

ARTICLE

EMBODYING JUSTICE IN ANCIENT EGYPT: *THE TALE OF THE ELOQUENT PEASANT* AS A CLASSIC OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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This article is an introduction to an ancient Egyptian text called *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* and an argument that it ought to be seen as a classic of political philosophy. After contextualizing the tale as part of a tradition of moral and political philosophy in ancient Egypt, I explore the methods by which the text defines the proper roles of political authority and contrast its approach to justifying political authority with the argument from the state of nature so common in modern Western political philosophy. I claim that the tale's argument from dysfunction anticipates the move in contemporary Western political philosophy towards privileging non-ideal over ideal theory. I discuss challenges in translating the key term in the tale – *ma'at* – in light of the fact that it can be taken to mean 'justice' and/or 'truth'. Finally, I discuss how the irony at the heart of its narrative can lead us to interpret the tale as having either conservative or revolutionary implications for the political system it depicts.

KEYWORDS: ancient Egypt; Eloquent Peasant; justice; political authority; *ma'at*; non-ideal theory

When and where was political philosophy born? It may seem natural to look for the answer in ancient Greece, as we derive the term 'philosophy' from ancient Greece, and it is therefore reasonable to think that what the term referred to in that context should play a role in determining what we are willing to count as philosophy. It seems unreasonable, however, to let this determining influence cause us to completely restrict the term to intellectual practices found in ancient Greece and subsequent traditions built upon those practices, instead of working with some more general definition – say, for instance, philosophy defined as the activity of raising and seeking to answer, in a reflective and critical fashion, fundamental questions about the nature and value of things, about how we gain knowledge, and about how we ought to live our lives. Looking for the birth of political philosophy,

then, will mean looking for the point at which we as humans first began to pursue this activity in relation to matters of politics, that is, in relation to questions about the organization of power in society. While it seems impossible to pinpoint the moment such activity began in oral discourse, searching for a point of origin in the surviving written works of the past naturally leads us to the birthplaces of writing: Egypt and Mesopotamia.

I propose to offer, in what follows, an introduction to a rich and fascinating Egyptian text, written at least twelve centuries or so before the rise of Greek philosophy, and generally referred to by scholars as *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*. I will not treat the text as marking the very beginning of political philosophy, especially since I will claim that fully understanding its importance requires recognizing its place in a pre-existing tradition of thinking about morality and politics in ancient Egypt. I do, however, intend to suggest that political philosophers engaged in surveying, investigating, or teaching students about the *classics* of their field have good reason to revise the canon and provide a place at its chronological head for the *Eloquent Peasant*.

I will attempt to make the case for this claim in the following five sections. Section 1 provides a synopsis of the tale and some thoughts on its place in ancient Egyptian literature, including a broad defence of its philosophical importance. In Sections 2 and 3, I consider what might be described as the tale's methodology: its use of praise and blame to delineate the proper roles of political authority, and what I call – in contrast with the argument from the state of nature so prominent in modern Western political philosophy – its argument from dysfunction. Of special interest to those interested in topics in contemporary political philosophy will be my argument here that we can see the *Eloquent Peasant* as anticipating recent moves towards the privileging of non-ideal over ideal theory. In Section 4, I address the problem of how to translate and understand the central concept at the heart of the tale (and the larger tradition of which it is a part): *ma'at*. Finally, in Section 5, I discuss the question of how we ought to interpret the tale's ironic frame, differentiating between what I call conservative and revolutionary interpretations.

1. THE TALE OF THE ELOQUENT PEASANT AND ITS PLACE IN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN LITERATURE

The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant is thought to have been written in Egypt's Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 BC), and more specifically during the Twelfth Dynasty (1985–1773 BC), often considered a literary golden age.¹ The tale

¹For the chronology used here and elsewhere, see Shaw, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, 479–83. On literature in the Middle Kingdom, see Parkinson, *Poetry and Culture in Middle Kingdom Egypt*, and on the dating of the *Eloquent Peasant*, see Parkinson, *Poetry and Culture in Middle Kingdom Egypt*, 46, 48, 50.

itself takes place during the First Intermediate Period (2160–2055 BC), the time between the breakup of the Old Kingdom and the reunification inaugurating the Middle Kingdom. It begins with a peasant named Khunanup from the area known as Wadi Natrun (an oasis to the Northwest of what is now Cairo) telling his wife that he is going to Egypt (i.e. the Nile Valley) to get provisions.² Stocked with bread and beer to live on and a wide variety of goods to trade, he heads towards Heracleopolis, the capital of Egypt during the Ninth and Tenth Dynasties (2160–2025 BC). Before he gets there, though, he runs into Nemtinakht, a subordinate of the High Steward Rensi. Nemtinakht spontaneously devises a plan to steal the peasant's belongings. He sends a servant to bring a sheet from his house and he lays it on the narrow path between his barley crops and a body of water. When Khunanup tries to travel along the path, Nemtinakht warns him not to trample his clothes. Trying to heed this command leads Khunanup towards the barley, which he is also warned not to trample. Just as he is asking if he will be allowed to pass, one of his donkeys eats a bit of barley. Nemtinakht takes this offence as justification to seize the donkey and, when Khunanup dares to protest, Nemtinakht beats him and takes all of his donkeys. Khunanup cries out in grief and receives only more threats in return.

After a week of petitioning Nemtinakht to return his belongings, Khunanup goes to Heracleopolis to petition Rensi to intervene. Rensi sends a servant who reports back to him on what happened. When he discusses the matter with fellow officials, they are dismissive, questioning the need to punish Nemtinakht. Rensi remains, for the moment, silent. Khunanup comes back to petition him, giving the first of the extended speeches that take up most of the text and around which the tale is structured. Rensi is clearly impressed, as he goes to the king, Nebkaure, and tells him about the case, emphasizing the peasant's eloquence. The king advises Rensi to remain silent in order to provoke the peasant to speak more and furthermore to record his speeches in writing. He tells Rensi to provide sustenance for Khunanup's wife and children, and for Khunanup himself, but all without letting Khunanup know what he is doing.

Khunanup petitions Rensi eight more times, thus making a total of nine speeches. Each time, Rensi is either unresponsive or, in a few cases, hostile (as when, after the third time, he has Khunanup beaten). By the ninth time, Khunanup has begun to despair that justice will never be done and appears to be considering suicide. Rensi has Khunanup brought back to him and Khunanup assumes that he is to be punished, but instead Rensi

²It should be noted that, while the term 'peasant' has become standard in translations and discussions of the story, the Egyptian term used to describe the story's protagonist does not refer to an agricultural labourer but to a person from the countryside. Stephen Quirke, in his translation of the tale, has taken this point so seriously that he has opted to translate the term as 'marshdweller' rather than 'peasant'. See Quirke, *Egyptian Literature 1800 BC*, 151–65.

reveals that the petitions have been recorded and has them all read out. Renzi then presents them to the king, who is extremely pleased with them and who tells Renzi to go ahead and judge the case. Renzi does, punitively awarding Khunanup all of Neminakht's property.

In his introduction to his 1923 translation of the tale, famed Egyptologist Alan Gardiner compares it to *The Tale of Sinuhe*, the celebrated story of an official who, after the assassination of the king, flees to Palestine and attains success and power there before returning to Egypt as an old man. *Sinuhe* is not only thought to have originated in the same era but also was preserved in manuscripts written by the same Twelfth Dynasty scribe who best preserved the *Eloquent Peasant* for us. Gardiner's comparison is not favourable to the *Eloquent Peasant*. He writes

But whereas the simplicity of the story of Sinuhe, its conciseness, its variety of mood and its admirable felicity of expression make it a great literary masterpiece, the same praise cannot be given to the tale of the Eloquent Peasant.

(Gardiner, "The Eloquent Peasant", 6)

He is willing to deem the narrative portions of the tale 'straightforward and unobjectionable', but, in his view, 'the nine petitions addressed to Renzi are alike poverty-stricken as regards their ideas, and clumsy and turgid in their expression' (Gardiner, "The Eloquent Peasant", 6).

A very different and, I would say, more accurate judgement emerges in the more recent work of R. B. Parkinson. In his introduction to his own translation of the tale, he notes that the plot is only 'deceptively simple' (Parkinson, *Tale of Sinuhe*, 54). Note, first of all, the deep irony at its heart:

The eloquence which ensures the peasant's success is also the cause of his prolonged suffering: he is so eloquent that, after the first introductory petition, the king commands that no response be given, simply to force him to continue talking.

(Parkinson, *Tale of Sinuhe*, 55)

This irony creates 'a continuous dichotomy between the actual audience's awareness of the situation (shared with the fictional audience of the High Steward) and the peasant's awareness' (Parkinson, *Tale of Sinuhe*, 55). As for the petitions, Parkinson claims that their 'rhetorical exuberance' helps make the tale 'a dazzling display of poetry as entertainment and impassioned expression' (*Tale of Sinuhe*, 55). Both in his introduction and in the extensive notes he appends to his translation, Parkinson identifies in the petitions 'a rapid play of ideas and a high level of imagery, with frequent repetition of keywords, syntactic patterns (such as a series of negative constructions), motifs of imagery, and heightened recollections of earlier phrases' (*Tale of Sinuhe*, 55). Providing a wonderful example of the tale's complex but integrated structure, he points out the way that tonal shifts within the petitions

(‘from eulogy to denunciations, from subtle criticisms to direct abuse’) serve to express the peasant’s mounting anxiety (Parkinson, *Tale of Sinuhe*, 55).

Parkinson does a great job, in my view, of directly countering the suggestion that the *Eloquent Peasant* fails as a piece of creative literature. What Parkinson is less direct in confronting, and what is of greater importance to me, is Gardiner’s charge that the petitions and thus the tale as a whole are ‘poverty-stricken’ on the level of ideas. I will, therefore, try to build upon but go beyond Parkinson in showing that Khunanup’s petitions and the complex interaction between these petitions and the frame story are rich not only stylistically but *philosophically*.³

It is helpful in this regard to take seriously a connection Parkinson makes while arguing that the tale displays ‘a fusion of various genres’ of Egyptian literature (“Literary Form”, 167). Among the genres he identifies is that commonly known in English as *instructions*. Some of the best-known works of this type include: *The Instruction of Prince Hardjedef*, *The Instruction Addressed to Kagemni*, *The Instruction of Ptahhotep*, *The Instruction Addressed to King Merikare*, *The Instruction of King Amenemhet I for His Son Sesostri I*, *The Instruction of Amenemope*, and *The Instruction of Ankhsheshonq*.⁴ What is characteristic of the genre is that the writer addresses someone for the sake of giving advice. Hardjedef, for example, in what some take to be the oldest instruction we have, advises his son: ‘Cleanse yourself before your (own) eyes, / Lest another cleanse you’ (Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1, 58).

Together with autobiographical tomb inscriptions, which from an equally early period begin to feature catalogues of the virtues of the deceased, I believe early instructions like Hardjedef’s lay the groundwork for a tradition of moral philosophy.⁵ The point is not simply that Hardjedef’s advice is an exhortation to moral behaviour. People can be found encouraging each other to behave in this or that way, on moral grounds, on an everyday basis. They need not be engaged in the activity of *reflecting on what is fundamental to living a morally good life*, reacting as they are to this or that particular situation. The scenario set up by the format of the instruction, though, necessarily gives a different weight and character to the writer’s words. This

³It is significant, I think, that the French Egyptologist François Chabas, the first to translate any of the *Eloquent Peasant* into a European language, warned that translation is made difficult precisely because we are dealing here with a composition ‘de nature philosophique’. See Chabas, *Les papyrus hiératiques de Berlin*, 15.

⁴The titles used in various publications of and references to these works vary in wording and spelling, given their partially modern provenance. I have followed here the titles and attempted chronological order found in Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vols 1–3. Each of these works can also be found in Simpson, *Literature of Ancient Egypt*.

⁵For an example of an early funerary autobiography with this feature, see the *Inscription of Nefer-Seshem-Re Called Sheshi*, from the Sixth Dynasty (2345–2181), which reads in part: ‘I gave bread to the hungry, clothes <to the naked>, / I brought the boatless to land. / I buried him who had no son, / I made a boat for him who lacked one’. See Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1, 17.

special message from a father to his son, in the case of Hardjedef, is clearly meant to summarize *the* – or at least *some of the* – most important things to know about how to think, how to act, and how to purposefully construct one’s character so as to be a good person likely to flourish.

Unsurprisingly, then, by the time we get to instructions like *The Instruction of Ptahhotep* – the most famous in the genre – we find that hallmark of philosophy: *explicit argument*. Ptahhotep, a retiring vizier instructing his son, begins with this directive concerning epistemic humility: ‘Don’t be proud of your knowledge, / Consult the ignorant and the wise’ (Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1, 63). He then *offers reasons* for accepting this egalitarian norm:

The limits of art are not reached,
 No artist’s skills are perfect;
 Good speech is more hidden than greenstone,
 Yet may be found among maids at the grindstones.

(Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1, 63)

While one should be careful about drawing too sharp a line in this tradition between ethical instructions and political ones, let us turn now to works more clearly in the latter category. Among the most notable of these is the *Instruction Addressed to King Merikare*, which is written from the point of view of the old king, Merikare’s father, addressing his successor.⁶ At times, the instruction seems primarily concerned with the question of how to keep power: it begins, for example, with advice concerning the identification and suppression of the rebellious. But, at other times, the focus on maintaining power gives way to arguments concerning *what is just*. ‘Advance your officials, so that they act by your laws’, the king advises, but not simply because a happy bureaucracy is a loyal one:

He who has wealth at home will not be partial,
 He is a rich man who lacks nothing.
 The poor man does not speak justly,
 Not righteous is the one who says, ‘I wish I had’,
 He inclines to him who will pay him.

(Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1, 100)⁷

⁶In his recent *World History of Ancient Political Thought*, Antony Black writes: ‘The *Instruction to Merikare*, written between 2100 and 1800 BCE, is the oldest political treatise’. See Black, *A World History of Ancient Political Thought*, 25.

⁷Vincent Tobin translates the first line of the indented quotation as ‘he whose house is wealthy will not take sides (against you)’, but the context clearly favours Lichtheim’s rendering. See Simpson, *Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 156.

There is a serious argument here about the relationship between the wealth of the bureaucracy and the ability to create a society administrated by the just rather than the corrupt. This is not merely straightforward *realpolitik*, but sophisticated normative political theory.

This brings us back to the *Eloquent Peasant*, which has a fascinating possible connection to *Merikare*: the king in both texts may be the same person, Nebkaure of the Tenth Dynasty (Parkinson, *Tale of Sinuhe*, 212). This possibility deepens the profound irony involved in the way that the *Eloquent Peasant* partakes in the instruction genre. As Parkinson notes, the tale's petitions often capture the style of instructions, with their injunctions and pithy statements. But, while the standard instruction is structured around the contrast between 'the established office of the teacher and the "liminality" of the junior person', in Khunanup's case 'it is the "liminal" peasant, from the edge of society, who is the teacher of a senior official' (Parkinson, "Literary Form", 168). This is a striking role reversal. What does it mean for a disempowered peasant rather than a recognized superior, like King Nebkaure, to be the source of practical wisdom? Is it possible to see this as a direct attack on the sentiment in *Merikare* that 'the poor man does not speak justly'? To what extent might this be meant as an attack on the entire hierarchical structure of ancient Egyptian society?

The *Eloquent Peasant*, given its ability to raise questions like these, stands out, in my view, as the crown jewel in the moral and political philosophical tradition constituted most prominently by the instructions but in which this unique narrative also participates. Properly interpreting the tale, I would argue, thus involves both (a) exploring what it adds to this tradition through the content of Khunanup's petitions and (b) thinking through the way the frame story's topsy-turvy revision of the instruction genre further shapes its overall philosophical stance. I will attempt to accomplish these tasks – or at least suggest how they might be accomplished – over the course of the following sections.

2. PRAISE, BLAME, AND THE ROLES OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY

The first step in analysing the philosophical content of Khunanup's petitions is understanding the form this content takes. Examining the shifts in tone mentioned by Parkinson is, I think, the place to start. The dominant mode of address in Khunanup's first petition is *praise*. In language echoing the catalogues of virtues in funerary autobiographies, he exalts Renzi as 'a father to the orphan and a husband to the widow, a brother to the divorced, an apron to the motherless' (B1 93–5; Parkinson, *Tale of*

Sinuhe, 60).⁸ Khunanup's second, third, fourth, and seventh petitions likewise begin with praise.

As the second petition continues, though, we find a series of shifts, somewhat subtle as they come but cumulatively drastic. After praising Rensi by calling him the '[h]elm of heaven', the '[b]eam of earth', and the '[p]lumb-line bearing the weight', Khunanup transitions to injunctions: 'Helm, drift not / Beam, tilt not / Plumblin, go not wrong' (B1 121–3; Parkinson, *Tale of Sinuhe*, 63). Soon he is invoking the wrongness of 'a balance that tilts' (B1 127; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1, 173). This oblique reference and others are then, finally, followed up by a direct accusation of injustice: 'Lo, justice flees from you / Expelled from its seat!' (B1 128–9; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1, 173).⁹ From praising Rensi, Khunanup has gradually moved to *blaming* him.

I intend the term 'blame' here in a broad manner, referring to a number of related ways in which Khunanup addresses Rensi: general complaint (as when he laments that, because of Rensi's inaction, '[g]oodness is destroyed'); direct accusation (as when he charges Rensi with benefiting from his misfortune, saying 'your heart [is] greedy'); and unvarnished abuse (as when he fearlessly calls Rensi a 'fool' and an '[i]gnorant man') (B1 228, 148, 249–50; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1, 177, 174, 178). Khunanup's shifts from praise to blame are a significant source of meaning in the tale. Parkinson's insight into the tale's literary structure, as we have seen, is that these shifts have the emotional effect of expressing Khunanup's ever-increasing desperation. For my part, I wish to argue that this alternation between contrasting modes of address also has the philosophical function of expressing ideas about the proper roles of political authority in a society.

Seeing the praise and blame in the *Eloquent Peasant* as means of philosophizing may at first run into the worry that it is difficult to see someone's statements as representing a philosophical position if these statements are contradictory, and the alternation between praise and blame in the petitions might seem to warrant this charge. Thus one way to interpret these alternations is to see Khunanup as rapidly changing his mind, displaying no stable position whatsoever. Another option would be to say that, while these petitions do not provide us with a display of philosophy, they do provide a display of *rhetoric*: what is stable is Khunanup's goal of gaining redress and he is willing to say whatever is rhetorically efficient in order to achieve this goal, even if

⁸On the relation of these lines to funerary autobiographies, see Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe*, 77n17. Quotations from *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* will be cited with manuscript and line numbers as well as identifications of the translation used. There are two systems of line numbers: the 'old' numbers and the numbers in the most recent scholarly edition of the original text: Parkinson, *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*. I will cite Parkinson's numbers.

⁹'Justice' = *ma'at*.

this leads to saying inconsistent things. An immediate problem with this interpretation, however, is that it seems unlikely that a purely strategic approach to convincing a powerful government official to provide one with assistance would ever lead one to opt for the kind of harsh accusations and abuse that Khunanup lobs at Rensi.

More importantly, both this interpretation and the one according to which Khunanup is changing his mind back and forth are ruled out by a careful reading of the petitions, for there is no lack of consistency *in the ideas they express*, despite the fact that praise and blame (i.e. their modes of expression) are opposites. The praise and the blame in the petitions are, on the contrary, unified by their shared portrayal of the functions and responsibilities of those upon whom political authority is bestowed. When Khunanup praises Rensi, he provides us with a direct description of what political authority ought to look like. When Khunanup blames Rensi, he provides us with an indirect description of what political authority ought to look like through description of what has gone wrong when there has been a failure to uphold the ideal.

Let us consider the account that emerges. I will highlight three roles that Khunanup delineates for the holder of political authority: *leader*, *safeguard*, and *creator of good*. The duty of leadership, which is in a sense a master duty that includes the others, is explicitly mentioned in the praise of the first petition ('Leader free of greed', B1 96–7; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1, 172) and is then, I would argue, more creatively invoked in the boat metaphors of the second petition. As the helm of heaven, a political figure is a divinely ordained source of guidance for society, steering it in the right direction.

We can return to the praise of the first petition for images of the political figure as safeguard: father to the orphan, husband to the widow, brother to the divorced, and motherly figure for the motherless. In all these cases, either calamity has struck or one has been so unfortunate as to have never had the essential protective human connection indicated. The role of political authority is to make up for this absence. Moving beyond the real charity due to actual orphans, widows, etc., I take the general point here to be that nature or society can sometimes render one defenceless or without necessary support – in other words, exposed to harm. The role of political authority, then, is to safeguard the people against harm.

Pursuing this question of the role of safeguard further, let us begin to consider the ways Khunanup invokes the role when blaming rather than praising Rensi. By his inaction, Khunanup charges, Rensi has ceased to play the role of safeguard: 'If you avert your face from violence, / Who then shall punish wrongdoing?' (B1 198–9; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1, 176). The vulnerable are thus left without support and the dangers of the world go unchecked. The fourth petition includes this lament:

Who now sleeps till daybreak? Gone is walking by night, travel by day, and letting a man defend his own good cause. (B1 232–4; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1, 177)¹⁰

In passages like this, we see an attempt to paint a picture not merely of a single wronged individual, but rather of the consequences for society generally of abdications of responsibility on the part of those in power. A society in which political authority does not play its role of safeguarding against harm, this passage suggests, is an anxious society in which people no longer feel free to rest, move about, or express themselves.

What makes Khunanup's critique of Rensi particularly sharp, though, is that he is not satisfied with the charge that Rensi has allowed wrongdoing to go unpunished. Rensi is further charged with having become a wrongdoer himself: 'the punisher of wrong does evil' (B1 133–4; Parkinson, *Tale of Sinuhe*, 63). This charge is not based on anything Rensi has been witnessed doing above and beyond his inaction. It certainly derives, at least partly, from suspicion about the cause for this inaction: Khunanup repeatedly claims that greed is motivating Rensi, thereby suggesting that Rensi is enriched by siding with Nemtinakht, presumably through bribery or sharing the stolen property. But it often seems as if all that is sufficient for the charge of wrongdoing is the failure to intervene. Consider the following accusatory passage, from the fifth petition:

You were appointed to judge complaints,
 To judge between two (disputants), and to curb the thief when he steals.
 But behold, your actions are a support of the thief;
 Men trust you, but you have become a transgressor.
 You were appointed as a dam for the destitute
 That he might not drown,
 But behold, you are a torrent raging against him.
 (B1 265–70; Simpson, *Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 38)¹¹

The imagery of a raging torrent is ironic, since what Khunanup has met with from Rensi is, above all, silence and stillness. But, simply by thus failing in his appointed role as safeguard, Rensi allows the power wielded by political authority to strengthen, rather than weaken, evil.¹²

This brings us back to the question of leadership. If the task of political authority is to steer society in the direction of right and if failure to safeguard the people against harm makes political authority a source of wrong, then the failure to safeguard against harm obviously entails a failure to lead. Khunanup expresses this point by repeatedly characterizing Rensi's wrongdoing

¹⁰Parkinson: 'making a man attend his good true right'. *Tale of Sinuhe*, 68.

¹¹Translated by Vincent Tobin.

¹²This is why, as Matthew Light writes, '[t]he peasant may be *angry* at Nemtinakht, but he is *indignant* at Rensi'. See Light, "The Power of the Law", 112.

as a matter of failing to set an appropriate *example*. He describes Rensi, for instance, as ‘a district overseer who should beat off the plunderer who has become an archetype for the evildoer’ (B1 224; Parkinson, *Tale of Sinuhe*, 67). Leadership involves acting in such a way that it will be good for people to imitate you: ‘You should be the model for all men, but your affairs are crooked!’ (B1 292–3; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1, 179).¹³ As I understand it, the claim being made here is that political authority sets the tone, good or bad, for society as a whole, and this is why inaction against evil – and certainly any collusion with it – is not only a failure to prevent harm, and not just a kind of harm in itself, but also *a means of multiplying harm*.¹⁴

Besides leadership and safeguarding against harm, though, there is a third responsibility of political authority I have not yet discussed: the creation of good. In a move that should remind us of the critique of libertarianism from the perspective of the liberal and socialist left, Khunanup suggests that it is not enough to simply eliminate and avoid harm. As the seventh petition comes to a close, we find this powerful set of accusations:

There is none quiet whom you made speak,
 none sleeping whom you roused,
 none obtuse whom you enlightened,
 none with shut mouth whom you opened,
 none ignorant whom you made wise,
 none foolish whom you educated.
 Officials are men who beat back evil, they are lords of goodness,
 they are craftsmen of creating what is, joiners of the severed head!

(B1 316–20; Parkinson, *Tale of Sinuhe*, 71–2)¹⁵

The role of political authority in society, on this view, includes not only the negative task of preventing harm but also the positive task of producing better, fuller lives for people. As ‘craftsmen who create what is’ (Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1, 180), it is within the power of those who hold authority to elevate people beyond their current status. It is especially interesting to read in this passage a defence of the importance of education, and perhaps even of education made more widely available. If, as I suggest in this essay’s final section, there is a possible interpretation of the tale’s frame story such that it is a general defence of a more egalitarian society, this

¹³Parkinson: ‘You act the same as everyone; your surroundings are awry, you who should be right!’ *Tale of Sinuhe*, 70.

¹⁴I take this to be the meaning behind Khunanup’s pithy statement: ‘Pass over a misdeed, and it will be two’ (B1 246; Parkinson, *Tale of Sinuhe*, 68).

¹⁵Regarding ‘none obtuse whom you enlightened’, see also Tobin: ‘none who were exhausted whom you have revived’. Simpson, *Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 40.

expression of the ideal of spreading education clearly functions as a component of that argument.

3. THE ARGUMENT FROM DYSFUNCTION

At this point, though, it is worth taking a step back and thinking more about what it means to try to make sense of political authority in the way I have suggested the tale does. Clearly, from the perspective it encourages us through Khunanup's eloquence to share, political authority is (a) necessary but (b) must meet certain criteria in order to serve its necessary purposes. The tale addresses, in this way, a set of issues that have been central to modern Western political philosophy: the justification for and proper limits of political authority.¹⁶ It is, therefore, illuminating to compare and contrast the tale's approach to deciding these matters with the best-known approach in the modern Western tradition: the formulation of arguments about why we need the coercive power of government and what limits, if any, ought to be placed on its power in terms of why and how we should want to leave *the state of nature*, that is, a state of affairs in which there is no government. The idea of the state of nature or something much like it has, of course, served as the starting point for reflections on politics by many of the biggest names in Western philosophy: Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, Rousseau, Kant, Rawls, and Nozick. Do we find anything like it in the *Eloquent Peasant*?

An intriguing passage in this regard can be found in the third petition, shortly before Khunanup calls Rensi a pattern for the criminal. It reads:

Look, you are a town without a mayor,
like a generation without a great man,
like a boat with no controller,
a gang without a leader.

(B1 220–2; Parkinson, *Tale of Sinuhe*, 67)¹⁷

The point here, as I understand it, is that bad political authority is akin to no authority. By raising the spectre of no authority, the tale seems to open up a link to the idea of the state of nature. Beginning with Hobbes, it is central to the argument of many theorists who deploy the idea that there is a level of vulnerability in the state of nature that only the transition to civil society,

¹⁶It is interesting that it is easier to connect the tale to these themes in modern Western political philosophy than it is to some of the themes that dominate ancient Western political philosophy, such as the comparisons between various types of rule or constitutions found in Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics*.

¹⁷Regarding 'a gang without a leader', see also Lichtheim: 'A company without a chief'. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1, 177.

with its establishment of political authority, can eliminate. We can relate this to the claim in the petitions of the *Eloquent Peasant* that the task of political authority is to safeguard people against harm.

But, of course, to recognize such a link is not the same as saying that the *Eloquent Peasant* is structured around an argument from the state of nature. Neither in the frame story nor in the petitions do we find the idea that we can get clear on the nature of justice by thinking about a starting point outside organized society and then imagining why and how we might go from there to an ordered state of affairs in which rules governing conduct can be impartially enforced.¹⁸ Indeed, it is important to remember that even the suggestion that bad authority is akin to no authority is a suggestion about what *an organized society with a government* is like under certain circumstances. And there are clear limits to this suggestion: when Khunanup treats bad authority as involving setting a bad example, he suggests that bad or incompetent authority is in some ways quite far from being like the absence of authority – it is rather an operative presence, influential in its badness.

The approach to justifying the need for political authority that emerges in the *Eloquent Peasant* is, therefore, not an argument from the state of nature but what I would call an *argument from dysfunction*. We are not presented with a scenario in which we start society from scratch, as in the state of nature, but rather – interpreting things for the moment from Khunanup's perspective – a scenario in which something in society has gone wrong, in which things are not working as they normally do. Indeed, reading the petitions, the picture that emerges is, as we have said, not simply of one individual suffering an injustice but rather of an entire society verging on chaos as a result of the evil unleashed and furthermore supported by the weight of political authority gone bad.

What do we gain from considering this type of catastrophic picture? The idea, I take it, is that when we watch things break down, it is possible to see with clearer vision the purpose and value – or the lack of purpose, value, or both – of the affected institutions. The routine of the normal, everyday functioning of institutions – even harmful ones – can lull us into taking them for granted, instead of bringing a critical eye to their foundations, characters, and effects. Khunanup's experience of dysfunctional political authority provokes his articulation of the purpose and value of political authority: its purpose, he argues, is to provide leadership, safeguarding against harm, and the creation of good, and its value is thus positive or negative depending on whether these tasks are accomplished or neglected. Indeed, perhaps the

¹⁸It would be a mistake, though, to think it is simply obvious that this emblematic idea of modern political philosophy would not be found in an ancient text, for the Chinese philosopher Mozi (480–390 BC) includes an argument from the state of nature in his justification of political authority. See Chapter 11 of *Mozi* in Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 65–8.

most illuminating way to think about the use of praise and blame in the petitions is in relation to this scale of possible value: when praising Rensi, Kahunanup demonstrates the gracious awareness that we ought to have of the necessity and beneficial nature of functioning political authority, while, when he blames Rensi, he displays the forthrightly critical attitude we ought to have in relation to dysfunctional authority, given the danger we face in its wake.

It is fascinating to consider the relationship between this argument from dysfunction and an important debate in Western political philosophy today: ideal vs. non-ideal theory. Reacting especially to the immense influence of Rawls, proponents of non-ideal theory have argued that it is wrong to think that doing normative work requires abstracting away from actual conditions in real-life societies in order to determine what justice would look like.¹⁹ For example, in his recent book, *The Idea of Justice*, Sen draws a distinction between Enlightenment approaches to thinking about justice that have ‘concentrated on identifying perfectly just social arrangements’ and those that have involved ‘comparisons of societies that already existed or could feasibly emerge’ (*Idea of Justice*, xvi, 7). Associating the former approach with Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and Rawls, he defends the latter, comparative approach: ‘if we are trying to choose between a Picasso and a Dalí, it is of no help to invoke a diagnosis ... that the ideal picture in the world is the *Mona Lisa*’ (Sen, *Idea of Justice*, 16).


If not neatly and totally fitting into such categories, the argument from dysfunction in the *Eloquent Peasant* nevertheless seems to me to prefigure in important ways the non-ideal, comparative alternative to ideal theory. Sen’s list of thinkers who seek to describe perfect justice replicates most of the list of those who have appealed to something like the state of nature; this is because the implication of that approach is that we must erase the image of society as we currently know it in order to envision the best possible society humans could create. The implication of the argument from dysfunction, on the other hand, is that seeing things go bad is the best way to know how it would be good to see them go. If I am right in making this contrast and connection, the significant result is that the *Eloquent Peasant* can be seen as close to the cutting edge of contemporary political philosophy!

4. ANALYZING MA’AT

As useful as it is to draw contrasts and connections with Western political philosophy, as I have done in the previous section, it is also important to

¹⁹See, for example, Mills, “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology”; Farrelly, “Justice in Ideal Theory”; McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*, 23–41; and Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, 3–7.

highlight the ways in which, as an ancient Egyptian text, the *Eloquent Peasant* is foreign and not completely easy to fit into a contemporary Western framework. The most important way in which this is so involves the difficulties we have in translating and interpreting a term that is central not only to the tale but also to the tradition of which I have argued that it is a part and to Egyptian literature in general: *ma'at*. What does it mean? What kind of concept is it?

In his landmark philosophical study of the concept, Maulana Karenga hypothesizes: 'The etymology of Maat,  suggests an evolution from a physical concept of straightness, evenness, levelness, correctness, as the wedge-shaped glyph suggests, to a general concept of rightness' (*Maat*, 6).²⁰ This possible development from a physical starting point also importantly leads in the direction of religious ideas, such as 'Maat as a constitutive part of creation itself', a 'goddess or divine spirit' born of the Creator and 'a life-generating principle or force' (Karenga, *Maat*, 7–8). In the *Book of the Dead*, we find the famous concretization of the concept in a balance or scale upon which the heart of the person seeking to reach the afterlife must be weighed against 'the feather of Maat' (Karenga, *Maat*, 140). Though the feather is associated with the goddess, the balance is handled by Anubis, 'the divine power who presides over the deceased', behind whom stands Thoth, 'the Scribe of Heaven and Lord of Just Measure' (Karenga, *Maat*, 139).²¹ One's heart must weigh no more and no less than the feather if one is to pass; otherwise a monster sits ready to devour.

How important are these religious dimensions in understanding the concept as it shows up in a text like the *Eloquent Peasant*? Vincent A. Tobin, in his introduction to his translation of the tale, raises this question while explaining his choice regarding how to translate *ma'at*:

The subject of the peasant's speeches is the Egyptian concept of Ma'at. This in itself presents a problem of translation: should we understand the peasant to be speaking about Ma'at, the personalized goddess and abstract concept of order and righteousness? Or is he speaking simply in terms of practical justice? For the purpose of the present translation, I have preferred to retain the Egyptian 'Ma'at', as this term, I believe, conveys a better impression of the Egyptian original.

(Simpson, *Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 25)

²⁰Karenga's study (which precedes this article in treating the *Eloquent Peasant* as a philosophical text of exceptional importance) is remarkable both for its scholarly erudition and for its attempt to depict *ma'at* as a living ideal. For discussion of the concept from a more traditional Egyptological perspective, see Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt*, 127–68.

²¹Khunanup signals that he is thinking about committing suicide at the end of the ninth petition by announcing: 'I will go and plead about you to Anubis' (B2 114–15; Parkinson, *Tale of Sinuhe*, 74). Ironically, his name means 'One protected by Anubis'. See Parkinson, *Tale of Sinuhe*, 88n110.

Tobin's decision to leave this word untranslated is, I think, very useful, as it forces readers to consider the ways in which the term is distinctively Egyptian, and this may include reflecting on its religious allusions. I doubt there is much need to worry about catching references to the goddess Ma'at herself, as I can think of very few instances of the term in the tale that could possibly be interpreted, based on context and usage, as references to a personalized figure. As for the 'abstract concept of order and righteousness', however, it may be argued that this reference is implied in almost every instance.²²

What is important here, above all, is Tobin's suggestion that opting always and only for 'justice' – the most common translation of the term, and also the one that best marks the tale as a work of political philosophy – runs the risk of missing important resonances. There are the religious/cosmic resonances, for one thing, but alongside *justice*, scholars also recognize *truth* as one of the most common and prominent meanings of *ma'at*. The significant differences between the meanings of the terms 'truth' and 'justice' in English are enough to make choices about how to translate *ma'at* difficult.

Let us begin to consider selected passages. The first appearance of the term in the tale is in the first petition and is a poetic, metaphorical instance (and perhaps one of the few instances that someone like Tobin could argue possibly involves a reference to the goddess). Khunanup tells Rensi: 'If you descend to the Lake of Ma'at, / You will sail thereon in the breeze' (B1 85–6; Simpson, *Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 29). He continues the metaphor for a number of lines, suggesting that Rensi will not only sail smoothly but also catch fish and fowl effortlessly. In an instance such as this, where the rhetorical strategy in the text is to take such a culturally specific reference and then further embed it in an elaborate metaphor, we are left with no real hints as to which of the possible translations of the term would best fit the context. So, how should it be translated? It is not clear that there is one right answer.²³

The next instance, also in the first petition, is the first to help us out through context. Khunanup praises Rensi as '[o]ne who obliterates deceit, one who nurtures Ma'at' (B1 98; Simpson, *Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 29). The contrast with deceit invites us to translate 'Ma'at' here as 'truth', and indeed, many do. But Gardiner translates: 'a destroyer of falsehood, a fosterer of justice' ("The Eloquent Peasant", 9). Only later on, in the ninth petition, does a series of contrasts with 'falsehood' lead him to translate *ma'at* as '[t]ruth' (B2 96–7; Gardiner, "The Eloquent Peasant", 20). The fidelity Gardiner shows to 'justice', however, is outdone by Parkinson's fidelity to 'truth', as Parkinson never once translates *ma'at* as 'justice'. This sometimes makes for strange constructions, as when Khunanup closes the

²²Parkinson also discusses the tale's evocation of *ma'at* as 'a cosmic creation of order'. *Tale of Sinuhe*, 56.

²³For example, Gardiner and Lichtheim choose 'justice', while Parkinson chooses 'truth'.

first petition with a plea for Rensi to intervene and Parkinson renders the plea as follows: ‘Do Truth, praised one whom the praised praise!’ (B1 99–100; Parkinson, *Tale of Sinuhe*, 61).

I will return to the strangeness of such constructions momentarily, but before doing so, I wish to remark briefly upon three more instances of talk of *ma’at* in the petitions that seem helpful for deeper analysis of the concept. First, consider this phrase from the third petition, explicitly identified as a common saying: ‘To do Ma’at is the breath of the nostrils’ (B1 177; Simpson, *Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 34). There are few endorsements of doing right in the history of philosophy stronger than this claim that it sustains life in the way that oxygen does. It is especially interesting to connect this to the claim in the fifth petition that ‘a pauper’s belongings are his breath – taking them is suffocating him’ (B1 263–4; Parkinson, *Tale of Sinuhe*, 69). One suspects that the latter claim about the precarious situation of the lives of the poor must be meant less figuratively than the claim about *ma’at*, but the exact relationship between these claims is not self-evident.

Second, consider – also from the third petition – the following claim: ‘But the stability of the land is to do Ma’at’ (B1 189–90; Simpson, *Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 34). The idea of stability here is connected to the straightness of the balance, which is referred to a couple of lines later: ‘Do not utter falsehood, for you are the balance’ (B1 191; Simpson, *Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 35). This theme of balancing and straightening could have been treated as a separate role of political authority in Section 2, but I have introduced it here because of the special significance of the balance as part of the connotation of *ma’at*. That being said, it is interesting to question where the idea of balancing and straightening fits in with regard to leadership, safeguarding against harm, and the creation of good. The argument can be made, I think, that it has something to do with each: leadership involves exemplifying balance so as to straighten out the land; being the balance through weighing and punishing crimes is part of being a safeguard; and, most daringly, it might be argued that creating good involves bringing some up to the level of others, which can be described as a form of straightening and balancing of society.

Third, the idea of balance is clearly behind this somewhat surprising claim from the sixth petition: ‘Rightly filled justice [*ma’at*] neither falls short nor brims over’ (B1 281–3; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1, 179).²⁴ It intriguingly complicates things to know that justice – or, even more surprisingly, truth – has limits that should not be exceeded. As with the idea of *ma’at* as breath, I think it is useful to relate this to a point made elsewhere about poverty. In the second petition, Khunanup says:

²⁴Parkinson: ‘For Truth has not been damaged, nor has overflown’. *Tale of Sinuhe*, 70.

The wealthy should be merciful; violence is for the criminal; robbing suits him who has nothing. The stealing done by the robber is the misdeed of one who is poor. One can't reproach him; he merely seeks for himself.

(B1 152–5; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1, 174)

Other translations of this passage suggest that it is not about declining to reproach the poor robber but rather being sure to reproach the wealthy one.²⁵ In either case, though, we find the implication that properly judging wrongdoing may require taking into account the socioeconomic status of the perpetrators. We might, therefore, take Khunanup to be arguing here that merciless punishment of the poor without any regard for their status is one way in which justice can exceed its proper bounds.

From these rich instances, let us return now to the general question of justice vs. truth, which is raised especially by a fascinating passage in the eighth petition. Tobin renders the text as follows: 'Speak Ma'at! Perform Ma'at!' (B1 351; Simpson, *Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 42). Where Tobin has 'perform', most translators have 'do', but this is not important. What is important is the way this pair of injunctions displays that basic flexibility of the term *ma'at* which is somewhat lacking in the English terms with which we try to translate it. Whether we go with 'justice' or 'truth', if we attempt to be consistent and use the same word in each injunction, we end up with half of the sentence sounding normal and the other half sounding strange.²⁶ It is normal to talk of speaking the truth and doing justice, but what does it mean to 'do truth' or 'speak justice'? I suspect that here, more than anywhere else in the tale, it helps us to allow the term to remain foreign, that is, untranslated.

What do we gain when we try to listen through the Egyptian rather than around it by means of translation? We gain, I would say, a striking moral vision of the world and of our agency within it: a strong form of moral realism in which, since the just is the true, we undergo a sort of break with reality whenever we act unjustly (similar, perhaps, to the way we can lose touch with reality through mental illness). In this vision, there is no sharp dividing line between speech and action: we do justly by virtue of speaking truly, and we express truth whenever we act justly. We possess the power, in other words, to embody truth in our actions and to embody, through our choices to speak, the doing of justice.

²⁵Parkinson: 'A lord of bread should be merciful, whereas might belongs to the deprived; theft suits one without belongings, when the belongings are snatched by the deprived; but the bad act without want – should it not be blamed? It is self-seeking'. *Tale of Sinuhe*, 64.

²⁶Karenga and Quirke, however, demonstrate a useful third option. Karenga: 'Speak right and do right' (*Selections from the Husia*, 34). Quirke: 'Say what is Right, do what is Right' (*Egyptian Literature 1800 BC*, 163).

5. CONSERVATIVE AND REVOLUTIONARY INTERPRETATIONS OF THE TALE

What more can be said about the choice to speak behind the nine petitions in the *Eloquent Peasant*? And, relatedly and even more importantly, what more can be said about the choice *not to speak* that provokes these speeches? Interpreting the views elaborated in the petitions is key to understanding the work's position on issues of justice, but if we have not attempted to grapple with the irony of the frame story, then even our understanding of the petitions must be shallow. What exactly do we learn about injustice from the petitions when what is being perceived and complained about is not what it seems? What Khunanup understands himself to be encountering is not real, and that must have repercussions for our understanding and evaluation of what he says. And yet, despite the fact that it is indeed appreciation for Khunanup's eloquence on the topic of justice that motivates the king and Rensi's actions (or, more precisely, Rensi's commanded inaction), is it really fair to say that there is nothing but illusion in Khunanup's subjective experience of suffering new and even more galling injustice at the hands of political power past the initial injustice he suffered at the hands of Nemtinakht?

We are led by these questions, I believe, towards interpretations of the *Eloquent Peasant* as expressing a general position on the system of government depicted in the tale. I wish to argue that there are at least two such interpretations, the conservative and the revolutionary. On the conservative interpretation, the tale seeks to justify the monarchy and hierarchical relations, whereas, on the revolutionary interpretation, the tale indicts that system and calls for fundamental change in a more egalitarian direction. I will sketch each and, in closing, state my own leaning.

On the conservative interpretation, the frame story of the *Eloquent Peasant* depicts the ennoblement of a figure from the margins of society and combines this with a celebration of the wisdom and righteousness of the king. The peasant's marginal position, on this account, is first of all not a condition whose existence is to be lamented but rather one social position among others, and we see in Khunanup an admirably self-reliant peasant who is skilled, first of all, in trade (witness the list of exotic goods he brings with him on his way to Heracleopolis, R2.1–6.1). Of course, to push trade aside, he is most amazingly skilled when it comes to oratory, and thus we see that peasants can, in special cases like his, possess talents that distinguish them beyond their station. But how might this talent gain expression and a public? Enter Nemtinakht, whose greedy, evil actions are beneath his higher station. Despite the badness of what he does, though, Nemtinakht's actions turn out to serve the greater purpose of bringing the eloquent peasant to light. Things continue to work, in other words, in an ordered way.

The decision of the king to have Rensi keep Khunanup talking can be seen as the king wisely wielding his influence in order to (a) further distinguish the newly found gem that is Khunanup's eloquence and (b) pay tribute to the importance of *ma'at*, with Khunanup as his capable mouthpiece. This role as showpiece and mouthpiece is an ennobling one that Khunanup takes up, comically, without realizing it. As mouthpiece, Khunanup is able to express all that justice is supposed to be. He is powerless, however, to effect justice himself, because, as he himself indicates in his speeches, that power rightfully belongs to the political authority – that is, the king or his representatives. At the end of the tale, it is, therefore, affirmed that justice ultimately flows directly from the king.²⁷ Nemtinakht is made low, Khunanup is made high, and life in the kingdom carries on.

The revolutionary interpretation, by contrast, takes the frame story of the *Eloquent Peasant* to be about oppression and the need for accountability in political institutions. On this interpretation, Nemtinakht's robbery of Khunanup is symbolic of the terrible vulnerability of the poor in general. It is significant that when Rensi asks his fellow officials about the case, they more or less side with Nemtinakht, thus demonstrating the corruption of the bureaucracy and its investment in elite domination. The long silence that Khunanup meets with as he makes his complaint is just what it feels like to him: oppression. He is ignored and, when he is not ignored, he is either threatened or beaten.

Khunanup's gift of oratory is a triumph of the spirit, a capacity he has to make things beautiful in spite of the oppression he suffers. What the king and Rensi do is exploit this gift, sadistically leaving Khunanup in misery in order to enjoy the fruits of his mouth. At the end of the tale, this intensive exploitation of Khunanup ceases and, after Rensi's judgement, he seems to live happily ever after. His powerful words about injustice, though, are meant to continue to ring inside our heads as readers. We are meant to feel the palpable unfairness of Khunanup having had no choice but to press on calling for justice while the forces of power took delight in the style of his message without heeding its substance. The resolution at the end of the story is no resolution at all of the larger problem that has been highlighted: the lack of accountability of those in power. It is up to them to decide when, how, and if justice will be done, and there is nothing that ordinary people can do about it. The message, then, is clear: there has been no happy ending yet, and there will not be until the system changes by opening up and making power more accessible and accountable to all.²⁸

²⁷Parkinson evokes this interpretation when he writes: 'On one reading, the plot suggests an entrapment model of discourse – in which dissident voices are represented in order to contain them, and the dominant ideology ultimately appropriates their vitality'. See Parkinson, "Imposing Words", 42.

²⁸Parkinson raises the important question: 'what about other peasants who are less eloquent?' See Parkinson, "Imposing Words", 40.

For the purpose of vividness, I have spelled out these interpretations in some detail, and thus it is, of course, possible to interpret the story broadly in the manner of one or the other without agreeing with all the details. It should also be noted that to agree with, say, the conservative interpretation is, of course, not to endorse its values – it is simply to see it as the best account of the political outlook promoted by the tale. Many will find it hard to believe that this story from Pharaonic Egypt could have a revolutionary intent, and will, therefore, be attracted to the conservative interpretation (even if they think it underplays Khunanup's pain, overplays the benevolence of the king, etc.). For my part, I find myself attracted to the revolutionary interpretation. I admit that its foremost weakness is its need to explain away the seemingly happy ending. But in reflecting on the principle 'speak *ma'at*, do *ma'at*', it seems to me that the idea is not a division of labour whereby common folk can only speak while a select few have the power to do; rather, a world is called for and evoked in which we are all valued and held to account for our ability to both speak and do.

That there may be other possible interpretations of the frame story seems quite likely to me, and I have intended only to set out two extremes for the purpose of showing the different directions in which one can go. One might even wonder whether the author of the *Eloquent Peasant* intended for both interpretations to be plausible. In any case, whether conservative, revolutionary, or a bit of both, one thing seems clear to me: the *Eloquent Peasant* is a classic of political philosophy.²⁹

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