TORE NORDENSTAM

AN ARCHIVE OF EVERYDAY ETHICS

FIRST STEPS

When I taught moral philosophy at the University of Khartoum in the 1960s, I got interested in the moral thinking of my students and wanted to find out more about that. I was surprised when I found that the central notions of contemporary ethics in the Arabic-speaking part of Sudan – the concepts of honour, dignity and self-respect – were virgin territory from the researcher´s point of view. If I had been a social anthropologist, I could have done field-work based on participant observation in some part of the country and written a monograph on the basis of that. If I had been a sociologist, I could have approached the matter armoured with the theories and methods of sociology, including refined statistical methods and so on. But I was a philosopher and approached the matter armoured with the basic tools of philosophy in the Western tradition: reflective talks and conceptual analysis. The first models in that tradition were produced by Socrates and Plato, always engaged in conversations aiming at clarifying the muddled thinking of the dialogue partners around such themes as truth, beauty, justice, dignity, courage, generosity and so on. So what I did was to devise procedures for carrying out Socratic dialogues based on recent insights into the nature of moral concepts.

The results of my first excursions into that territory were summed up in the book entitled *Sudanese Ethics* which was published in 1968. The title was provocative in the sense that what I had done was only a small beginning. I hoped that other researchers would get interested in studying the existing ethics in more detail from various points of view, eventually leading to a kind of ethical map of the cultures which coexist in the Sudan.

Before leaving the University of Khartoum in 1966 I took the opportunity to carry out a sequel to the Socratic talks of 1963-64: a survey of the moral thinking of the students in all the faculties of the university based on short questionnaires on honour, dignity and self-respect. But I am ahead of myself. Let us go back to the moment when it all began.

It all began on a day in June 1961. I was strolling along the main avenue in Gothenburg, Sweden, when I happened to meet Håkan Törnebohm who was one of the three teachers in the department of philosophy at the local university when I began my philosophical studies seven years earlier. It was a small department with few students. We were two or three of us who attended his introductory course in logic, and after the lectures he always invited us for tea and talks in his nearby apartment. In 1957 he was appointed to the new chair of philosophy at the University of Khartoum which had become an independent institution after Sudan´s independence the year before. Now he was back home for the long vacation which coincided with the hottest period of the year in Khartoum. After the standard greetings he looked at me and said, "Do you want to come to Khartoum for five years as a university lecturer?" I thought about it for a second or so. Should I give up the grant which I had just got for writing a Ph.D. thesis in linguistic theory and the philosophy of the humanities? Was I prepared to leave the city in which I had lived for the last sixteen years? What about my family and friends? After that second I said "Yes." Three months later I was installed in a completely foreign environment in an Arabic-speaking part of the world. The working language of the university at that time was English, and I could start teaching courses in the history of philosophy, logic and moral philosophy along the same lines as in any analytically oriented department of philosophy in the United Kingdom and Scandinavia at that time.

One of Håkan Törnebohm´s many virtues was his interest in reflective talks on themes ranging from philosophy and theory of science to Arabic culture and the political situation in the country. In the course of one of our almost daily conversations I mentioned that I had become fascinated with the moral outlook of the students and that the whole field of Sudanese ethics seemed to be unexplored territory, adding that I felt tempted to do some research in that field some time in the future. He said "No", immediately adding ”Start at once." So I did.

This happened towards the end of my second academic year in Khartoum.

I had overcome the initial culture shock; I gave my lectures; I took lessons in Arabic, including colloquial Sudanese Arabic; I read a good deal about the Sudan and the Arab world; and I and my wife enjoyed life as expatriates in the isolated desert town. After the summer vacation in 1963 I approached three students of philosophy whom I had got to know during the past two years, explaining what I had in mind and asking them if they were interested in taking part in a project concerning Sudanese ethics. The answer was positive.

What I wanted to do was to clarify some aspects of the ethics which surrounded me in the Sudan. In my everyday dealings with the young men and women at the university I had become aware of the fact that considerations of personal dignity seemed to play a prominent role in their lives. If a student was criticized by a teacher in front of the class, for example, he might well leave the room. And to take an example of a quite different order: When I came to the Sudan, I had never heard of female circumcision. Now it came to my knowledge that the practice of female genital mutilation was widespread in the country in spite of its being forbidden by the law. I began to understand that it was a matter of honour and dignity without it becoming clear precisely which ethical words and concepts and assumptions which were embedded in the practice. Examples like these seemed to me to point in the direction of an exploratory study of Sudanese thinking about honour and dignity and other personal virtues.

It was an approach which differed from social science and mainstream moral philosophy in the middle of the 20th century. In the first place, it had become old-fashioned to approach ethics through considerations of the qualities that one ought to have in order to be counted as a good man or woman. In the course of the nineteenth century the distinction between facts and values entered the scene, and one began to see ethics as systems of norms and values. The focus shifted from agents and their qualities to actions and the value of their consequences. In the second place, contemporary moral philosophy, at least that portion of it which I had come across, concentrated on a few supposedly basic concepts and norms like the right and the good, Kant´s categorical imperative and the utilitarian principle that one should always try to increase the amount of happiness in the world as much as possible. The philosophers were more interested in constructing models and systems than in understanding the complexities of existing ethics.

The situation was the same in the philosophy of science of those days. The prevailing conceptions of science (especially in the English-speaking parts of the world) were based on examples drawn from disciplines like physics and chemistry rather than art history and other branches of the humanities. Case-studies were generally mistrusted. In addition, there was a widespread lack of confidence in the ability of ordinary people to express their own views in adequate ways. What the natives thought and did had to be studied by experts in the social sciences who could provide politicians and administrators with the background knowledge they needed for making their decisions. The reliance on experts in its turn rested on the age-old neglect of practical knowledge.

The search for knowledge in the Western tradition began as a search for the most general and unchangeable features of the world we live in, and theoretical knowledge continued to dominate the scene for a surprisingly long period. Gilbert Ryle´s lecture on knowing that and knowing how in 1945 was an important step in a new direction. The publication of Ludwig Wittgenstein´s *Philosophical Investigations* in 1953 was another important move towards a better understanding of how language is embedded in what we think and feel and do.

The most decisive break with traditional philosophy as I saw it was a reconsideration of the role of examples in our lives. Two thinkers were particularly helpful to me. One of them was a colleague of Gilbert Ryle´s in the thriving philosophical environment at Oxford. In the Trinity term of 1957 I attended J.L. Austin´s lectures on negligence, carelessness and similar notions in the Anglo-Saxon common law traditions. Examples play a key role in all legal systems. In statutory law precedents play an important role, but the role of examples is particularly clear in the common law traditions in Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence in which there are no binding rules at all. The procedures consist of comparisons between the present case and earlier cases. It is a paradigm of analogical thinking. The second thinker I have in mind was an American lawyer by name of E.H. Levi, author of a brilliant analysis of legal argumentation entitled *An Introduction to Legal Reasoning*. His analysis of the rise and fall of the concept of inherently dangerous articles is a model of clarity. Furthermore, it can be used as a model for how ethical concepts arise, develop and change, eventually to be replaced by other moral notions. The concept of things which are dangerous in themselves arose in common law cases concerned with loaded guns, a defective kerosene lamp and other articles which inadvertently had caused damage to people. The meaning of the term is determined by a series of lawsuits from the beginning of the 19th century to the middle of the 1930´s, after which the ascription of responsibility has been handled in other terms. The carefully recorded development of the legal concept of inherently dangerous articles is (I suggest) an excellent model of how ethical concepts may develop in more informal ways in the more scantily recorded series of cases which are the fabric of our lives.

According to the tradition from Plato and Aristotle all concepts stand for unchangeable essences which together make up the immutable core of the world. This is no doubt more convincing in the field of mathematics than in ethics. In classical geometry *triangle* can be defined once and for all as plane figure with three sides and angles. The brief dictionary definition of *dignity* in my copy of *The Pocket Oxford Dictionary* makes use of words like worthiness, nobleness and respect which cry out for examplification. The scope of concepts like honour, dignity and self-respect is determined by more or less tacit agreements in groups and societies on how it is and how it ought to be. Ethical concepts belong to the class of concepts which can be said to be open, multifaceted, porous and fuzzy. Hence the need for case studies in ethics and all other fields of culture.

To be continued.