DESCRIPTIVE ETHICS IN THE SUDAN: AN EXAMPLE

by

TORE NORDENSTAM

The study of ethical beliefs in the Sudan is a fascinating and more or less unexplored field of research. The purpose of this paper is to give an introductory survey of some of the problems and possible lines of research within this field. I shall first give a general outline of the nature of descriptive ethics, as I see it, then I shall highlight some of the problems in the field by discussing one particular example. Finally, I shall briefly indicate why research of this nature is of special importance in a developing country like the Sudan.

The field of descriptive ethics

Descriptive ethics can be defined as the description and analysis of the ethics of individuals and groups. Such a brief definition will introduce the nature of the field, but it certainly stands in need of further explanation. This applies particularly to the key word in the definition, the term "ethics," which can be used in a variety of ways with more or less clear meanings. I propose to take the term "ethics" in a wide sense so that any view about what is right and wrong, good and bad, praiseworthy and blameworthy will count as a moral view. An individual's ethics is, then, the system comprising all his values and ideals, all his opinions about right and wrong conduct, all his beliefs about deserts and punishment, responsibility and free will, and so on. In short, an individual's ethics, in this sense, consists of his ideal of life: it is the sum total of his personality ideals, his social ideals, his political ideals, his economic ideals, and so forth. And similarly for the ethics of groups like villages, tribes, and nations.

The justification for taking "ethics" in such a broad sense is that it is reasonable and fruitful to study people's ethical views in their interconnections as systems of beliefs; and similar methods can be employed over the whole field. At the present, the area of research so delineated is split up between a number of academic disciplines like social anthropology, sociology, political science and philosophy. There are good reasons for specialization, but the danger is that one will lose sight of the relations between the specialisms. In descriptive ethics, inter-disciplinary research is of prime importance. To clarify what contributions different disciplines can make, it will be necessary to introduce some distinctions between different types of research in ethics.

First of all, descriptive ethics must be distinguished from normative ethics. If one evaluates an action or a person or if one tells a person what he ought to do, then one engages in normative ethics. If one describes somebody's evaluations and views on right and wrong conduct, etc., then one engages in descriptive ethics. Normative ethics is thus the subject-matter of descriptive ethics. Descriptive ethics is the discipline which maps the normatively ethical views of individuals and groups. Much confusion has arisen in ethics because of a failure to distinguish clearly between describing on the one hand and prescribing and evaluating on the other hand. Many accounts presented as pieces of descriptive ethics are far from being morally neutral. The situation in traditional ethics is in this respect quite the same as in traditional linguistics with its notorious confusion between description and prescription.

The failure to distinguish clearly between descriptive and normative ethics is often combined with a failure to observe the difference between describing ethical beliefs and describing actual behaviour. It is sometimes assumed that ethical beliefs can be read off from outward behaviour and that ethical views which are not manifested in actual conduct can safely be neglected. But this is a mistake. For if a person performs a certain action, then it is clearly impossible to decide from this fact alone whether the action is done in conformity with one of his norms, or against one of his norms, or whether there is no norm at all in his ethical system which covers this kind of action. If one observes, for instance, that a person is prone to take the property of others, then it would be hazardous to conclude from this alone that he thinks that one ought to steal, or that he thinks that one ought not to steal but does it anyway, or that he thinks that stealing is permitted under certain circumstances, or that he lacks the concept of honesty. And if one observes a persistent tendency in an individual to leave other people's property alone, it would be equally hazardous to assume that he does so because of a particular moral norm to which he happens to subscribe. Perhaps, the appropriate occasion has never arisen; perhaps he holds no views at all on the subject. It is only too easy to impute one's own beliefs and values to others. If an explorer notes in his diary that the people are honest, friendly, and hospitable, he may possibly have assumed that the actions he observed are manifestations of the same kind of moral principles as similar actions on his own part would be manifestations of. The outward actions are not enough to give one the right to impute moral principles to the agents. The explorer might have had no intention of describing the moral beliefs of the people—the entry in the diary might have been intended simply to describe and evaluate the people's behaviour from his own point of view in terms of his own ethical system. There is thus a distinction to be drawn between describing a person's ethics from his own and from the observer's point of view.

Moral views, like other beliefs, can be selected as isolates for intensive study in their own right, and they can be studied in relation to other factors, e.g., in relation to actual behaviour, personality traits, existing social institutions. A study of them of the first kind can be called a morphological study; for the second type one can use labels like causal and functional studies. Most research in the fields of ethics and ideology is probably of the second type, and justifiably so, since it is only by studying beliefs in their contexts that one can get a full understanding of them. This broad approach to the study of ethics, which is typical of the social sciences, tends however to have the side-effect that the problems of morphological mapping of belief-systems are glossed over too hurriedly. As the example later in this paper will illustrate, it is a complicated task to give a well-documented and detailed account of the ethics of a whole community is an infinitely more complicated task. Causal and functional studies are still more complicated, since they presuppose the results of morphological studies. Investigations of (for example) the operational efficiency of moral norms (the extent to which moral norms are translated into actual behaviour) presuppose that the individual's moral norms have been mapped. A good functional analysis will, therefore, in fact be a combination of morphological and other investigations.

In this connection, it might be worth while to introduce yet another pair of terms. More often than not, a research worker in descriptive ethics is interested in only a limited part of the ethics of the people he is concerned with. It will then be sufficient for him to make a "point-analysis" of the morphology of their ethical

systems. Especially in philosophy, one finds also another type of morphological investigation, "system-analysis," which attempts to give over-all accounts of whole moral systems.

Finally, there is the distinction to be drawn between studying ethical views at a certain point of time, synchronic studies, and studying the development of ethical views over a period of time, diachronic studies.

To sum up so far: descriptive studies of ethics have been distinguished from normative studies of ethics, and within the field of descriptive ethics distinctions have been drawn between (a) morphological and causal-functional studies, (b) studies from the individual's and from the observer's point of view, (c) studies of ethical beliefs and of ethical behaviour, (d) synchronic and diachronic studies.

It might be worth noticing that there is a close parallel between ethics and linguistics as far as all these distinctions are concerned. Much of the criticism which is nowadays directed against traditional linguistics by the various structuralist schools amounts to a complaint that these distinctions have not been observed. The discussions which have been going on in linguistic circles over the last fifty years about the relative importance of different types of linguistic research make instructive reading for the descriptive ethicist. One lesson which can be learned from them is the fruitlessness of disputes of the type "Are synchronic studies somehow prior to diachronic studies?"; "Is this technique more important than that?"; and so on. Different backgrounds, skills and techniques will be needed in different parts of the field, and the field is wide enough to allow different approaches. After having made this plea for tolerance, I would, however, like to add that this does not hinder me from regarding certain kinds of projects in the field as particularly urgent. I shall return to this question towards the end of the paper.

An example: the concept of dignity

Considering the linguistic, ethnic, and cultural heterogeneity of the Sudan, it seems reasonable to expect an assortment of moral outlooks within the country. Well-informed observers have, however, sometimes assumed that the overwhelmingly Muslim north is culturally homogeneous: a common basis of Arabic race and language, and Islam, with their resulting unity of social and political ideas, have fused the Northern Sudan into a single whole. The District Commisssioner who is transferred from Berber to Bara, from Kassala to Kordofan, finds that he is dealing, in different local conditions, with the same kind of people, the same mental outlook."[1] "Despite the persistence of old languages, dialects, and to a lesser extent customs, the North is, however, culturally homogeneous, thanks to Islam, for Islam is a culture as well as a creed."[2]

In the northern Muslim area of the Sudan, "the adoption of Islam has fused the peoples so that they are culturally homogeneous, for Islam is not so much a creed as a unified social system."[3]

How far this hypothesis of the cultural homogeneity of the north is true in ethics remains to be tested. The unsystematic accounts in the literature give

---

[1] L. F. Nalder, "The Two Sudans," in J. A. de C. Hamilton, ed., *The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan from Within*, London 1934, p. 95.

[2] Saad ed Din Fawzi, "Ethnical and Cultural Pluralism in the Sudan," in *Ethnic and Cultural Pluralism in Inter-tropical Communities*, International Institute of Differing Civilizations, Brussels, 1957, p. 395.

[3] J. S. Trimingham, *Islam in the Sudan*, 2nd impression, London 1965, p. 4.

only clues.   What is required to test the hypothesis is amongst other things, intensive investigation into the morphology of ethics in the Northern Sudan. This is no mean task, and one had better proceed step-wise.   The natural precedure would be first to make exploratory studies of selected individuals' ethical systems, then to test hypotheses, deriving from the exploratory studies, by statistical treatment of data collected from large groups by random sampling. Now even if one's ultimate goal is to give an account of the structure and contents of some individuals' or groups' total ethical systems, one will have to start by making point-analysis.

In the following, I shall give an account of some aspects of one such exploratory study which I made in 1963-5.[1]

The fragment of Sudanese ethics which was selected for closer analysis was the conception of the good man, in particular the ideas of honour, dignity, and self-respect.   This choice was made because such ideas have been accorded a prominent place in Arab and Islamic ethics by a number of writers and because some of the things that my students in moral philosophy said in seminars and essays seemed to indicate that they held firm beliefs within this area of ethics. A further consideration was that this area has been relatively neglected in recent moral philosophy.

The selection of informants was guided by the following considerations. The informants ought to be interested and willing to co-operate over a period of time, they ought to be relatively clear-headed and able to make their views explicit, they ought to be readily available, and they ought to hold views widely spread within some significant sector of the population.   The individuals which came closest to this ideal were three students in one of my seminar groups, who all agreed to take part.

The three informants were all from the central, riverain Sudan.   One came from the town of Atbara and belonged to the Bideyriya tribe.   The two others came from villages in the Blue Nile province.   One of them belonged to the Baṭahin tribe, the other to the Kenana.   They were about 25 years old and received the usual state education before entering the University of Khartoum.   All three had attended a traditional Koranic school—a *khalwa*—for shorter or longer periods, and seemed to be rather religiously-minded.

The method used consisted of informal interviews which were tape-recorded and afterwards transcribed.   The laborious work of transcribing was necessary for the detailed analysis of the informants' ethics.   Besides some preliminary talks, eight interviews were recorded with one, two or all three informants taking part each time.   Each interview lasted between one and two hours.   The interviews were designed to illuminate the informants' views on the good man, and explored in some detail the concepts which they saw as most important: courage, generosity, hospitality, honour, dignity, and self-respect.

The technique of conceptual analysis needs some explanation.   Talking of the concept of dignity is a way of referring to the meaning of the expression "dignity" and equivalent expressions in other languages.   To make an analysis of the concept of dignity is thus to make an analysis of the meaning of the word "dignity" and its synonyms.   Now the meanings of ethical terms like "dignity," "honour," "courage," "generosity," etc., are rather floating.   Ethical terms are

[1] For a full account, see "An Analysis of the Traditional Sudanese Virtues" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Khartoum, 1965).

seldom sharply defined, they tend to be vague and indeterminate in meaning, and to be used with different meanings on different occasions by different persons. Unlike the meanings of mathematical terms, which can be exhaustively summed up in neat formulations, the use of ethical terms needs detailed exploration, in order to find out exactly to which situations an individual is prepared and to which he is not prepared to apply them and what his reasons are. The key words are all normally used to refer to personal qualities which are held to be valuable. A meaningful analysis of such terms requires answers to the following questions: To whom does this informant ascribe this quality and to whom does he refuse to ascribe it and what reasons does he give for his views? How does one acquire and lose the quality, according to this informant, and what should one do if one has lost it? Is there anything one can do to get more of it and, if so, what? What should other people do to a person who has lost it? Does a person who has got it deserve any special treatment? If so, what? One would then have an exhaustive account of the meaning of the term used to refer to the quality, but only for that informant and at that time. To find out what other informants mean by the term, the process would have to be repeated with them, and to find out whether the concept has remained stable for an informant over a period of time, the process would have to be repeated with him.

If these are the questions to raise to elucidate the meaning of "dignity," then it does not matter much in which language the interviews are conducted. If one wants to analyse an Englishman's meaning of the term "dignity" at a certain time, the questioning can take place in French or Arabic or any other language which is sufficiently well understood by both interviewer and interviewee. It is not even necessary for the interviewer to know English in order to make the analysis. This point is of some interest, since it has sometimes been claimed that the investigator ought to be fluent in the language to which the term he is interested in belongs. One of the reasons for this seems to be an excessive reliance on intuition in semantics: it is assumed that if one knows the language perfectly, then one will somehow be able to "see" what the meaning of a certain term is. But this is a mistake. Intuition is a very unreliable instrument of semantic analysis.

There are practical advantages in knowing the language concerned, since it will suggest leads for investigation. But there are also disadvantages, for one might be tempted to read one's own interpretations into the informants' use of the terms. A scanty knowledge of the language is thus one way of keeping semantical intuitions under control, and it is therefore also a method of increasing the explicitness of the analysis. If one has no intuitions to rely on, then one is forced to ask explicitly for information. In the exploratory study, I had to choose between making the interviews myself in English, or to make them in Arabic through an interpreter, or to let somebody else carry them out in Arabic. In view of the considerations just adduced, the first alternative seemed clearly better than the others.

The exploration of the informants' moral concepts was thus carried out in English. Since the informants normally expressed their concepts in Arabic terms, these were used throughout as technical terms. It was also decided at the outset to adopt "standard translations" into English of the key terms in Arabic. One of the concepts selected for analysis was the concept expressed by the informants by the Arabic word *karama*, which can be translated by terms like "nobility," "high-mindedness," "noble-heartedness," "generosity," "magnanimity," "liberality,"

"munificence," "honour," "dignity," "respect," "esteem," "standing," "prestige," etc. (Wehr and Cowan, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, Wiesbaden 1961, p. 822). From this range of translation, "dignity" was selected as the standard translation of *karama* for the purposes of this study.

The informants often asserted that there are close relations between *karama* and the concepts of *sharaf* and *'ird*, which can also be translated by "honour" and "dignity" (Wehr and Cowan, p. 467, 604). To avoid confusion, "honour" was selected as the standard translation of *sharaf*, and "decency" as the standard translation of *'ird*.

Unlike the concepts of *sharaf* and *'ird*, which are often referred to in treatments of Arab ethics, *karama*, in the sense of dignity, does not seem to have received any attention in the literature before. Yet, the three informants agreed that *karama* is one of the most important virtues. Let us, therefore, consider it in some detail. The views of the three informants were sufficiently similar to make it justified, in the present context, to speak of one common concept of *karama*.

From the interviews, the following picture of the concept emerges. *Karama* is primarily ascribed to grown-up Northern Sudanese men. Any Sudanese who is not a "slave" or a descendent of a "slave" has *karama*, unless something particular has happened which has deprived him of it. The paradigm case of a dignified person is thus an adult man from the Northern Sudan. It seems reasonable to assume that the question whether non-Sudanese have dignity or not is not usually considered, so that the concept of dignity remains indeterminate in meaning in this respect for most people. Two of the informants said that all human beings have dignity, in principle, though "if you ask a Sudanese who doesn't go outside the country, it is the Sudanese who have it." *Karama* was ascribed to women in several places, but it was assumed that because of their inherent weakness, women cannot be trusted with the responsibility for their own *karama*: *karama*, like *sharaf*, "can't be given to women or put in the hands of women, because they are weak, and they will lose it. So it is always in the hands of men." "Every man in Sudanese society is held responsible for the actions of those women who are related to him, and it is commonly known among this Sudanese society that every Sudanese man is the guardian of every Sudanese woman." Children are not usually considered to have *karama*, though on reflection one informant thought that children must be held to have *karama*, though they show no signs of having it.

Karama is sometimes ascribed to families, e.g. a girl was said to wound her family's *karama* by going out alone. The extension of *karama* to apply to the whole family seems natural in view of the fact that the responsibility for the *karama* of each member of the family is held to be shared by all the grown-up males of the family. One's dignity does not depend only upon one's own behaviour and upon how one is treated; it is also a function of the family's status.

On one occasion *karama* was also ascribed to another kind of collective, the government, in a discussion of how the government should extricate itself from an embarrassing situation without losing face.

There is one exception to the general rule that everybody has got dignity: the people referred to as "slaves," i.e. descendants of former slaves or, generally, anybody from the areas from which slaves used to be recruited (the South and the Nuba Mountains), who are traditionally held to have no honour and dignity: "They have no *karama* and no *sharaf*. By birth, they have no *karama*, they say. And the slaves themselves, as they call them, believe that they have no *sharaf*,

have no *karama*." The informants did not agree with this traditional view, which one of them referred to as "inhuman."

One's *karama* can be affected (the informants used words like "wounded," "injured," "touched") by various kinds of misdemeanour or even lost completely. If lost, it cannot be regained, although one can hope that people will forget about it after some time. But the loss will remain there as "a black spot in his life" which can be referred to at appropriate occasions, as the following example shows: "If one man was in prison, and then he got out of prison, and if some other person injured his dignity, the other man would say, 'Did I injure your dignity? Have you dignity? You were in prison!'" There does not seen to be much one can do to add to one's dignity, according to the informants. The emphasis is definitely on the preservation of the status quo: *karama* is something which has to be preserved by not letting it get wounded or lost.

High up on the list of acts which would affect one's dignity comes sexual misbehaviour on one's own part or on the part of any relatives, particularly female relatives. If, for instance, one's wife commits adultery, that would be an injury to one's *karama*. The preservation of the family's honour (*sharaf*), which to a large extent depends upon the sexual behaviour of the women of the family, thus seems to be a necessary condition for the preservation of one's dignity. The list of actions to avoid if one wants to preserve one's dignity which can be compiled from the interviews also includes things like crying on failing an examination (for male students at least); failing after having worked hard (in order to avoid exposing oneself to the danger of losing dignity, a student would therefore either not work much or else at least not let the others know that he studied hard); repeating a year in a school; repeating more than one year in the university; changing one's mind on an important decision as the result of pressure from others; having been in prison. In all such cases, it does not, however, seem to be so much the action itself which leads to loss of dignity as the unfavourable reactions on the part of other people which the behaviour provokes if they get wind of it. One's dignity is predominantly, perhaps entirely, dependent upon how one is treated by others. The informants' concept of *karama* is clearly shame-oriented.

One's dignity is very sensitive to improper treatment, and to protect it means above all to see to it that one is treated with due respect. Any action which is liable to give rise to adverse reactions would therefore seem to be a potential threat to one's *karama*, and any deviation from the norms governing personal relations between human beings is likely to be interpreted as an offence to one's *karama*. Nonconformist behaviour is liable to give offence—it will be interpreted as an insult. The word "insult" is a key word in the interviews, and its frequency is a measure of the importance of the preservation of *karama*. The student who was unjustifiably accused of cheating during the examinations felt so deeply insulted that he tried to commit suicide in spite of the stringent Islamic norm against it; being accused of flattering a lecturer was a bad insult which deeply upset the student concerned; ironical remarks from a teacher are likely to be interpreted as insults rather than as justified admonitions; public blame is, generally, an unjustifiable insult, irrespective of the gravity of the misbehaviour which caused the blame; if a junior man is promoted, his seniors might take it as an insult and even resign; not to be greeted by somebody who is supposed to greet you first is an insult; to refuse to accept a gift is an insult; if you don't show the required hospitality and friendliness towards your relatives and friends when they come to visit you, they will feel insulted; and so on. To look for possible insults is thus a good

way of finding the socially important norms in this kind of ethical system, and the seriousness of the insult is a measure of the stringency of the corresponding norms.

One norm of special importance in connection with dignity is that of equality. All men are on principle equal; there is no difference between a servant and a president with regard to their personal dignity: "the ordinary man in the street, he thinks that he has his *karama*, just the same as 'Abboud." Everybody has a claim to be respected, and people should show mutual respect. Some people do, however, deserve more respect than other. If one is insulted by one's father, for instance, one should not treat him in the same way as one would treat one of one's peers, although there is no need to accept the insult.

It is not very clear what it means to accept an insult. The informants repeatedly said that if one's dignity is threatened by insulting behaviour, one must show that one does not accept it by "rebelling" or "revolting." It is because women and children don't "rebel" when insulted that it is difficult to tell whether they have any dignity or not. The "slaves" show that they have no *karama* by not revolting when insulted or abused.

Three features of this concept of dignity seem especially noteworthy: (i) the egalitarian attitude which is reflected in the notion that everybody—with the exceptions mentioned—has dignity; (ii) the essentially conservative and negative character of dignity with the emphasis on the preservation of the status quo; (iii) the dependence of dignity on other people's reactions rather than on one's own conscience.

The analysis of the conditions of dignity opens up a wide field for further inquiries, which can only be touched upon in passing here. In the first place, there are close relations between the norms of dignity and other moral norms. The preservation of dignity is dependent upon the observance of the norms of hospitality, generosity, and sexual propriety. The mapping of these inter-relations within the informants' ethical systems requires patient, detailed analysis. This applies not least to the relations between the notions of *'ird* (decency), *sharaf* (honour), *karama* (dignity), and *iḥtiram al-nafs* (self-respect), which form a com-plicated cluster of prime importance in the informants' ethics. Besides such morphological analyses, scores of further investigations of e.g. a statistical, functional, behavioural, and historical nature suggest themselves. Some such investigations of special urgency will be referred to in the next section.

Ethics and development

The value of research in descriptive ethics can be placed under three headings: (i) theoretical, (ii) cultural, (iii) practical.

(i) Like many other academic subjects, moral philosophy has up to now been excessively European-centred. Moral philosophers have been concerned almost exclusively with aspects of ethical ideologies in Europe and America. It does not seem fanciful to suggest that current theories and techniques in moral philosophy have been influenced by this bias, and that a broadening of the field of vision will have stimulating effects upon the subject. The need for interdisciplinary and unorthodox approaches to cope with new problems in fresh environments should have similar effects.

(ii) The ethical ideologies in a country are an essential part of the national heritage, the mapping of which will have an intrinsic cultural value irrespective of the practical applications.

(iii) In order to understand a person's behaviour, it is often necessary to be familiar with the norms and ideals which govern his conduct. This applies particularly to situations where one deliberately sets out to introduce change, e.g. in education and development programmes. Among the many practical applications of descriptive ethics, I would like to put emphasis on its relevance for development. There is a growing awareness of the importance of human resources for development and of the need for increased research into them in order to be able to plan rationally. In the investigation of available human resources, the mapping of existing norms and ideals will have to play an important part. Knowledge of the characteristics of the raw material is essential if one wants to avoid bad mistakes, as development planners are beginning to realize. It seems particularly important to localise the progress-hindering factors, among which many of the ethical characteristics must undoubtedly be counted. Research in descriptive ethics in the Sudan is one aspect of the mapping of the country's resources for development.

In the exploration of the quantity and quality of the country's human resources, the traditional and uneducated sectors should be investigated as well as the modern and educated sectors. There is however, reason to pay special attention to the modern sector, since it is the educated elite who have the task of initiating and directing the development of the country. Too little is known at the present about the leaders of development, what their characters and ambitions are, what norms and ideals they have, and so on. Further research on the students and graduates of the University of Khartoum would therefore seem to be a good investment for the future. The representativeness of the informants in the exploratory study should be tested, further aspects of their ethics investigated, the ethical factors should be studied in relation to actual behaviour, social background, psychological traits, and so forth. One finding in the exploratory study of unusual interest is that the selected students were of the opinion that their moral views agreed on the whole with the common views, e.g. the views held in their families. They were thus not aware of any chasm between themselves as educated persons and the uneducated people. If their feeling should prove correct, that there is no such gulf between the élite and the masses as has been reported to exist elsewhere, that would be a remarkable feature well worth further investigation.