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## book reviews

**Tore Nordenstam: *Sudanese Ethics*  
Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala, 1968  
pp. 239.**

For those who are used to conceiving ethics in a classical sense, the title of this book might alarm. The title suggests that Sudan has a distinct ethics that may be studied as a discipline of its own. One hardly comes across books under such titles as "English Ethics" or "Swedish Ethics".

This seems strange, because in Europe ethics has been highly studied. Why more books with such titles have not been written ought to surprise us. It may be symbolic that it has not done so. Most moral philosophers in Europe and America do not think it is within their profession to write such books. Instead they are concerned with classical or universal academic problems in ethics. Like G. E. Moore, their beliefs seem to be that ethics is "the general inquiry into what is good". Hence ethical philosophers think that they must not, in the present state of human knowledge, concern themselves with casuistry but with "trying to answer more general and fundamental questions ..." It therefore follows that ethics in a Western philosophical sense must be universal and a title such as "English Ethics" would suggest that the English differ from the rest of mankind in the idea of "what is good". And this would contradict the idea that "what is good" is universal.

Perhaps this is why Tore Nordenstam states in his book that the "word 'ethics' is used in this book in the way in which it is normally used outside philosophy, *viz.*, to refer to a certain kind of system of norms, values, and ideals" (p. 14). "Outside philosophy" means outside what the moral philosophers in the West would consider as ethics relevant to their profession. One wonders why what may not be known as "ethics" among such respectable moral philosophers should be entitled "Sudanese Ethics".

Nevertheless, Nordenstam's conception of ethics does not seem to differ from that of the traditional moral philosophers in the West. He takes as his definition of ethics the traditional Aristotelian definition, namely, that ethics is "the inquiry into the good life", in other words, the inquiry into "what is good for man" (p. 18). The Aristotelian definition of ethics is not so much different from

the Moorean definition that ethics is "the general inquiry into what is good". Both definitions imply that the study of ethics is the study of what is universally desirable for man. For the idea "good for man" implies good for all men. Thus it seems that ethics, in the philosophical sense, cannot be one thing to the Swedes and another thing to the Sudanese. By the "philosophical sense" in this context I mean the traditional Western philosophical sense.

If ethics as used in Nordenstam's book is not to be understood as ethics in the philosophical sense, in what sense then is the term used in this book? Nordenstam takes the anthropological approach to the study of ethics. This approach is particularistic and it mainly deals with the assembling of knowledge about the various moral judgements of a people. Thus it is a kind of sociological data collecting. Nordenstam therefore seems to be using the word "ethics" in the anthropological sense. He contends that "the best anthropological reports on foreign people's moral systems are such a useful antidote to the oversimplified pictures drawn by the philosophers" (p. 40). Why an anthropological approach to a subject which many would think needs a philosophical approach?

In Africa today a revolt is being born: a revolt against the Western social anthropologists. They have tried to help subdue the African societies by their claim to have studied and understood the mentality of the African peoples. According to Okot p'Bitek the Western anthropologists justify the colonisation of the African peoples by "perpetuating the myth of the 'primitive'".

Nordenstam may not be aware of the bad name which Western anthropologists are beginning to acquire in Africa. And he may not himself be conscious that the works of Western anthropologists in Africa have helped go subdue and exploit the African peoples as p'Bitek and others allege. Nevertheless Nordenstam states: "The level of precision and particularity of our analysis may be perfectly adequate for some practical purposes, e.g., as an introduction to one important aspect of Sudanese mentality for foreigners coming into contact with Sudanese . . ." (p. 117). Professor Nordenstam may therefore be guilty of what social anthropologists are trying to do in Africa. This, however, is unfortunate since Nordenstam is essentially a philosopher. Why he deviated from philosophy to advance the works of anthropologists is something that we shall not discuss here.

*Sudanese Ethics* is a study in descriptive ethics and is based on interviews with three former philosophy students at the University of Khartoum. The interviews reveal what are said to be the traditional Sudanese virtues: courage, generosity, hospitality, honour and self-respect. Nordenstam maintains that the analysis he has given is representative of widespread views in Sudan. "My hypothesis is, however, that the informants are highly representative of a large moral community in the Northern Sudan" (p. 119). All the three informants were from the "central riverain Sudan".

Certain shortcomings in Nordenstam's work are obvious. First, he deals only with the Moslem-Northern part of Sudan whose culture he believes to be "homogeneous", and the "ncgro-inhabited", Southern part of Sudan is not considered. Yet the Northern Sudanese (mostly Arabs) form less than 40 per cent of the Sudanese population. The "ethics" of only one section of a population ought not to represent the whole population as the title of Nordenstam's book suggests.

Another shortcoming lies in the fact that the informants were Professor Nordenstam's pupils and might have been already influenced by the Professor's ethical judgements. He says about one of the

informants: "Following Aristotle, he demanded that the motive of the agent must be 'good' or 'noble' for an action to be a proper manifestation of courage" (p. 82).

It is not always clear in *Sudanese Ethics* what the difference was between the informants' own virtues and the traditional Sudanese virtues. Nordenstan thinks he makes the difference clear. But the clarity may only be apparent. There is a possibility that sometimes what an informant maintains as the traditional conception of virtue may be his own or his family's own conception; and what he offers as his own conception may yet be an echo of Aristotle's or Professor Nordenstan's conception. Nordenstan himself detected that one of his informants was trying to present Sudanese virtues in Western and favourable ways. The virtues which Nordenstan discusses with the informants are virtues commonly attributed to men and no attempt was made to discuss the virtues that are primarily attributed to women.

The research was done at a time when Sudan was ruled by a military junta and when most people would not dare to discuss or answer anything connected with politics. None of the informants, he tells us, answered any question about political interest. Ethics is a part of a person's or a people's ideology. The understanding of a person's politics is essential for understanding his ethics and ideology. Where a person leaves us in the dark about his politics we cannot clearly comprehend his ethics.

Professor Nordenstan's title *Sudanese Ethics* is therefore too big a title for the content of the book. A title such as "Northern Sudanese Virtues" would have been appropriate. After all the book deals with only one aspect of ethics, namely virtue. On the other hand I find Professor Nordenstan's book to be a scholarly work. It is clearly written and, except for several academic wrestlings with the views of those he is opposed to, the arguments are easy to follow. Professional philosophers will find in it a relevant and interesting discussion on ethics and its methodology.

For African social philosophers, *Sudanese Ethics* will be useful as a reference in researches dealing with ethical or moral systems in Africa. I use the word "social philosophers" in a broad sense to include sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, theologians and historians. In fact, the methodology that Nordenstan used is one which directly concerns the works of theoretical sociologists and anthropologists. Those who may not find the book useful will nevertheless have to face it as a challenge.

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