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SUDANESE ETHICS

Ethics can be defined as the study of ideals of life, and an individual's ideal of life can be defined as the sum total of all his ideals, norms, conceptions of right and wrong, good and bad, and so on. It is obvious, then, that the mapping of an individual' s ethics is bound to be a complicated task because of the complexity of the contents of ethical systems. An exhaustive account of somebody's ethics should contain chapters on his personality ideals, his social idealsk, his opinions on rights and responsbilities, blame and praise desert and punishment, responsibility and free will, his views on the value of specific classes of actions, things, and situations; and so on. It would also have to include an account of the other parts of his ideology, e.g. his factual and theological beliefs, in so far as they are relevant for the justification of his ethical beliefs, for ultimately one's moral ideals depend upon one's beliefs about the nature of the universe. Many, but by no means all, ethical systems have e.g. been backed up by reference to such facts as that there is a God and that that God wants human beings to behave in certain ways.

Another reason why any description of an ethical system which aims at giving more than the outlines of the system will tend to run to some length has to do with the nature of general norms in ethics. General ethical norms tend to include words which have got a rather indeterminate meaning, and the more general the norm is, the more indeterminate its meaning tends to be. Consider e.g. the basic utilitarian rule which says, roughly, that one should always try to make everybody as happy as possible. The crucial word here is the word 'happy', an honorific term which can be used to mean practically anything as long as you keep to rule that it is word which should be used to bestow praise. To be told that somebody thinks that one should try to maximize the amount of happiness in the world is, then, pretty uninformative unless you get a specification of what that particular person understands by happiness. The best way of finding out what he means by happiness is usually not to ask him directly what he means by happiness, but

to observe how he uses the word in practice: to observe to which people he ascribes happiness and to which he does not, to observe and list the actions which he deems conducive to happiness and unhappiness, in short, to try to find out what the conditions of happiness are according to him. To use a metaphor which has become part of the professional jargon in philosophy, general ethical norms have got an "open texture". In this respect, ethical norms are in the same position as legal norms. And just as a future lawyer does not only study the general rules in the law-books but also how the general rules have been interpreted in particular cases, so the student of an ethical system has to study both the general norms of the system and how the general norms are applied in practice to particular situation.s This is, I think, an important point about the study of ethics which is worth some emphasis, especially since philosophers have sometimes defended the opposite view. It has been argued that it is the philosopher's job to formulate the general rules, and that the application of the rules can be safely left to "the specialists", and "the specialists" have been said to be those people whose detailed knowledge about means-end relationships enable them to apply the rules in the wisest way. The trouble with this view is that it presupposes that the ends have always been fixed in advance and that the choice of means is ethically unimportant, or at least of so little importance that it can safely be left to the specialists.

But these two presuppositions do not seem to me to be true. We often formulate our aims very loosely ("peace", "freedom", "justice", "happiness", etc.) so that the implementation of the aims will, in fact, amount to specification of the aims. And to specify the aims is to elaborate the ethics rather than to make use of one's specialist, professional knowledge.

Similarly, a man's specialist knowledge about means-end relationships does not make him a specialist on the ethical aspects of the choice of means. But it would take us too far afield to elaborate on this theme here. Let this suffice for the present to conclude that case-studies are an essential part of the study of ethics.

To sum up so far, we have found two reasons why the description of ethical systems tends to be a complex affair: ethical systems

cover a very wide field, and their internal structure is complex because they form a net-work of general norms and applications of the general norms to particular cases.

A third reason is that an individual's ethical beliefs rarely form a fixed, unchangeable system. An individual's normative commitments may be more or less stable. There is probably a general tendency to exaggarate the degree to which people are prone to change their minds on ethical questions, but it is clear that the possibility of changes must not be overlooked, although such changes may be rarer in practice than is sometimes assumed. There is also an opposite tendency to overlook or discard unstable ethical beliefs which one had better beware of. How stable or rigid an individual's ethics is a question which can only be answered by empirical investigation, and the analyst has no right to assume from the beginning that unstable opinions can be disregarded in the final analysis.

2. The description of the ethics of a group of people is somehow based upon findings about the ethics of individual members of the group. The description of the ethics of groups will, therefore, partake of all the complexities which surround the description of the ethics of individuals. Luckily, however, for the descriptive ethicist, people tend to be rather unoriginal in their ethical views. Most people conform to a high degree to the standards which are prevalent in their groups. But some groups may be more homogeneous than others from the moral point of view, and some moral views may be more widely accepted than others. One can never take it for granted, therefore, that the norms which one individual accepts is the generally accepted norm in the group or groups to which he belongs. This is again a matter for empirical investigation.

3. After these preambles, let us now consider the problem of describing Sudanese ethics. People are wont to make sweeping generalizations about the ethical views of nations and other large groups. There is usually some truth in such statements, but also exceedingly difficult to find out just how much truth there is in them. This holds not least for a nation which is as culturally di-

versified as the Sudan. When the first population census was taken in the Sudan ten years ago, provision was made for 115 languages and 597 tribes, grouped into 56 tribal groups. It seems reason able to expect at least some important differences in the ethical systems which predominate with in these tribal and linguistic groups. The analyst has again no right to assume that there will be a uniformity in moral outlook until he has assembled and evaluated the evidence in favour of and against that hypothesis. And more or less self-contained and isolated groups like linguistic communities and tribes tend to differ much more from each other than the individuals within the same group do.

The major cultural division in the Sudan goes between the Arabdominated, largely Moslem Northern part of the country and the Negro-inhabited, non-Muslim South. Well-informed observers like Saad ed Din Fawzi have some times found the North on the whole "culturally homogeneous", but in how far this is teur of the ethical beliefs remains to be investigated.

Very little has so far been done within the field of Sudanese ethics. Illuminating accounts of certain aspects of the ethics ocertain tribes can be found in anthropological works like Evens-Pritchard's well-known studies of the Nuer and the Azande, expj lorers and civil servants have made scattered remarks which give clues for research, but little intensive, detailed work in descriptive ethics has so far been carried out in the Sudan. The field is virtualally unexplored, it is very promising, and vast indeed. There are many possible approaches to the field and there are many parts of the field to choose from if one wants to study ethical beliefs in the Sudan. Many different types of skills will be needed in the attempt to map Sudanese ethics: there are historical questions about the development of the ethical systems and about the influences that have worked upon them, there are aspects of some of the systems which require specialist knowledge about Islam and other religions, there are aspects which can be illuminated by analyses of the social institutions in the community, there are problems of a linguistic nature, there are statistical problems, there are problems where the philosopher's analytical training will be invaluable and so forth. The study of Sudanese ethics does not

belong to any particular university department, although it is clear that sociology, social anthropology and, above all, moral philosoply should be more interested in the field than other departments.

Philosophy is the only subject which specializes in conceptual analysis, and a lot of conceptual analysis will be required if one undertakes to study ethical systems in the Sudan. (As an example one could mention the work which is at the present been done in the Department of Philosophy on the concepts of dignity, honour and self-respect which seem to play a key role in the dominant ethics of the central, riverain Sudan; but I am sure there are hundreds of other important ethical concepts to explore and analyse in the Sudan.) And moral philosophy is the only subject which specializes in the analysis and comparative study of ethical systems in their own right.

While I am dealing with the question of who should do the job, I would, finally, like to make some propaganda for the view that students could make an invaluable contribution to the study of ethical beliefs in the Sudan. The students in the university come from all parts of the country, they have an intimate knowledge of the language and culture of their home areas, which could be made use of for research purposes. There is, in fact, much information which will hardly be accessible to anybody else at the present. To make a success of such a programme of work in descriptive ethics requires detailed planning and supervision, but the experience of some similar experiments is encouraging. And I am confident that most students would find it much more interesting and rewarding to take part in real research than to be told again and again of the research that others have already done.