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### **BOOK REVIEWS**

*Sudanese Ethics*. By Tore Nordenstam. (Uppsala : The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies. 1968. Pp. 239. Price paper Sw. Kr. 15.)

This is an essay in descriptive ethics based on interviews with Sudanese students. It is divided into three parts. Part I is devoted to methods in descriptive ethics ; Part III consists of the transcripts of the interviews ; and Part II uses the material of Part III to provide a systematic account of traditional Sudanese virtues.

Parts I and II should be of both theoretical and practical interest to moral philosophers, especially to those who believe that philosophy can contribute to the effective handling of practical problems. For example, Mr. Nordenstam's enquiry should further our understanding of the difficulties that face any international body which concerns itself with the application of bills of human rights.

Part I begins with a discussion of the field of ethics, which is said to be part of a person's ideology. Nordenstam lists a number of conditions that must be satisfied by any account of this field which is to meet the needs of descriptive ethics. He thinks that these conditions are best satisfied by defining ethics, in the normative sense, as "the inquiry into the good life". Thus, a question is ethical if it has to do with how one ought to live. This chapter also discusses ethnocentrism, drawing upon such recent studies of descriptive ethics as those of MacBeath, Brandt and Ladd. He claims that although there is a sense in which all such studies are necessarily ethnocentric, they only become ethnocentric in an objectionable sense when one imputes one's own motives to those who belong to an alien culture "without having found evidence which entitles one to do so".

His second chapter attempts to show the untenability of the deductive ideal in ethics and to outline the methodological implications of its rejection. In the deductive model "the premise describing the facts is subsumed under the appropriate norm, and the conclusion follows automatically ... ". This involves two dubious assumptions: (i) that the premisses of a moral argument always entail the conclusion ; and (ii) that the premisses referring to particular situations are purely factual statements "which can safely be left to the specialists". As a consequence of these assumptions ethical systems are taken to be deductive systems in which the basic norms function as axioms and the derived rules as theorems, and their criteria of adequacy become identical with those of other types of

axiomatic systems, e.g., those of mathematics. This he regards as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the deductive ideal since it would make it impossible for ethical systems to be applied to new and unforeseen kinds of situations. Such flexibility requires open-texture; and he concludes that moral terms – like legal terms – have no fixed set of conditions which is necessary for their correct application. For this reason descriptive ethics cannot restrict itself to the study of basic norms but must spell out "the whole system of general and specific norms, for the general norms cannot be fully understood in isolation from the specific norms which help to make their meaning determinate". He thinks that these conclusions are reinforced by the consequences of two other features of moral discourse, namely, the prevalence of analogical reasoning, and the fact that many of the key terms of normative ethics have a predominantly emotive meaning".

In his third chapter Nordenstam discusses the following general methodological questions: the problems of mapping an individual's ethic ; the different kinds of ideological research and their interrelations; the difficulties involved in attempting to infer a man's ideals from how he behaves; and the deficiencies of Ladd's claim, in his study of Navaho ethics, "that non-verbal behavioural evidence is irrelevant in a morphological study of descriptive ethics". Ladd's basic fault is his intellectualism, which leads him to overlook the distinctions between having an ethical norm and being conscious that it is ethical, and between accepting a norm and being conscious of a norm.

His fourth chapter, on the ethics of virtue, develops a number of distinctions which he thinks are needed in descriptive ethics if it is to avoid "ethnocentric interpretations of non-European ethical systems". The distinctions in question are between ideal rules and rules of duty, the inward-orientated and the outward-orientated conceptions of a virtue, agent-centred and action-centred systems of ethics, and self-determined and other-determined systems of ethics. The chapter ends with a defence of his own method. This turns on the assertion that "information about people 's opinions on what kind of person one ought to be yields more insight into the spirit of their ethics than information about particular actions one ought to do ... "

Part I ends with a chapter on the analysis of virtues. Its main interest lies in Nordenstam's discussion of the language difficulties involved in such an investigation as his own.

Part II opens with a full account of the course of his research. This is followed by a succession of detailed studies of the traditional Sudanese virtues: courage, generosity and hospitality; honour and dignity; and the ethics of respect and self-respect. These analyses are carefully linked to the interview material reproduced in Part III, making it easy for the reader to look up the conversations dealing with any specific issue. This part of Nordenstam's book is most interesting. It should also be of practical value to those who, for whatever reason, have occasion to work or play with – or against – the Sudanese.

The only serious misprint I noticed occurs on page 63.

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