Ib (Egyptian heart-mind)

Ib (often transliterated as jb) refers to an ancient Egyptian conception of a person’s moral character. Ib may be thought of as a kind of heart-mind compound, insofar as it embodies capacities that are commonly considered both cognitive (viz. people think and formulate intentions with their ib) as well as conative (viz. people’s motivations, desires, and religious sentiments arise through their ib). Ib had a particular role to play in Egyptian soteriology, for it was the deceased’s ib that was weighed on a scale against the feather of truth/justice [see maat] while the deceased formulaically asserted the various sins of which they were innocent. Despite its metaphysical functions, ib was still conceived of in terms of the corporal organ, which was preserved inside the mummified body. Ib-shaped amulets were also a popular item in Egyptian apotropaic magic.

The moral psychology of the ib remains a frontier for Egyptological and comparative philosophical analysis. And the relationship of ib to other aspects of personhood which are recognized in different Egyptian texts—such as one’s name (ren), one’s animating life-force (ka), one’s distinctive personality (ba), the rest of one’s physical body (khat), etc.—would be a productive subject for future comparative explorations related to the morality and metaphysics of personal identity across time and mind-body interaction.

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Literature:


Miriam Lichtheim, Moral Values in Ancient Egypt (University Press Fribourg, 1997).
