The Metaethics of Maat

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Maat (*mȝ't*) was a central category in ancient Egyptian philosophy. Its extension covers the domains of both justice and truth, and it was frequently personified as a goddess with a special role in adjudicating the afterlife and justifying dynastic rule. *Maat* has long been recognized as integral to ancient Egyptian thought and there have been several sustained analyses of the roles it might play vis-à-vis first-order moral principles. Yet, there has been no systematic metaethical examination of it. In this paper, I argue that *maat* should be recovered as an important historical and cross-cultural contribution to metaethics. Specifically, I'll suggest that *maat* gives us a vision of the world itself as language-dependent in a way that disrupts key assumptions of the modern realist/anti-realist dichotomy.

Two caveats are in order. First, I dismiss from the start any prejudice that ancient Egyptian thought is not properly philosophical. Within Egyptology there has been much debate about how, or even if, we can talk about ancient Egyptian 'morality' in any way commensurate with modern Western sensibilities. Skeptics on this issue argue that the relevant source material from ancient Egypt belongs to the genre of 'wisdom' literature, in contrast with more systematic or self-aware 'philosophy'—somewhat along a parallel with the alleged *mythos*/*logos*

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distinction.[2] Such skeptics forget that, for most of the history of Western philosophy, it was taken as a truism that philosophical thought originated in places like Egypt.[3] For the purposes of our present analysis, I will simply assume that the material I'll be sourcing from ancient Egypt is at least generically 'philosophical' enough to justify our metaethical conversation with it. When, as we shall see, Egyptian texts make claims about souls, truth and reality, political legitimacy, theodicy, and proper forms of behavior, it certainly seems prima facie that they're doing something recognizably philosophical.

The second caveat is that, as with any comparative cultural endeavor, we must resist essentialism about ancient Egypt. 'Ancient Egypt' spanned thousands of years, and its inhabitants may not have accepted the diachronic identity we attribute to them today.[4] Moreover, the primary sources we'll be looking at frequently pertain mainly to royal and scribal classes, and so might not characterize the thought of laborers or other non-elites.[5] Furthermore, the material that ends up getting preserved through so many generations is sometimes pretty random. But in this regard, the hermeneutic challenges facing the present project are at least no greater than those facing other Egyptological or other comparative philosophical endeavors. With these two caveats in mind, let us look more closely at *maat*.

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[2] Assmann (1991), for instance, argues that we differentiate ancient Egyptian morality *proper* from the 'mere' hortatory injunctions of wisdom literature. For an argument against this, and a recognition of the hermeneutic necessity of linking the two domains, see Lichtheim (1997, 89-99). For an overview of the Egyptological debate concerning how best to characterize the genres of the relevant literature, see Lichtheim (1997, 1-8).

[3] See Park (2013, 70-74) for documentation about the forces and motives behind the gradual erasure of Egypt from the philosophical canon. James (1954) suggests that the ancient Greeks and Romans themselves recognized their philosophical debt to Egypt, although James contends that Hellenistic authors deliberately and systematically suppressed this fact. James's more controversial charges are expanded in Bernal (1987) and critiqued in Lefkowitz & Rogers (1996). The James-Bernal perspective has become formative within Black Studies interventions in Egyptology, where *maat* in particular has received special attention (e.g., Karenga 2004). Although the present investigation of *maat* is not aimed at the same political or reclamation projects as these other interventions, I hope it is consistent with them.

[4] For different perspectives on ancient Egyptians' sense of their own history, see the essays in Tait (2003).

[5] *Maat* does not, for example, seem to play a very prominent role in the archaeological materials we have from the ancient laboring community of Deir el-Medina—neither in the medical evidence (Borghouts 1994) nor in the visual or decorative elements of the village (Friedman 1994).

1. Truth, Justice, and the Egyptian Way

Egyptologists typically translate *maat* as 'truth' or 'justice', without much thought as to how that disjunction could be coherently inclusive or what kind of metaphysics of morals might be involved.[6] The word was graphically represented in slightly different ways, most commonly as either '�⌷' or just '⌷', but sometimes (less frequently) in its full phonetic form '⌷'. In inscriptions, it is often contrasted with a category called *isfet* (*iẕf.t* ⌷), typically translated as 'chaos' or 'strife'.[7] The etymology of *maat*—and we should be wary when we speak of 'etymology' in the context of a glyph-based script such as ancient Egyptian[8]—suggests straightness, levelness, and measure, and the word might be cognate with other words meaning 'direction/wish' (*mꜣꜥ* ⌷) and 'sacrifice' (*mꜣꜥ* ⌷).[9]

As a personified deity[10], Maat is depicted as a young woman with one or more feathers (possibly of an ostrich) atop her head (⌷), and often holds in her hands an animal-topped scepter (*wꜣs* ⌷) and an *ankh*-symbol of life (*ꜥnḫ* ⌷). She sits with other gods during the judging of the

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[6] Other prominent and more philosophically-loaded renderings include: "world order" (Anthes 1952), "integrative harmony" (O'Connor 2001, 163), "the status quo" (Tyldesley 1998, 71), "the totality of all social norms" (Assmann 1996, 127), and "the equilibrium which the universe has reached through the process of creation, enabling it to conform to its true nature" (Grimal 1988, 47).

[7] For a deeper analysis of the *maat*/*isfet* binary, see Harry Smith (1994) who makes the case that each category is the absolute negation of the other. *Isfet* is not the only word in ancient Egyptian for 'bad things' or 'evil', nor is it the only antonym of *maat*. But then again, neither is *maat* the only word used to refer to 'good things,' even in a moral sense: importantly, the aesthetic category *nefer* (*nfr* ⌷) has significant ethical extensions, ones that are also bound up with *maat* (see Cannon-Brown 2006, 10-18). However, *isfet* seems to have a somewhat wider and more cosmic scope than other negative terms, and it is *isfet* that occurs most explicitly in conjunction with *maat*. Hence, *isfet* is most germane to our present argument. See Bleeker (1966, 6n2-3) for a list of other words that occupy nearby semantic space with *maat* and *isfet*.

[8] For an analysis of some of the many ways in which Egyptian hieroglyphs defy modern Western assumptions about language, see Jespersen & Reintges (2008), who take particular aim at the Wittgensteinian tradition of treating hieroglyphs as 'pictures'—a tradition that has its roots in Europe's earliest (pre-Champollion) encounters with the hieroglyphs, when it was popular to think of them as crude, but perhaps mystical pictograms.

[9] Westendorf (1966, 202-25).

[10] Tobin (1989, 79) argues that the deified Maat was a later development of the basic moral category. Occasionally—e.g., *Unas Pyramid Text* 317 (Lichtheim 2006a, 40) and *Book of the Dead* 125 (Budge 1895, 193-202)—the goddess's written name or pictorial representation is given in a double form, perhaps signifying the dualism of *maat* as both divinity and moral category, or the fact that *maat* was considered cosmically all-encompassing (Budge 1895, cxix).

deceased's heart-mind (*ib* 𓄣), an image we'll be returning to later.[11] The goddess evolves to have special connections with the pharaoh: she becomes incorporated into the name (prenomen) of the ruler and the iconography of the royal throne even seems to take on her abstracted form, making her literally foundational to the pharaoh's political legitimacy.[12] Another recurrent motif renders Maat in miniature, where she is offered by the hand of the pharaoh to other gods who ritually ingest her.[13] It will bear to keep in mind such associations with names and rituals when we consider below the philosophy of language that seems to underwrite *maat*.

Independent of its deified form, *maat* appears prominently in moral teachings, especially in the Instructions (*sbꜣyt* 𓋴𓃀𓊃𓏭𓌪𓂧𓏏) genre, in lamentations about the fallen state of the world, and in evaluations of people's moral character or the success of a pharaoh's rule. Scribal autobiographical inscriptions frequently testify to their author's good character by declaring that he had been reliable in speech and not quarrelsome to others—two key features of *maat*, as we'll come to appreciate.[14]

One who would devote herself to *maat* is a *maaty* (*mꜣꜥty* 𓐙𓂝𓏏𓁦)—that is, a *maat*-aspirant. Succeeding as a *maaty* during one's life is sometimes presented as a necessary and sufficient condition for admission to the Egyptian afterlife (*dwꜣt* 𓂧𓄿𓏏𓇽). As famously depicted in the *Book of the Dead*, when a person dies—that is, when their animating life force (*kꜣ* 𓂓) has vacated their physical body (*ḫt* 𓄡𓏏𓄹)—what remains of them, their name (*rn* 𓂋𓈖), is presented before the gods (amongst them the goddess Maat) who weigh the contents of their heart-mind (*ib* 𓄣) on

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[11] See, for example, the stela inscription (British Museum 142) in Kitchen (1980, 218-19).

[12] For examples of the incorporation of *maat* into royal names, note for instance: Hatshepsut as *Maatkere*, Amunhotep III as *Nebmaatre*, Ramesses II as *Wsermaatre*, etc. The graphic similarities between *maat* and the throne are noted by Kuhlmann (1977, 94n1). For other symbolic associations of the pharaonic throne with *maat*, see Kuhlmann (2011).

[13] On the ingestion iconography and theology, see Faraone & Teeter (2004) who note similarities to depictions of the goddess Metis within Greek myth. A comprehensive analysis of the changing ways this ritual was depicted throughout the New Kingdom can be found in Teeter (1997). For an opposing view, which instead sees *maat* largely receding in ethical significance post-Amarna, see Assmann (1993).

[14] Lichtheim (1992) provides a comprehensive analysis of the way *maat* is expressed in Egyptian autobiographies.

a scale against the feather of *maat*.[15] The deceased must recite a formulaic litany of offenses of which they assert themselves to be innocent, and their heart-mind grows heavier any time they lie.[16] Thus, one's name is importantly bound up with who one essentially is, and salvation is reserved for those whose name measures up to their actions in life.

Precisely who could be a *maaty*, and how, were contested questions within Egyptian philosophy. Sometimes *maat* is depicted as universally attainable, other times Egyptians use it to distinguish themselves from barbarians.[17] Sometimes the pharaoh seems to occupy a special position as an earthly conduit of *maat* for the rest of the land.[18] Other times, even lowly peasants get to wield *maat* to speak truth to power.[19] And we find ancient dialogues that explicitly debate whether one can become *maaty* just through personal effort or whether some people's natures are hopeless.[20]

These questions about the scope and admissions criteria for being *maaty* aren't germane to our present metaethical investigation, but they do help illustrate the essentially contested and highly self-aware place of *maat* in Egyptian thought. What we can already appreciate metaethically is that, regardless of what special roles may have been envisioned for the pharaoh

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[15] The Egyptian conception of personhood is fascinating and complex, although we should not assume that there was necessarily any determinate or universally agreed-upon way of organizing the different aspects of personhood that are recognized in different texts.

[16] The *Book of the Dead* 125 (Budge 1895, 193-202) lists the 42 'negative confessions' the deceased must assert, corresponding to the 42 'assessors' (*ŝsw* 𓇌𓏤𓏥) who attend Maat and feed on *maat* and who each represent a different particular form of *isfet* to be avoided, e.g., theft, murder, etc.

[17] Janzen (2013, 12-17).

[18] For instance, *Pepi I Pyramid Texts* 573 tells us that the pharaoh uniquely "lives on/by *maat*" (Lichtheim 2006a: 49). Lichtheim (1997, 12) summarizes the pharaoh's role thus: "It was in himself that the Egyptian found the knowledge of Maat… The awesome king stood for righteous government, for he desired that Maat be done; but knowledge of Maat belonged to every man."

[19] For example, in the *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* (Lichtheim 2006a, 66), a governing magistrate comes to marvel at the *maat* of a lowborn and unsophisticated commoner.

[20] The debate about moral meritocracy is made explicit in the *Instruction of Ani*, where a father defends the egalitarianism of *maat* (noting that even a crooked stick left on the ground can be turned into a noble's staff) against his son, who subscribes to the more fatalistic and aristocratic view that "everyone is drawn by their own nature" (Lichtheim 2006b, 135-45). Similarly, the *Instruction of Ptahhotep* (Lichtheim 2006a, 66) asserts that one might become a "person of worth" (*s-ikr* 𓋴𓇌𓏤𓀀) solely through one's own efforts.

or scribal elites, *maat* is deeply concerned with *language*. To do or uphold *maat*, or to be *maaty*, is to *speak* and *be spoken of* in certain ways. As we have seen, being judged worthy of immortality is a matter of having one's *name* cleared and being weighed (literally) against one's *words*. The 'vindication' (*mꜣꜥ ḫrw* ⟤⟤⟤⟤) of a deceased *maaty* means literally "to be proven true by speech" or "to be true to one's words."[21] Thus, in order to better understand the meaning of *maat*, we must try to understand the background philosophy of language that was operative in *maaty* contexts.

2. The Khat is on the Maat: Philosophy of Language and Egyptian Ritual

Language is the primary generative force in Egyptian metaphysics. The inaugural act of the universe is creation *ex nihilo* by means of speech.[22] The tongue and the mouth are the dominant motifs of Egyptian cosmogony[23], with Ptah creating first by utterance and then by continuing to "control all things" by being "in their mouths".[24] Speaking is making, words constitute reality—this is performative utterance taken to an extreme.[25] (We'll be returning to speech-act theory at the end of section three below.) The words of mortals can partake of these divine powers. For instance, the pharaoh is able to "fell his foe with the power of his speech," which enables the cosmos "to glide on its way in joy."[26] Warriors are victorious when they act as

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[21] See for instance the Amarna tomb inscription of general Ramose (Hornung 1995, 102). And see Anthes (1954) for an overview of the contested translation history of *ḫrw* in this context.

[22] Perhaps in anticipation of the looming *ad infinitum* problem here, *Coffin Text* 1130 describes the first speaker as "he with the secret name."

[23] Note, for instance, the etymological associations of 'mouth' (*rꜣ* ⟤) with the fact that temples and shrines were literally 'mouth-houses' (*rꜣ pr* ⟤⟤).

[24] *Memphite Theology* (Lichtheim 2006a, 51-57).

[25] If it helps (it very well might not!), this somewhat magical view of language that I shall be attributing to Egyptian *maaty* ritual might be seen as roughly similar to a variety of historical views of *logos* as found, for example, within Hellenistic Stoicism and Middle Platonism, or in the *Gospel of John*, or even the so-called 'panlogism' associated with Hegel. (See Williams 2016 for an overview of different historical versions of the *logos* doctrine, and see Eisenberg 1990 for a critical assessment of the Hegelian version.)

[26] Text from Medinet Habu VI, plates 422-23 (Hughes, et al. 1963).

"creators through speech."[27] When a *maaty* speaks (*ḏd* 〄), "it happens…such a one is like a god."[28] And all people regardless of social position are enjoined not merely to make sounds, but to use specifically "divine words" (*mdw nṯr* 〄) and thereby to "speak as magic" (*ḏd m ḥkꜣ* 〄) and "fill the ears of Horus with *maat*."[29]

This generative power of speech extends to the physical world. Physical things decay, but can be recreated through the linguistic reinvestments that are expressed in the *maaty* rituals. The body or *khat* (*ḫt* 〄) is animated by the spirit (*bꜣ* 〄) that inhabits it, and bodies are preserved and renewed when their spirits are *maaty*. For then they respect and ritually participate in the recreation of the primordial order. In a literal way for the ancient Egyptians, bodies are at least partially constituted by normative relations we have to them, in terms of proper ritual observance and the accuracy of our memories and linguistic attributions. Within this philosophy of language, we might say, in good Analytic idiom, that the *khat* is (dependent) on the *maat*.[30]

The generative dimension of speech is also evident in ancient Egyptian lamentations, where strife and disorder (*isfet*) are described in terms of their muting effects on language. That there 'are no words' to describe suffering and chaos is not platitudinous, but literal—chaos disables the power of speech.[31] In the Egyptian language, silence (*sgr* 〄) is related to violence (*sgr* 〄). Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be violent. This semantic interplay gives rise to all sorts of interesting metonymies in Egyptian soteriology, where the dead are 'the silent ones' (*sgrw* 〄), the tomb is 'the city of silence' (*sgr.t* 〄), etc. To die is

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[27] *Instruction Addressed to King Merikare* (Lichtheim 2006a, 97-112).
[28] Schenkel (1965, 426).
[29] The *Apophis Book*, as quoted in Sethe & Helck (1958, 961.13; 1958, 1172.13).
[30] The pun works in the other direction too: the *maat* is also on the *khat*, as '*khat*' is a homophone for the sort of place for weighing (*ḫt* 〄) upon which one's soul was measured against the feather of *maat*, i.e., the *mḫꜣt*-scale (〄).
[31] E.g., the *Lamentation of Khakheperre-sonbe*: "O that I might find unknown phrases, strange expressions, new speech not yet uttered, free of repetitions" (Simpson 1973, 231).

to be silenced, to lose one's voice, to cease being spoken of. Immortality consists in being remembered and being reborn or recreated through having one's name preserved.[32]

This suggests that names enjoy a reified status in Egyptian thought. Things have 'true' and 'proper' names, the written expression of which is their mere 'shadow' (*šwt* ⬜𓃀𓏤) but which may be damaged by external forces. As we saw above, it's the name of the deceased person that waits in judgment for their heart-mind to be weighed against *maat*. In other texts, one of the worst fates to befall a person is for their name to 'stink' (*mk bḥ* 𓅓𓂋𓏤).[33] Many aspects of mortuary ritual were enactments of metaphysical preservation, with names playing an especially central role both in the funerary ceremonies themselves and in the regular liturgical observances that followed.[34] To erase the name of a disgraced pharaoh from inscriptions was not simply propaganda. Such erasure was metaphysical: by causing a name to be forgotten, that name was thereby removed from membership in the ontology of things—a kind of "semantic homicide."[35]

This is a reminder that hieroglyphs, being gifts from the gods[36], were less concerned with the communication of information, which we today might see as the essence of language, but were instead involved in a 'magical' (*ḥkꜣ* 𓎛𓂓) performance that was taken to bring about the very realities the glyphs expressed. To inscribe hieroglyphs was to participate in those realities. Very few Egyptians were literate, after all, and even scribes may often have not understood what

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[32] This is perhaps an unorthodox way of interpreting Egyptian mortuary religion, which has tended instead to be understood as committed to proto-Christian soteriological categories such as a transcendent rebirth in an 'afterlife'; but these latter preoccupations might reveal more about the post-Victorian heritage of Egyptology, emerging as it did out of Biblical studies, than about actual Egyptian ritual practice (Nyord 2018).

[33] This is the recurrent self-accusation voiced by the disgraced narrator in *The Man Who Was Tired of Life* (Simpson 1973, 205-206).

[34] Daily recitation of the deceased's name was performed by relatives (or commissioned professionals) at the tomb itself, at home, or in community shrines. For more on the distinction between funerary as opposed to mortuary observances in ancient Egypt, see Willems (2001).

[35] This excellent phrase is from Picardo (2007).

[36] The *Memphite Theology* tells us that "All divine speech [i.e., hieroglyphs] originated from that which was thought up by the heart and commanded by the tongue" (Lichtheim 2006a, 51-57).

they were copying, or if they did, it might not have occurred to them that the sacred words passed down to them could be recoupled in new ways to fit their whimsy.[37] Writing hieroglyphs was not an act of describing or documenting, but of creative articulation.[38] Such ritual words were "language offerings."[39]

This ontic dimension of Egyptian language is inextricably normative. Hieroglyphs and other ritual utterances reenact the original creation of the universe—the divinely-ordained way that things are supposed to be.[40] For this reason, there is no pattern of life that is not infused with normativity in some way; there is nothing (at least nothing that can be *spoken* of) to which *maat* is extrinsic. Speaking in ritually-appropriate ways means speaking in a way that is faithful to the real established natures of things—the way that things were and are supposed to be. Speaking *maat* means saying that "the land is as it was at the first time."[41] Upholding *maat* means therefore to "speak truly" and "silence" chaos and evil.[42]

As we saw earlier, in the *Book of the Dead*, the dead person's *name* is the object of the verdict and the deceased is judged according to whether their confessional assertions accurately match their past deeds and intentions. The imagery here is of the heart-mind as a kind of tablet upon which thoughts are written, thereby becoming memories. Memory is what conditions expectations of the future and what 'should' happen; and thus, memory is closely connected to *maat*. Finding the right words to remember—to memorialize upon the tablet of one's heart—is an act of moral creation. In the lamentation texts, chaos is characterized by an inability to engage

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[37] For an analysis of ancient Egyptian scribal training and practices, including evidence that both teacher and student were often ignorant of the meanings of what they copied, see Williams (1972). For more on how to understand 'literacy' in an ancient Egyptian context, see Baines (2007, 33-62).
[38] See Roccati (2003).
[39] Assmann (1996, 208).
[40] Cf., Baines's (1990) thesis about hieroglyphic expressibility being constrained by a principle of cosmic 'decorum'.
[41] Sethe & Helck (1958, 2026.19).
[42] *Coffin Text* 1130.

in this sort of moral generation. The turbulence of the present disrupts the continuity of past to future, thereby 'casting *maat* out' and leaving the heart 'unable to speak.' Without *maat*, there can be no language (*ḏd* 𓂧𓂡), for there would be no stability (*ḏd* 𓂧𓂡𓊽) upon which to ground shared meaning.[43]

This also allows us to make more sense of the autobiographical formulae in which scribes assert that, "There is no word against me on earth among men, there is no accusation in the sky among the gods, for I have annulled the word against me."[44] It's tempting to see such expressions as nothing more than preoccupations with the scribes' reputations, and to read "annulling words against me" as simply having avoided or rebutted any slander against oneself. But as we have seen, within the Egyptian conception of ritual language, words have ontic repercussions; genuinely annulling a word against oneself must involve that word not actually being true to normative reality, i.e., not being in accordance with the ordained and eternally-valid way that things once were and are supposed to be.

Thus, the creative powers of *maaty* language can be thought of as 'magical' (*heka*), in that they are grounded in a conception of ritual as ontically efficacious.[45] When a *maaty* speaks, she speaks in a ritually-appropriate way, and thus she speaks in a way that both hearkens to and recreates the ordained natures and true names of things.[46] Such 'magic' connects *maat* to the central Egyptian ritual category of *hu* (*ḥw* 𓁷𓏤) or 'authoritative utterance.' When "*hu* is in one's

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[43] See Assmann (1996, 143).
[44] *Pyramid Text* 302.
[45] If the connotations of the word 'magic' (the traditional translation for *ḥkȝ*) trouble the sensibilities of the modern secular reader, see the excellent overview of the contested nature of that term as a hermeneutic category within Egyptology in Ritner (1993, 3-13).
[46] It's important that the creative powers of specifically *maaty* language are not conflated with any old uttering whatsoever. Ritually-efficacious utterances (*heka*) are 'god's words' (*mdw nṯr* 𓂧𓀁𓊹).

mouth" then one's speech becomes "the shrine of *maat*" and stability and eternity are reinforced.[47]

To speak with *hu* is to speak in a way that is unchanging, both in the sense of keeping true to one's earlier words and in the sense of staying faithful to the natures of things as originally ordained by the gods. It is because the pharaoh speaks with *hu* that he has the moral authority that he does.[48] Mortals can attain a similar moral authority by also channeling *hu* through participation in the ritual language of *maat*. In the *Book of the Dead*, the *maat*-aspirant is vindicated by knowing the correct ritual names for the divine aspects of *maat*, and thus speaks with *hu* in a way that even the gods respect and fear (*snt* ⟨glyph⟩).[49]

Someone's success as a *maaty* may be contested or obscure during their own lifetime, but their moral virtue can be ascertained through a kind of ethical autopsy in the form of a special ceremony in which a mummy or other symbolic stand-in for the deceased would have its mouth ritually opened.[50] In addition to providing a symbolic way to feed the spirit of the deceased, this ritual also let the deceased symbolically speak. And when the deceased speaks during this ceremony, it is in the voice of *hu*, and therefore *maat*.[51] It's not that everyone who dies is universally virtuous, and therefore speaks with *maat* when their mouths are ritually opened. Rather, it's that the ritual action of the ceremony itself plays a causal role in making the deceased a *maaty*. For if one was beloved enough or influential enough to have one's descendants go

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[47] *Book of the Dead* 17 (Budge 1895, 35-37). The connection with stability and eternity is expressed in *Pyramid Text* 255. The language about *hu* being in the mouth, etc. is quoted in Gardiner (1916, 50). Blackman (1945) suggests that *hu* in the sense of generative, divine language is semantically as well as liturgically connected with the homophone and homonym *ḥw* ⟨glyph⟩, referring to food and the sense of taste generally, insofar as food offerings were sanctified with ritual language.
[48] See *Pyramid Text* 401, where the relationship between the pharaoh and *hu* is also described symmetrically, with the pharaoh listening to the words that a personified deity Hu (*ḥw* ⟨glyph⟩) speaks to him.
[49] *Book of the Dead* 78 (*Ani Papyrus*, plate 25; Budge 1895, 156-57).
[50] The Opening of the Mouth ceremony is described in the *Book of the Dead* 17 (Budge 1895, 35-37). For comprehensive documentation and analysis of the various depictions and episodes of the ceremony, see Otto (1960).
[51] *Coffin Text* 816.

through the effort of the ceremony, that very fact rebounds to one's moral character. The attitudes and memories which others have regarding us are realities not merely of those others; they are (post-mortem) realities about ourselves as well.[52]

This helps us see how *maat* can be understood as both justice and truth. Truth, on this account, is faithfulness to the primeval order. It is not correspondence to how things are, but to how things were and ought to be. Truth is normative in this way, and so takes on an aspect of justice in a coordinative sense: *maat* involves balancing (literally) names and deeds, and (re)syncing things with their ordained natures.

3. Realist or Anti-Realist?

Can such an ancient category teach us anything new today, and can contemporary metaethicists offer anything that can aid Egyptologists in the recovery of *maat*? To address these questions, we shall have to see whether *maat* can be situated within the debates and taxonomies of contemporary metaethics.

There are aspects of *maat* that pull in both realist and anti-realist directions. In the realist direction, we have the fact that no one can really alter *maat* insofar as it is based in the true natures of things as ordained in the primeval creation. *Maaty* language and practice are always compliant recreations of this original normative order. So, in this way, *maat* is deeply mind-independent. Indeed, even the gods themselves are largely passive perpetuators of *maat*'s independent reality: they merely "pass on what has been told to them" of *maat* by its personified

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[52] A plausible comparison here is to Aristotle's famous claim about one's *eudaimonia* being vulnerable to things that may outlive one or occur after one's death (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.11). See also Assmann (1996) who argues that the Egyptian sense of selfhood is 'constellational', in the sense that a person's metaphysical identity is intermingled with others on whom she socially depends (although Assmann does not develop that argument on the basis of either *hu* or the Opening of the Mouth Ceremony specifically).

voice—a moral authority all the gods fear.[53] Thus, *maat* seems resistant to any kind of divine command or voluntarist classification.

Furthermore, *maat* seems an unlikely candidate for naturalistic analysis.[54] As we've seen, *maat* is intimately bound up with divine forces and entities—*maat* was itself deified—that would seem to resist physical or scientific reduction. And if naturalism is to substantively contrast with anything, it's gods.[55] Thus, if *maat* pulls in the direction of realism, it would seem to be a quite 'robust' realism in virtue of its mind-independence and its non-naturalism.[56] However, one of the necessary conditions for a position to be robustly realist by contemporary standards is that it adhere to some version of a correspondence theory of truth, according to which being true (for at least some moral truths) is determined by some truth-maker that is existentially prior to and independent of the content of the truth-bearer in question. This kind of correspondence is thus committed to a dyadic relationship between mind and world, a relationship that keeps separate the mind-independent truth-makers (e.g., facts) from the mind-dependent truth-bearers (e.g., propositions). All card-carrying realists of sufficiently high levels of robustness agree with this priority and independence.[57]

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[53] *Book of the Dead* 78 (*Ani Papyrus*, plate 25; Budge 1895, 155-57).

[54] It will depend, of course, on how we understand what it is to be 'naturalistic'. (See Flanagan 2006 for a more comprehensive taxonomy of naturalism in ethics.) There are several ways in which, for instance, *maat* was taken to exist in the physical world, e.g., in the form of its incarnation as the feather against which one's heart-mind (again, conceived as a physical thing) is weighed (again, literally), and as the audible sounds expressed when the mouth of the deceased is ritually opened. Rather than try to settle whether *maat* is or is not naturalistic, I suggest the real lesson here for metaethicists is to recognize the variations in how the natural world is distinguished from the supernatural in the first place, which suggests that 'natural' is not a natural kind.

[55] Such a minimum threshold is part of what has been thought to constitute the 'charm' of the naturalist program (Stroud 1996). There are, however, those who allow for theistic varieties of naturalism—Adams (1979) has referred to his divine command theory as a kind of ethical naturalism, for instance—and such a possibility is left open by Pigden's (1991) formative definition of ethical naturalism as involving the reduction of values merely to "something else" (left unspecified).

[56] See Enoch (2011: 4). 'Robust' realists title themselves thusly as a way of distinguishing their view from 'minimal' realisms that might be more consistent with naturalism, constructivism, or response-dependence.

[57] Rogues' gallery of robust realists, and where they talk about or presuppose correspondence: Shafer-Landau (2003, 15-17), Wedgwood (2004, 410-12), Oddie (2005, 1-19), Enoch (2011, 2-8), and last and least DeLapp (2013, 18-23).

If we are correspondentists, as we must be to qualify as robust realists, we should see our job as epistemic agents to be the alignment of our beliefs with the external facts. By contrast, when we think of *maat* as involving 'correspondence' to the primeval normative order, we're no longer talking about correspondence in the same sense. For the primeval normative order is not merely inertly out there and moral agents are not ontologically passive with respect to it. Instead, the primeval normative order is itself a product of active linguistic creation and recreation. *Maaty* are not merely tweaking their beliefs to bring them in-sync with facts; they are also at the same time constituting (or re-constituting) those facts. This is still dyadic in a sense, but not in the robust realist's sense. Instead of mind-independent truth-makers and mind-dependent truth-bearers, with *maat* we have mind-dependent truth-makers (namely, the generative utterances of *hu*) but mind-independent truth-bearers (insofar as the language of ritual must be faithful to the natures ordained by the primeval creation). For example, when a tomb inscription avows that its occupant in life had acted "as a son to the aged, father to the child, protector of the poor" or had judged a dispute fairly and mercifully[58], the robust realist would view these as propositional claims that, in order to be true, would need to correspond to independent historical facts about the deceased. In the moral semantics of *maat*, however, the inscription itself must be treated as one of the relevant facts: it is formulated according to ritual rules and it testifies to the caring memories that ancestors (who oversee the inscription itself and also reenact it in subsequent mortuary commemorations) have about the deceased. Thus, the inscription possesses the moral authority of *hu* and ('magically') makes it true that the deceased was the good person he is being memorialized as.

This reveals a way in which, despite other affinities, *maat* fits very awkwardly into our modern taxonomies of moral realism. Perhaps we'll do better to see it as a kind of anti-realism.

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[58] Lichtheim (1992, 27-28).

After all, *maat* is fundamentally linguistic, a feature more commonly associated with modern anti-realism. As we've seen, being a *maaty* is at root a linguistic achievement. It involves being able to clear one's name from imputations, successfully assert the ritual litany of negative confessions before the tribunal of the gods, and have one's mouth opened post-mortem through the proper ceremony. The absence of *maat* is the absence of proper speech, and vice versa. In virtue of these dimensions, *maat* is also deeply interpersonal and relational. Being a *maaty* means being remembered and spoken of well by posterity. Truth, the other extension of *maat,* is created precisely through these linguistic and social acts: the original cosmic creation was through linguistic fiat by the divine, and mortals bring about realities through the ritual words they utter or inscribe.

All of these linguistic features might suggest that *maat* has anti-realist contours. The modern metaethicist asks, "What specific kind of anti-realism?" Given that we've just seen that *maat* has pronounced realist dimensions too, the best anti-realist analog could be so-called *quasi-realism,* as most prominently defended by Simon Blackburn; for what's supposed to be distinctive of quasi-realism is that it's as close to realism as one can get without bringing in extra-linguistic moral facts. In the remainder of this section, then, I'll briefly explicate quasi-realism and show how this makes sense of many elements of *maat*. The comparison will leave us with an interesting remainder, however, which I will argue reveals a neglected point of contact between realism and anti-realism. Ultimately, it's not that *maat* is (or is not) a feature of a language-independent world, and is therefore realist (or anti-realist); rather, in the Egyptian way of thinking, it's that the *world itself is language-dependent* in a way that disrupts key aspects of the modern realist/anti-realist dichotomy.

I take quasi-realism to involve three commitments. The first is a commitment to naturalism. Blackburn expresses this commitment by asserting that the raison d'être for metaethics is the "question of explanation, of 'placing' our propensity for ethics within a satisfactory naturalistic view of ourselves."[59] Such a view will presuppose that "there is none except a natural science of human beings."[60] The reader may be understandably surprised here by the claim that *maat* may be compared to quasi-realism if we've already seen the ways in which *maat* is not naturalistic. Bear with me. As we'll see, the fact that *maat* follows other key commitments of quasi-realism, even if not its naturalism, reveals something interesting about the internal logic of the quasi-realist position.

The second commitment of quasi-realism is non-cognitivism. Instead of asserting propositions, moral language expresses some kind of attitudinal or affective states which may then be foisted onto the world.[61] It's quite plausible to see *maat* as a version of non-cognitivism. The fact that *maat* rejects correspondentist truth would seem to require that *maat* must also reject cognitivism, insofar as all cognitivists must be correspondentists. More specifically, *maaty* language is not engaged in asserting propositions as truth-bearers that can be true or false in relation to any facts independent of that language itself. It's through the very act of speaking in the ritually appropriate ways (namely, with *hu* and *heka*) that moral 'facts' are generated. There are no truth-makers for *maaty* discourse outside that discourse itself.[62]

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[59] Blackburn (1993, 208).
[60] Blackburn (1993, 166).
[61] It's in virtue of such foisting that quasi-realism is sometimes also described as a kind of 'projectivism'.
[62] I'm focusing here on the fact that there are no moral truth-makers independent of *maaty* linguistic discourse. But we could also point to putatively cognitivist aspects of *maaty* discourse, such as the fact that, in addition to *hu*, it must involve *sia*, 'understanding' (*siꜣ* 𓋴𓇋𓄿𓀜). This still won't get us cognitivism by modern standards, because cognitivism implies correspondentist truth, to which *maat* is unsuited. But emphasizing the *sia* component of *maat* might mitigate how extreme a form of non-cognitivism we read into *maat*. Resolving the question of whether *maat* is ultimately cognitivist or non-cognitivist will come down to how we choose to divide beliefs from desires, a division which is not obviously recognized in all intellectual traditions.

What distinguishes quasi-realism from other anti-realisms is its third commitment, that the expression of non-cognitive states provides an acceptable functional equivalent to realist moral discourse.[63] Since realists are cognitivists, their moral discourse will have a degree of logical stability and structure in virtue of its propositional content (in conjunction with rational requirements). Quasi-realism is supposed to mimic this stability and structure, but without viewing moral discourse as having genuine propositional content. The functional equivalence is supposed to obtain at all levels of discourse, including the psychological level (quasi-realists truly feel their moral commitments in as serious a way as do robust realists) and the linguistic level (quasi-realists can convincingly use all the same moral predicates and hortatory injunctions as realists, passing a sort of metaethical Turing Test). The mimicry of realism at all these levels is what's *quasi* about quasi-realism.

This preoccupation with logical stability and structure is part of quasi-realism's response to the so-called Frege-Geach Problem, the problem of explaining how moral arguments can still follow deductive inference patterns despite not being propositional.[64] In this paper, I'm not interested in evaluating whether or not the Frege-Geach Problem is resolvable by quasi-realists. Rather, what's relevant to the present discussion is that it is precisely because quasi-realists take concerns about stable moral discourse so seriously that Frege-Geach is considered a problem by them in the first place. For if we weren't concerned with stable moral discourse, then it shouldn't bother us to concede that there is no deductive validity in the non-cognitivist readings of Frege-Geach. Moral discourse would just be a matter of different individuals expressing different

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[63] This at least is what 'modest' quasi-realists aspire to. More 'ambitious' quasi-realists, such as Blackburn himself, aren't satisfied merely with talking *as if* there were moral truths; they want to insist that there definitely *are* moral truths (even if those truths are given the sort of deflationary parsing discussed below). For the modest/ambitious division within quasi-realism, see Miller (2003, 77-81).

[64] For an accessible and comprehensive overview of the Frege-Geach problem, see Schroeder (2008a).

attitudes willy-nilly. But quasi-realists do take such stability seriously, and they want to find a way of securing it without defecting to cognitivism.

One of the ways quasi-realists have attempted to do this is by embracing a deflationary account of moral truth. According to the deflationary account, the invocation of truth in moral discourse adds nothing metaphysical that the discourse wasn't already committed to. Appending 'is true' to a moral utterance is merely a different way of articulating that utterance, perhaps more forcefully. Quasi-realists appeal to deflationary truth in order to imitate the stability and structure of realist discourse without the metaphysical baggage of independent truth-makers for moral sentences.[65] In the absence of independent truth-makers, this stability might be secured by certain epistemic and linguistic constraints—such as warranted assertibility or the satisfaction of whatever platitudes we have about the meaning of truth[66]—that govern what a speaker can and cannot get away with communicating, according to whatever are the rules of the particular language game they're playing. These rules are ultimately conventional, but they're not arbitrary and they can't be whimsically broken by participants, at least not if they wish to be understood by other players. The rules have all the stability and structure of the language-games of which they're a part, and that stability is all the quasi-realist needs in order to imitate the logical stability which regular realist discourse already has in virtue of its propositional content. Appealing to such epistemic or linguistic constraints would amount to what Blackburn calls 'fast-tracking' quasi-realism.[67] Fully fleshing out precisely how those constraints operate in the case of moral discourse will require the much wonkier 'slow-track' labor of developing a new

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[65] Blackburn and other prominent expressivists (e.g., Gibbard 1990) embrace deflationism. Granted, Wright (1992) and Horwich (1990) both claim that their versions of deflationism ('minimalism') are incompatible with expressivism. But I view Michael Smith (1994), Dreier (2010), and Price (2015) as convincing arguments not only that expressivism and deflationism are compatible, but that the former actually relies upon the latter.

[66] Such constraints are most famously developed by Wright (1992).

[67] The distinction between 'fast-track' and 'slow-track' ways of working out the deflationary aspects of quasi-realism is from Blackburn (1993, 184-86).

logic of attitudes, since on the quasi-realist picture of moral discourse, the expression of moral attitudes is supposed to replace the assertion of propositions.[68]

Comparing *maat* to this final commitment of quasi-realism—namely, the stability of moral discourse—reveals something interesting about both *maat* and quasi-realism. *Maat* shares with quasi-realism a deep commitment to stability and structure within moral discourse. However, *maat* secures that stability and structure in a very different way than does quasi-realism. *Maaty* language is an enactment of ritual and, in that context, it is vitally important that the agent accurately adhere to or reproduce the specific words, glyphs, and formulae that constitute the primeval normative order. That's the only way that moral language gets the 'magical' (*heka*) powers or moral authority (*hu*) that is has. This ritual adherence guarantees an analog of warranted or super-assertibility, serving as a structural constraint on discourse, which is precisely what quasi-realists wish to do. But making sense of *maaty* ritual constraints does not require establishing a whole new logic of attitudes. Thus, *maat* gives us an even greater degree of discourse stability and at a cheaper theoretic price compared to quasi-realism, while still keeping faith with quasi-realism's commitments to non-cognitivism and non-correspondentism.

What about quasi-realism's appeal to deflationism? Recall that the whole reason quasi-realists are attracted to deflationism is that they reject cognitivism. That is, they want there to be stability and structure to our moral discourse that's due to something other than propositional content anchored to mind-independent truth-makers. For these reasons, as we've seen, quasi-realism seems almost to entail deflationism. *Maat*, by contrast, is not so easily deflated. There is nothing minimal or anti-metaphysical about *maat*: when a *maaty* speaks, the truths that result are robustly ontic.

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[68] See Schroeder (2008b) and Weintraub (2011) for sophisticated efforts to develop such a logic.

We can appreciate this distinction between *maaty* discourse and deflationary discourse by attending to the sorts of speech acts each discourse involves. When it comes to creating moral reality through language, quasi-realists can see moral speech as illocutionary.[69] When I say "I do hereby solemnly swear," I am *ipso facto* making a promise—that's the illocutionary dimension of my utterance. Just so, according to quasi-realists, when I say "Murder is wrong," although the locution itself is grammatically propositional/cognitivist, that's merely a front for the illocutionary act of expressing an attitude. And for the quasi-realist, moral truths consist just in such expression. But *maaty* language is not like this. When the *maaty* says "I am attentive without equal, a good listener, well spoken"[70] or "I never let anyone spend the night angry with me about something,"[71] she is not just expressing attitudes (though she may be doing that too). Her utterance has an additional ontic power that the quasi-realist cannot accommodate; for the *maaty*'s utterance does bring about a moral reality that is mind-independent in the sense that it recreates a primeval normative order over which the *maaty* ritual agent has no control. Thus, while the quasi-realist sees moral language mainly in an illocutionary light, *maaty* language additionally recognizes *perlocutionary* dimensions, in that it brings about real external effects all by itself. Illocutionary force might fail to be realized, as when someone is not successfully intimidated by your attempted intimidation. But a perlocutionary act always succeeds by definition; if an utterance didn't have an outward effect, then it simply wasn't a perlocutionary act at all.[72]

To summarize, although both realism and quasi-realism approximate different aspects of *maat*, neither one is an exact fit. Instead, with *maat*, we have an exciting new metaphysical

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[69] Searle (1975) classes the expression of attitudes as a kind of illocutionary act.

[70] Stela of Mentuhotep (Cairo Museum 20539), line 8; quoted from Lichtheim (1997, 79).

[71] Giza inscription from tomb of priest *Wr-ḫww*, quoted from Lichtheim (1992, 9).

[72] Austin (1955, 121) phrases this difference between perlocution and illocution in terms of the former being 'natural' (i.e., creates tangible effects in the natural world) and the latter being 'conventional'.

combination: it is non-cognitivist without being naturalistic, it secures the desired stability and structure of moral discourse in a theoretically simpler way than quasi-realists can, and it does so moreover without needing to either metaphysically deflate truth or invoke discourse-independent facts.

4. Lessons for Modern Metaethicists

All this being said, I am not saying that *maat* should be the ultimately correct metaethics. The magical conception of language that undergirds *maat* is likely foreign and perhaps implausible to many contemporary metaethicists. Yet, even if we are not persuaded to adopt *maaty* metaethics, there are still important lessons which modern metaethicists can take away from this comparative endeavor.

First, *maat* should remind us that metaethics need not be as disconnected from first-order normative considerations nor actual lived experience as it is sometimes taken to be. *Maat*, after all, intersects all levels of morality: it is metaethical in its ontic and linguistic aspects, yet it also plays roles in political critique and ethical exhortation, and it has embodied expression through ritual practices. The question of what relationship, if any, metaethical positions have or should have to normative theory, applied ethics, and moral phenomenology has been a vexing one for contemporary theorists.[73] But for the most part, metaethical theorizing has tended to be unrecognizable to everyday moral agents and irrelevant to even other levels of moral philosophizing. The interpenetration of all levels of morality by a category such as *maat* can help

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[73] Some realists have argued for a reconnection of metaethics with these other levels of morality, e.g., Kramer's (2009) argument that moral realism is itself a first-order moral position. Anti-realists have instead tended to embrace a disconnect with other levels of morality. The whole point of Joyce's (2001) fictionalism, for example, is that what is metaethically fictional is nevertheless still efficacious at the first-order level. And Blackburn himself stresses that his quasi-realist can still talk, behave, and feel in ways indistinguishable (except metaethically) from individuals of realist persuasions.

modern-day metaethicists appreciate possible points of contact between a metaethical theory and other facets of moral life.

Second, *maat* exposes many of the presumed orthodoxies of modern-day metaethics to be culturally contingent. We might believe that the only way to be a non-cognitivist is to think of moral language as the expression of attitudes, but *maat* helps us see a different way of arriving at non-cognitivism, which really does not have much to do with non-cognitivist attitudes, but instead proceeds via the rejection of correspondentism. Similarly, the modern taxonomist might presuppose that all non-cognitivists are naturalists, or that all expressivists are deflationists. Taking *maat* seriously helps us see past these limitations, opening up possibilities for new metaethical hybrids. This can be especially attractive for anyone who might like most but not all of quasi-realism, or for someone who might lean strongly toward robust realism but harbor misgivings about correspondentist truth.

A third benefit modern-day metaethicists can take away from the study of *maat* is a new frontier for thinking about the philosophy of language. We have in ancient Egypt a very distinctive conception of the essence and purpose of language. Hieroglyphic language—the ritual language of normativity—is non-naturalistic and it is not primarily aimed at locution or the conveyance of information. *Maaty* discourse is perlocutionary through and through. This is not merely a conception of language as being capable of manifesting tangible extra-linguistic effects. Rather, it is a conception of language as deeply intertwined with the nature of reality and normativity. This is to view language as a kind of "material engagement…not merely a *means* but a very *way* of being."[74]

To conclude, *maat* was a fascinating metaethical achievement of ancient Egypt and modern-day philosophers have much to learn by undertaking a comparative study of it. This

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[74] Elias & Gallagher (2014, 382), though they do not touch on ancient Egyptian language specifically.

study reveals new ways of combining alternative accounts of language, nature, and truth—the

building blocks of metaethical positions. In seeking to recover the metaethical heritage of Egypt,

we might find encouragement in Plato's recommendation to look to history for both

philosophical inspiration and humility. In the *Timaeus*, we are told a story about Solon who, after

bragging about the accomplishments of his own modern civilization, is rightly chastened by an

Egyptian philosopher for his failure to appreciate the precedence of antiquity. Like Solon, by

neglecting comparative philosophy we run the risk of "becoming infants all over

again…completely unfamiliar with anything there was in ancient times."[75]

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[75] Plato, *Timaeus* 23b, translation following Zeyl (1997, 1230).

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