lamentations" consisted of vivid descriptions of gloomy situations in which all

moral principles were trampled and all normal ways were reversed. Both types of literary writing—Instructions and Lamentations—were attributed to learned men whose assumed fame and status granted the writings an authoritative tone and an unquestioned validity. By reading through these works of ancient wisdom, one can discern what the various foci of ethical norms were and in what way they were linked to the norms of politics, religion, society, and education, and to the Egyptians' conception of their own history. For example, one may identify various moral norms and their relationship to the acquisition of wealth and to Fate in this passage from the New Kingdom Instruction of Amenemope:

Do not set your heart on wealth,
There is no ignoring Fate and Fortune;
Do not let your heart go straying,
Every man has his hour.
Do not strain to seek out excess,
What you have, let it suffice you.
[Instruction of Amenemope, lines 9,10–9,15; translated by the author]

In addition to those provided in tomb biographies and wisdom literature, glimpses of a moral code were provided in works of funerary literature. There is the case, for example, of the so-called "Negative Confession" (also known as "Declaration of Innocence") found in Chapter 125 of the standard New Kingdom version of the Book of the Dead (for a discussion of this text, see Janák 2022: 399–402). This chapter contained a list of short, negative declarations that the deceased delivers before the god Osiris. The intent of these declarations was for the deceased to prove that s/he was pure and worthy to be judged "good" by the gods in the Hall of the Two Truths. Accordingly, the deceased declared that s/he had not committed a standardized set of evils within the context of everyday social and religious conduct:

I have not done crimes against people,
I have not mistreated cattle…
I have not blasphemed a god,
I have not robbed the poor.
I have not done what the god abhors.
[From Papyrus BM 10477; translation: Lichtheim (1976: 125)]

On the one hand, the standardization of the list of evils, along with its treatment of general themes and its common use in New Kingdom private and royal tombs, could suggest that it was indeed the embodiment of a well-established moral code, reflecting the ethics of contemporary Egyptian society. On the other hand, the exclusive use of the Book of the Dead within a funerary context (with a possible symbolic and ritualistic function) might indicate that the application of this moral code was restricted to that context rather than the sphere of popular ethics.

Finally, ethical principles were also reflected in literary narratives, as well as in the so-called Harper's Songs (for these two genres, see Assmann 1977 and Quirke 1996). Such works included general ethical statements and/or expressed ethical ideas indirectly through descriptions of everyday scenes, the progress of the "plot," and the construction of literary characters. In addition, in some cases, as in the Story of the Eloquent Peasant, ethical principles, and especially the function of the institutions associated with them (such as the judicial system), were questioned, revealing that their authority was not unchallengeable. A good example of the conveyance of ethical ideas in the context of a literary narrative is found in a passage from the Story of Sinuhe in which the runaway protagonist is addressed by the pharaoh:

What have you done that one should act against you? You have not cursed, so that your speech could be condemned. You have not spoken against the Counsel of the Nobles, that your words could be rejected….You should not die in a foreign land! Asiatics should not inter you. You should not be wrapped in the skin of a ram to serve as your coffin.
[Papyrus Berlin 3022, lines 183–185 and 197–198; translated by the author]

Methodological Problems

There is, however, a major problem with interpreting the sources: How can the modern reader decide whether the moral values reflected in ancient sources were popular at

the time they were written down and whether, thus, they constituted the general backbone of ethical thought and action in ancient Egypt? (For a similar issue in the case of ancient Greek ethics, see Herman 2006: 101–125.) Closely linked to this question is the issue of the influence of genre and literary fiction on the ethical statements present in literary works. In other words, is it possible that some of the ethical ideas expressed in Egyptian literature were deliberately projected because they fit the specific literary context in which they were included, thus playing the role of literary motifs, or figures, rather than voicing the general ethical concerns of Egyptian society? If one examines and compares the ethical statements found in Egyptian literature, one may observe that:

1) some of the sages mentioned in works of wisdom literature, such as Ptahhotep and Hordedef, were legendary figures and therefore their ethical writings might have been popular as well;

2) some of the sayings included in works of wisdom literature were recognized and reproduced in other written sources and were therefore probably widely circulated; and

3) some of the general patterns of ethical mentality observed in these works were shared by other sources of ethical material; therefore, these common patterns could, indeed, have constituted the backbone of ethics in ancient Egypt. The high degree of popularity implied in these observations is curtailed by the nature of the sources—that is, for example, the fact that they all came from the scribal milieu, which might mean their contents and style reflected only the mentality and ethics of that specific, learned segment of society rather than of Egyptian society in general.

Historical Development

Given the uncertain interpretation of the available sources, we may only speak with caution of a historical development of Egyptian ethics. *Maat*, both as a concept and as a cultic focus, remained throughout Egyptian history a vital, integral element of religious and funerary beliefs, of the politico-religious duties of the pharaoh and his palace, and of what was considered "right" or "wrong." What gradually changed in the world of ethics seems to have been the authority and model of ethical thought and action. The best-documented momentum of such a change was the transition that occurred in the New Kingdom (1550 – 1069 BCE), during which the practice of both official and private piety seems to have become more important than it had been previously (Assmann 1983; Baines 1987, 1991; Williams 1978). From the New Kingdom onward, piety likely became one of the essential criteria for judging a person within the societal context. This possible shift to private religiosity was marked in a variety of written sources. For example, when New Kingdom Instructions (such as The Instruction of Amenemope) are compared with earlier Instructions, there can be observed a significant increase in references to the gods, linking a great number of admonitions and observations to divine action and judgment (Lazaridis 2007b). The information drawn from such philological sources can be combined with archaeological evidence that indicates a possible rise in the expression of personal piety within a cultic context—for instance, the increase in quantity and variety of private dedications found in cultic places (Sadek 1988). This increase may, however, be due to the accident of archaeological discovery, or may have been restricted to representational forms rather than having reflected actual change in religious ideas and morality (compare the discussion in Baines 1985: 277–305).

Legacy in the Post-Pharaonic Era

In later historical periods, Instructions continued to circulate widely among Demotic-speaking communities (Quack 2016: 120–158). Among representative texts were the first century BCE Instruction of Ankhsheshonqy (Glanville 1955) and Instruction of Papyrus Insinger (Lexa 1926), and the second century CE Instruction on Papyrus Ashmolean 1984.77 verso (Jasnow 1991). In addition, several Greek works of gnomic literature were reproduced in Ptole-

Figure 1. The biographical funerary stela of Somtutefnakht, also known as the Naples Stela (c. 330 BCE). Limestone; originally from Herakleopolis Magna.

maic and Roman Egypt, such as the collections of sayings attributed to the Athenian playwright Menander (Jaekel 1964). The contemporary sayings produced and circulating in Egyptian and Greek have been compared by several scholars, leading in some cases to assumptions about wisdom "inter-influence" (Lichtheim 1983), while in other cases possible influence has been suggested between Egyptian ethics and Greek philosophy (Moraes 2018). However, although the multicultural context of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt points toward possible interaction between the Egyptian and Greek cultures in many societal and cultural aspects, careful examination of the available material has shown that, in the case of Wisdom Literature and the ethical ideas projected in it, interaction was limited, since works of this genre followed in many ways the style and arguments of their earlier literary traditions (Jasnow 1987; Lazaridis 2007a). Tomb biographies also continued to be produced in this period, propagating the good traits of their subjects in terms of well-established Egyptian moral principles. The continuation of this tradition of ethical writings is well illustrated by the fourth century BCE example of Somtutefnakht's biographical stela (Perdu 1985) (fig. 1). A fusion of tomb biographies with wisdom literature resulted in the production of a unique text on the walls of the fourth century BCE tomb of Petosiris at Tuna el-Gebel (Lefebvre 1923–1924, inscription no. 127). In addition, there is the remarkable case of the Demotic narrative Myth of the Eye of the Sun (de Cenival 1988), which is dated to the second century CE and in which ethical ideas combined with popular wisdom are expressed in a series of animal fables—pieces of a literary genre already known by that time, and connected to the life and sayings of the famous sages Ahiqar and Aesop (Holzberg 1992). By the third century CE, the moral principles dictated in these sources were replaced by Christian ethics, which were based upon the norms set in biblical works and the Coptic wisdom tradition (Brunner-Traut 1979).

Bibliographic Notes

Most scholarly discussions of, and references to, Egyptian ethics are found in studies of Egyptian religion. This is evident in the earliest available bibliography on the topic, which includes works by James Breasted (1912, 1933), Jules Baillet (1912), Alan Gardiner (1914), and John Wilson (1948), among others. Led by the scholarship of Helmut Brunner (1963, 1966, 1988), the German school of Egyptology, which was heavily influenced by biblical studies, produced a number of important works on Egyptian ethics and the function of *maat* as the cornerstone of ethical thought and practice. Among others, Eberhard Otto (1977) analyzed Egyptian ethics briefly in the *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, Erik Hornung (1987) studied the relationship of *maat* with justice, while Jan Assmann (1990) produced an exhaustive study of the notion of *maat* that has become the main reference for all later scholars who have discussed Egyptian ethics (Junge 2003; Karenga 2004; Lichtheim 1992, 1997). Notably, some scholars have focused on specific ethical topics identified in the ancient written evidence (for example, Cariddi 2019 on the ethics of silence, or Cox 2017 on the ethics of war), while others, relying on the universality of ethical codes, have attempted to compare *maat* and Egyptian ethics with the ethical ideas and practices of other ancient cultures (for instance, Moreno García and Pines 2020). Overall, however, there have not been many recent studies on Egyptian ethics, because scholars are justifiably deterred by the risk of anachronistically and arbitrarily applying modern ethical theories that have primarily been based on classical philosophy onto a body of ancient evidence that was not as systematized or uniform as the types of discourse most modern ethicists are accustomed to examining. The scholarship produced thus far on ancient Egyptian ethics-related topics has not addressed the problems of methodology mentioned above nor the relationship between the development of ethics and the evolution of religious ideology and practice. The former relates to the issue of defining the degree to, and manner in, which literature in ancient Egypt might have reflected the reality of circulating ideas and principles. Regarding the latter issue, scholars should investigate further the way in which religious developments might have influenced the content and function of ancient Egyptian ethics. A good case study for this is the assumed growth of personal piety in the New Kingdom and Late Period, a theory that is still in need of being re-examined in the light of all the available sources—literary and documentary, archaeological and philological—combined.

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Figure 1. The biographical funerary stela of Somtutefnakht, also known as the Naples Stela (c. 330 BCE). Limestone; originally from Herakleopolis Magna. Naples National Archaeological Museum, Inv. 1035. (Photograph by Berthold Werner under Creative Commons license CC-BY-SA-3.0 via Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Napoli_BW_2013-05-16_15-59-57_DxO.jpg)