SUMMARY

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 – honour, dignity and self-respect – were virgin territory from the researcher´s point of view. Had I 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. Had I 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 thinking of their dialogue partners around such themes as truth, beauty, justice, dignity, courage, generosity and so on. So what I did was to develop procedures for carrying out Socratic dialogues on ethical matters based on recent insights into the nature of moral concepts.

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 social groups 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, porous and fuzzy. Hence the need for case studies in ethics and all other fields of culture.

The results of my excursions into this territory in the 1960s were published in *An Analysis of the Traditional Sudanese Virtues* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Khartoum 1965), a paper on descriptive ethics in the Sudan (1967), and the monograph *Sudanese Ethics* (1968).