

# The Concept of *ka* between Egyptian and Egyptological Frameworks\*

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The virtuality–positivity of which I am speaking is a deeper reality than arbitrary will. We find it also in arbitrary will, or in the will generally, but as an original, intimate, secret cause which sustains and finally constitutes the will itself. It is above all an immediately and intrinsically purposive value, a deep and tenacious faith, which lives in love, in hate, in *power* ...

LEONE VIVANTE, *A Philosophy of Potentiality* (London, 1955), 10



## 1 Introduction

It is widely recognised that the concept of *ka* (*kꜣ*) is one of the most central in pharaonic Egyptian religion, especially in its earlier phases. However, modern interpretations of the concept have tended to go in one of two directions: either a particular subset of the occurrences of the word is identified as being the most central and a hypothesis based solely on this more limited usage is presented, or (especially in introductions and encyclopaedia entries, etc.) the most frequent uses of the term are simply listed next to each other without any consideration of how they might possibly have been related in the Egyptian view. Methodologically, it seems that the former, more hypothetical, approach

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is the only alternative to the latter, purely descriptive, and the present paper belongs clearly in the tradition seeking a more or less unified general understanding. Important challenges to such attempts in the past lie not only in the singling out of a particular group of sources as the most important from the outset, but equally in a related tendency to sum up (or even 'define') the ancient Egyptian notion in terms of one or two modern concepts. In an attempt to avoid these problems, the interpretation undertaken here builds on the one hand on well-attested general Egyptian religious notions, while on the other broadening the scope enough to incorporate all of the main groups of sources in which the term occurs in the Old and Middle Kingdom.

The approach taken here differs from previous attempts primarily in its focus on two basic ideas: *relationality* and *ontology*. A relational approach to concepts such as the *ka* focuses less on the traditional idea of the *ka* as an essential 'aspect of the person' and puts more emphasis on ancient descriptions of *ka* as a relation between different beings (which have been difficult to incorporate in the traditional approaches outlined below). In other words, what kind of relation is expressed between two beings by conceptualising *x* as the *ka* of *Y*? The stress of ontology in the approach argued here is related in the sense that it insists on an understanding of the *ka* in terms of broader Egyptian ideas about existence as opposed to taking a point of departure in modern concepts such as 'personality' or 'life force'. On the one hand, this approach accords a more central status to certain groups of sources than they have had in previous discussions, but on the other it also makes it possible to draw on the insights of each of the main Egyptological 'schools' of thought concerning the nature of the *ka*-concept.

## 2 Research History

The history of research into the concept of the *ka* and its place within overall interpretations of Egyptian religion is long and quite complex. The recent monographs on the *ka*-concept by Bolshakov<sup>1</sup> and Borioni<sup>2</sup> as well as an unpublished PhD thesis by Kusber<sup>3</sup> have examined the history and development of these Egyptological ideas in some detail, so that it is possible here to focus

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- 1 Bolshakov, A.O., *Man and his Double in Egyptian Ideology of the Old Kingdom* (ÄAT 37, Wiesbaden, 1997), 123–132.
  - 2 Borioni, G.C., *Der Ka aus religionswissenschaftlicher Sicht* (Veröffentlichungen der Institute für Afrikanistik und Ägyptologie der Universität Wien 101, Vienna, 2005), 59–74.
  - 3 Kusber, E., *Der altägyptische Ka: 'Seele' oder 'Persönlichkeit'?* (PhD thesis, University of Tübingen, 2005—defended 19/12 1994), 7–48.