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 tradi-
tional 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.