

AN ANALYSIS OF THE TRADITIONAL SUDANESE VIRTUES

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by

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Abstract

An Analysis of the Traditional Sudanese Virtues is a study in descriptive ethics, based upon interviews with three Sudanese students.

The thesis is divided into three parts.

Part I outlines a framework for the study of ethical systems. Definitions of the terms 'ethics', 'virtue', and 'the ethics of virtue' intended to be suitable for the purposes of intercultural research are proposed and justified. The use of deductive models of ethics is rejected on the ground that moral rules, like legal rules, normally are indeterminate in meaning to some extent; they should therefore be studied together with their applications which help to determine their meaning. Case-studies are held to be an essential part of the study of ethics. A number of methodological problems like the relevance of behavioural evidence for descriptive ethics are discussed, and the author introduces a battery of terms for the study of the ethics of virtue.

In Part II, this framework is applied in a study of how some well-educated young Sudanese conceive of the virtues which are traditionally highly valued in their own society: courage, generosity and hospitality, decency, honour,

dignity, self-respect, and so on. The notions of honour, dignity and self-respect are found to be central in the informants' predominantly shame-oriented ethics. The informants are found to conform to a high degree to what they think are widespread views. This study does therefore not lend support to the view that university education creates a gulf between the educated and the uneducated in underdeveloped countries.

Part III contains the complete transcripts of the interviews and also some essays which the informants wrote in connection with the interviews.

Preface

When teaching moral philosophy to Sudanese students, I gradually became interested in their own ethical ideas and decided to make an investigation of their views on the ethics of virtue, on which I had found that many of them had very definite opinions. Some students volunteered to co-operate, and I made a series of interviews with them which were tape-recorded and then transcribed. The analysis of the traditional Sudanese virtues in Part II of this book is based on these interviews and some written statements by the informants. The interviews and essays are an integral part of the work; they form Part III of the book.

An investigation of this kind raises a number of general methodological and theoretical problems. They are treated in Part I which outlines a framework for the analysis of that fragment of ideologies which is concerned with personal ideals. The import of these inquiries into the nature of ethical systems extends, however, to the other areas of descriptive and normative ethics, so that the book could be said to contain the outlines of a programme for moral philosophy.

To fill in some of the background against which this book has been written I would like to draw attention to three

factors which have done much to influence contemporary moral philosophy, in the analytical tradition at least. The first factor is the traditional philosophical quest for simplicity. Philosophers have tried to find simple sets of simple rules in ethics, they have tried to find simple decision procedures, they have tried to reduce some concepts to other concepts, and so on. The quest for simplicity has, in my opinion, done much to impoverish moral philosophy, especially since it has often been coupled with the assumption that ethical rules should be universally applicable. There does not seem to be much of interest in ethics which is both very simple and of universal application.

The second factor I want to draw attention to is the widespread view that normative ethics is inherently irrational and that normative ethics therefore falls outside the scope of academic philosophy (except as an object for metastudies). Under the influence of intuitionism, emotivism and value nihilism, normative ethics - which certainly ought to be the main preoccupation of moral philosophers - has come to be an almost totally neglected field. It seems reasonable to assume that also the study of metaethics has suffered from this lack of interest in normative problems.

The third factor which has done much to influence modern moral philosophy is that so many moral philosophers fight shy

of the idea of conducting empirical research or even of taking the results of empirical research into account.

These three assumptions - that ethics is simple, that ethics is irrational, that ethics can profitably be pursued in isolation from the social sciences, psychology, etc. - are, in my opinion, not warranted at all. The best antidote against such views is to have a close and unprejudiced look at some outstanding moral problems or at some actual ethical systems. So much for the background of the book.

I hope that the empirical application of the theoretical framework in Part II (and Part III), besides illustrating my general approach, will be of some practical value to educationists and others, but I would like to emphasize that the empirical investigation is of an exploratory nature. Its main purpose is to lead up to the formation of hypotheses to be tested in further research.

The interest with which a great number of my colleagues and friends have followed the project has been a constant source of encouragement to me. My thanks are due to all of them for their assistance, and especially to Prof. A.P. Cavendish and Prof. H. Törnebohm, with whom I have discussed many of the topics of this book in detail. Above all, I would like to express my gratitude to the informants for their invaluable co-operation.

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