Maat (Egyptian truth/justice)

Maat refers to an ancient Egyptian normative view of reality, encompassing how things had originally been ordained and also how they were to be again. Egyptologists have variously translated maat as ‘truth’, ‘justice’, and ‘harmony’. Maat was an essentially-contested concept in ancient Egypt: in different texts and in different dynastic periods it is alternately depicted as the sole purview of the pharaoh, a virtue accessible to even lowly peasants, a kind of divine mandate for political legitimacy, something to distinguish Egyptians from foreigners, a force divinely created, or a moral authority to which even the gods themselves are subject. One who aspires to align their life with maat was called a maaty. A successful maaty was able to speak ritually with a moral authority that could not be denied and that was capable of bringing about the very normative realities which were uttered [see heka].

Maat was frequently deified, appearing as a woman with a feather in her hair, against which the heart-mind [see ib] of a deceased person was weighed in order to establish their admittance to the afterlife. The deified Maat also appears in ritual iconography in which she is offered for ingestion by the pharaoh or other gods. Maat was often juxtaposed with its putative opposite isfet, chaos or strife.

The political dimensions of maat—namely, its status as a sort of ‘mandate of heaven’ that can be maintained or compromised by political actors—remains a fruitful topic for intercultural philosophy. The metaphysical and metaethical underpinnings of such a seemingly ‘magical’ view of language also deserve further philosophical exploration, e.g. whether maat is naturalistic or non-naturalistic, realist or anti-realist, cognitivist or non-cognitivist, deterministic or indeterministic, etc.

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Literature:


Emily Teeter, *The Presentation of Maat: Ritual and Legitimacy in Ancient Egypt* (Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1997).