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Sudanese Ethics by TORE NORDENSTAM

Uppsala, Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1968. Pp. 239. Sw.Kr. 15.

As a Sudanese reviewer, I shall try to be as fair as possible. This book, a revised version of a University of Khartoum doctoral thesis, is a study in descriptive ethics, based upon interviews with Sudanese university students. It is divided into three parts: the first outlines a framework and methodology for research into ethical systems, with particular attention to those aspects which have to do with personality traits. In the second part, this theoretical framework is applied in a study of how some well-educated young Sudanese conceive of the virtues which are traditionally high-valued in their own society: courage, generosity, hospitality, honour, dignity, and self-respect. The third part of the book contains the transcripts of the interviews.

The introductory chapters embark upon the use and methodology of research in ethics. The author establishes propositions about morals and ideology, with special emphasis on ethics and its relationship to social behaviour in the Sudanese society. According to Tore Nordenstam, a person's ethics can be regarded as part of his ideology; but there is no general agreement on how much of the ideology should be regarded as belonging to his ethics. This is really a problem of definition. The author surveys different definitions of 'ethics' and gives his own, as the 'inquiry into the good life'. An individual's ethics consists, then, of all those ideas, norms, conceptions of right and wrong, good and bad, and so on, which together make up his ideal of the good life.

The author then moves on to discuss the ethics of virtue, which in the European tradition has come to be closely associated with 'the inner life' of moral agents rather than with their external actions. This conception proves too narrow for the purposes of intercultural research. It is, therefore, Nordenstam's aim in this volume to disentangle those aspects of the ethics of virtue which are not clearly separated in descriptive ethics, in order to avoid ethnocentric interpretations of non-European ethical systems. He describes briefly inward-oriented and outward-oriented conceptions of a virtue, agent-centred and action-centred systems of ethics, and self-determined and other-determined behavioural actions.

Nordenstam then develops the notion of a virtue which he considers suitable for the purposes of intercultural research. He compares the ethics of a virtue with a trait of character, examines the relevance of psychology to the ethics of virtue, and comments upon the loose semantics of virtue terms, spelling out some practical implications of this for the study of the ethics of virtue.

As a visiting professor of moral philosophy at the University of Khartoum, it was natural for the author to use some of his students as informants. Three senior philosophy students agreed to participate in the project, the advantages being that they could be interviewed in English, and were relatively explicit and interested informants, whom the author could press for information even when they were somewhat reluctant to pursue a certain theme. All three were religious-minded, belonging to the Islamic Front party.

The author is open to criticism because the informants included no representatives of other active political parties. It would be interesting to know how far the students' political affiliations were correlated with their moral outlook. Secondly, only three informants could not represent the total student population in any statistical sense, especially as the interviews did not include any female students, who have their own views on the traditional Sudanese virtues and might have revealed a number of significant points. The investigations would have also been more valid if members of other economic sectors in the Sudan had been included. These are some omissions, in my opinion, but they do not by any means diminish the value of the book.

This work is a serious contribution to the study of Sudanese ethics and morals, in a field which is not well documented at all. It is bound to be of interest to Sudanese people; but its usefulness outside the Sudan is questionable. I found it a joy to read. In spite of its defects, this is a unique, pioneering study.

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