

## WICKEDNESS—ITS POSSIBILITY AND ANALYSIS

### (I)

One of the most perplexing moral phenomena which moral philosophers have found difficult to explain is wickedness. 'Wicked' according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, means 'given to or involving immorality', 'offending intentionally against the 'right', 'intended or intending to give pain'. Thus 'wickedness' means intentional or deliberate wrong doing' or 'wilful wrong-doing', and 'wilful' means for which compulsion, ignorance or accident cannot be pleaded as an excuse. The word 'wicked' is too strong for minor defects of this kind as Nowell-Smith recognises<sup>1</sup> but in the absence of a better word, it may be used to mean 'deliberate wrong-doing'.

In our daily moral life we come across cases of wickendess and distinguish them from cases in which a person does wrong under coercion or because he succumbs to temptation or because of his mistaken judgement and we think that it is the former who really deserves censure or punishment. The story of Ravana kidnapping Seeta in the Ramayana is an instance of wicked action. Dr. Lagu taking the life of a widow for the sake of property, Jakkal, Sutar and others who recently committed many atrocities in Pune and hundreds and thousands of cases of murder, theft, deception, raping decided by the law courts are instances of wickedness. It is one of the problems of moral philosophy to analyse wickedness, to formulate its conditions and to distinguish it from other types of wrong-doings.

The problem of wickedness is philosophically very important because it throws light on the relation between moral beliefs and action or more generally on the relation between practical beliefs or knowledge and action; between theory and practice. We may distinguish practical beliefs including moral and religious beliefs, beliefs in political ideology and so on from scientific or theoretical beliefs and call them, following Price,<sup>2</sup> 'belief-in' and 'belief-that' respectively. There is a philosophical tendency which denies the legitimacy of the talk of belief in moral, religious and other practical contexts. However, there does not appear to be any *a priori* reason

I. P. Q...5

for doing so. Moreover, we do talk of our belief or disbelief in polygamy, democracy and so on. One of the important distinguishing features of 'beliefs-in' is that they are action-guiding. Those philosophers who fail to see the importance of this distinguishing feature of practical beliefs and treat them on the model of 'beliefs-that' find it difficult to explain why it is odd to say that 'X is right but no one should do it'. On the other hand those who are impressed by the action-guiding character of practical beliefs make the connection between beliefs and action almost analytic so that it is a contradiction to say that 'A knows that X is right but does not do it' or 'B did Y though he knows it to be wrong'. These philosophers define practical beliefs in terms of action or behaviour. If we follow this latter tendency then we won't be able to say of any person that he believes in God unless he is completely resolved to God. We would have then to embrace the paradox that 'Jesus Christ is the only christian' because the teachings of Jesus Christ remain for almost every christian an ideal to be more or less approximated.

However, leaving aside the general problem arising out of the reduction of practical beliefs to successful action, it may be said that in ethics, if one's moral beliefs or attitudes or knowledge or one's moral principles are defined in terms of successful action, then the 'Socratic paradox' follows that no person can knowingly pursue evil; that all wrong-doing is involuntary and due to ignorance. On this view both moral weakness and wickedness become impossible. If moral belief or knowledge is defined in terms of 'trying' then the notion of moral weakness becomes intelligible, but wickedness still remains unintelligible.

It is on this background that wickedness poses a prior and more difficult philosophical problem : whether deliberate wrong-doing is possible at all. In this article an attempt is made to consider the problems of the possibility and analysis of wickedness. In section II, I shall consider the question : How is deliberate or intentional wrong-doing possible ? In section III, I shall consider Nowell-Smith's analysis of wickedness and try to bring out its inadequacies. In section IV, I shall give my own account of wickedness.

## ( II )

Though wickedness is recognised in our daily moral life by ordinary men and by law courts, philosophers of the past like

Socrates and Spinoza and many contemporary philosophers have denied its possibility, mainly on two grounds—the logical and the psychological. Let us first consider the denial of the possibility of wickedness based on the definition of moral knowledge.

Socrates defines moral knowledge in such a way that it becomes self-contradictory to assert that a man knows what is right and does not do it. In the words of Bambrough, “For Socrates it follows as *a matter of logic* that if a man does wrong, then he does not know what is right. Socrates does not use the word ‘knowledge’ as we ordinarily use it; his criteria of applying it are very much more strict than our ordinary criteria, so strict that according to his usage, nothing can be allowed to count as moral knowledge unless right action inevitably flows from its possession. On this account it becomes *logically true* for Socrates that no man does wrong willingly”<sup>3</sup>. Thus on the Socratic view, neither moral weakness nor wickedness is logically possible.

Aristotle protests against the Socratic view because it goes against the common opinion. He proposes to use the word ‘knowledge’ in a less strict way by making a distinction between ‘having knowledge’ and ‘exercising it’. He is prepared to grant that a weak person can be said to possess knowledge but that knowledge is similar to the knowledge of a person who is “asleep, mad; or drunk”<sup>4</sup>. On the Aristotelian view moral weakness is logically possible but not wickedness.

Thus we find that both Socrates and Aristotle deny wickedness and reduce it to either ignorance or weakness. But if there is no such thing as deliberate wrong-doing then it follows that there is no such things as just blame or punishment. Moreover, it would also mean that ordinary men have been labouring under a profound delusion that men deliberately do wrong. There are, therefore, two alternatives open to us : either to explain away wickedness or to redefine moral knowledge so as to recognise the possibility of intentional wrong-doing. I think it won't be correct to deny the possibility of wickedness. We may, therefore, define moral knowledge by saying that ‘to know X to be morally right’ is ‘to believe that doing X is justified or justifiable on moral grounds’ ? We may thus exclude the element of will from the definition of moral knowledge. This is in conformity with the quoted sentence of Hume, “It is one thing to know virtue and another to confirm the will to it”<sup>5</sup>.

Contemporary prescriptivism also makes the idea of wickedness look absurd by denying the gap between 'ought' and 'shall'. As Thalberg points out, "Post-Kantian philosophers tend to transmute Socrates' paradox into a problem about the comparative strength of moral reasons as opposed to consideration of personal advantage, sensuous, gratification, glory and other selfish goals."<sup>6</sup> On the prescriptivist view 'it becomes analytic to say that everyone always does what he think he ought to (in the valuative sense).'<sup>7</sup> Of course this is an over simplified statement of Hare which he further qualifies in order to account for moral weakness. But as Gardiner points out, Hare's view 'appears most obviously paradoxical' in cases where "there seems to have been no doubt in the man's own mind that what he did offended against a moral principle which he professed to believe and that he sincerely thought what he was doing was wrong."<sup>8</sup> Prescriptivism, thus denies the possibility of wickedness on logical grounds. It is true that Nowell-Smith can be said both (i) to subscribe to some form of prescriptivism in so far as he maintains that 'I ought' (in the verdict giving sense of 'ought') entails 'I shall' and that 'I ought but I shall not' is a contradiction and (ii) also to recognise wickedness as a distinct type of wrong-doing. I shall, however, argue in the next section that Nowell-Smith has not been able to give a satisfactory explanation of wickedness and this is mainly due to his prescriptivism.

The impossibility of acting against one's own moral judgement is based on the view that the relation between moral judgement or ought and action is that of entailment. This is regarded as a logical thesis. Now this thesis would be true if moral philosophers are bringing out the logic of the holy will or the will of a purely rational being where the objective moral law is also the subjective maxim of action. But this is not true of human beings who are imperfectly rational. As I have argued elsewhere<sup>9</sup> the relation between moral knowledge, belief or judgement and action, motivation or will is not uniform in all human beings. It varies and becomes closer in direct proportion to the moral development of a person. "The more developed the character of a person, the closer is the connection. Where the connection becomes so close that to know the virtue is to conform to it i.e. where it becomes logically necessary it is the highest stage of moral perfection or moral integrity."<sup>10</sup> In the case of a wicked person, the intellectual assent to the moral judgement provides no motivational or exciting

reason at all. This is how it can be shown that the logical grounds on which the possibility of wickedness is denied are inadequate and that it is possible for a person to do wrong intentionally and knowingly.

Another ground on which the possibility of wickedness is denied is psychological. Socrates, for instance, maintains in *Protagoras* that it is not in human nature to prefer evil to good or to prefer a greater evil to a lesser one. Again in *Meno* he asserts that if some one is found to desire what is evil it is because he has mistaken it to be good. Some of the contemporary prescriptivists also see to hold that moral reasons "are 'dominant' in the sense that he would not allow them to be over-ridden by any pro-attitude other than another moral principle."<sup>11</sup> F. H. Bradley<sup>12</sup> has stated this ground in the following way with a view to finally refute the Socratic paradox. To know an act to be wrong is to have an idea of wrong. To have an idea of wrong implies the feeling of wrong. This feeling of wrong repels a person from choosing or doing the act. It is, therefore, psychologically impossible for a man to choose or do what he feels to be wrong and not choose or do what he feels to be right. He, however, confesses, "For myself, and in my mind, I am able to verify the presence of wrong-doing in the face of and despite the voice of Conscience."<sup>13</sup>

Bradley accounts for the possibility of sinning wilfully and knowingly by pointing out that though the idea of pleasure gives rise to the feeling of pleasure, 'the idea of a greater pleasure need not in itself be felt as more pleasant nor the idea of greater pain as more painful'. This must also be true of the idea of wrong-doing. It is possible, therefore that, a discursive mind may think of an action to be wrong and yet may choose and do it. "It is only where the attention is concentrated upon the quality of the act and even then it is only where the act in its wrongful quality is present as a vivid imagination, that the conscience will be irresistible. It is not knowledge, it is a relative degree of feeling excited by a certain kind of knowledge, that coerces the appetite."<sup>14</sup>

To sum up, both the logical and psychological grounds adduced in support of the denial of the possibility of intentional wrong-doing may be adequate in the case of a purely rational or holy will but they, betray the logic of morals of the ordinary humans who are partly rational and who differ from each other in the

moral development. At the lowest stage of the moral scale may come the wicked person who knows what is morally right or ought to be done but this knowledge provides no motivation to do it. On a higher stage may come a weak-willed person who tries to do what he believes to be right but fails. There may be still higher stages of a virtuous person, a moral hero, a saint and so on. The point is that an adequate ethical theory must give up the supposition that the relation between moral belief or knowledge and action or motivation is uniform in all humans irrespective of their moral development. If this is done then no ethical theory would deny *a priori* or with a definitional fiat the possibility of a man acting against his moral judgement. To deny the possibility of wickedness is to ignore or explain away an important fact of moral life and the ethical theory which does so would be to that extent inadequate.

### (III)

P. H. Nowell-Smith, among the contemporary moral philosophers, recognises wickedness as a distinct type of wrong-doing and maintains that no ethical theory can afford to ignore it. He regards wickedness as a type of wrong-doing in which 'a man adopts and adheres to bad moral principles' and distinguishes it from moral weakness in which a person has 'good moral principles but fails, on some occasion to live upto them'. He seems to lay down the following three conditions of wickedness, viz., that a man (a) does something wrong, something, that is, that a spectator would condemn; (b) does not condemn himself for having done it; and (c) neither tries nor thinks that he ought to try to do anything other than what he does. Nowell-Smith adds, 'He may of course know that he ought not to do what he does in the sense that he knows that the practice is morally condemned by others. But he does not believe that he ought not to do so in the verdict giving sense of 'ought'; on the contrary, his action is an expression of the moral principle, that he espouses'. According to him, 'this is precisely the condition of the deliberately dishonest, cowardly, mean or callous man.'<sup>15</sup>

If the conditions laid down by Nowell-Smith are accepted as necessary and sufficient for characterising a person or an action as wicked, then a serious consequence follows, namely, that any person, including a moral reformer who deviates from the socially accepted moral code or from the moral code accepted by the spectator will

have to be regarded as wicked. This is because he fulfils all the three conditions. Nowell-Smith may say that we won't regard a person as wicked if we do not regard his principles as wrong or bad i. e. if we subscribe to his moral principles and this is what happens in the case of a moral reformer. But my contention is that when A deviates from the moral principles accepted by the society or the spectator and even when A's moral principles are regarded by the society or the spectator as wrong, it would be absurd to call A wicked on the ground that the society or the spectator does not approve of his moral principles. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>16</sup> this is the case of a moral error. In the case of moral error, the person who deviates from the socially accepted moral standards believes that the socially accepted principles are wrong and his principles are better than them. He, therefore, feels obliged to deviate from the socially accepted moral principles. In the case of wickedness, on the other hand, the person *knows* that what he has decided to do is morally wrong not only in the sense, as Nowell-Smith thinks, that it is condemned by others but also, in the sense that he himself judges it to be morally wrong. But his moral judgement does not motivate him to refrain from doing what is wrong. He deliberately decides to act against his own moral judgement, because he lacks good will i.e. because he is ill-willed. Thus Nowell-Smith's criteria seem to apply to the cases of moral error rather than to those of wickedness.

Secondly, Nowell-Smith regards wicked person as acting on bad moral principles. He says "we might say colloquially that he has no moral principles. But this clearly means not that he literally has no moral principles or that he has good ones but continually succumbs to temptation to act against them, but that he has bad moral principles."<sup>17</sup> His reasons for thinking it incorrect to say of a wicked person that he has no moral principles, seem to be (i) that a person having no moral principles cannot be held to be morally responsible for his actions and so no blame or punishment is possible; and (ii) that from the spectator's point of view wicked man's actions are morally wrong or bad. There is consistency in his behaviour and so the spectator can discern or formulate a principle underlying his actions. The underlying principle so discerned is condemnable. Therefore, from the spectator's point of view we may say that his actions are expressions of bad moral principles.

The phrase 'having no moral principles' seem to be vague and ambiguous. It is true that when it is applied to animals, insane persons or young babies, it means that they are 'a moral' or 'non-moral' i. e. moral judgement cannot be passed on them. They are not held to be morally responsible and they are not subject to moral praise or blame. The phrase understood in this sense is certainly not true of a wicked person. Similarly, there are many choices or acts or decisions that are not subject to moral judgement e. g. the tooth-paste or the pen one chooses is generally not an object of moral judgement. A wicked action certainly does not fall within the category of non-moral or moral actions or choices.

But within the moral sphere the phrase 'having no moral principles' may mean 'having no scruples', 'having no consideration for morality.' In such a case knowing that something is morally right or good or is a duty does not motivate the person to do it nor does the knowledge that something is bad or wrong refrain him from doing it. When we say that a wicked person has no moral principles, it means that the decisions of a wicked person are not affected by moral considerations.

We have thus distinguished two senses of the phrase 'having no moral principles' viz. the sense of being non-moral or 'amoral' and the sense of being unscrupulous or immoral. The phrase understood only in the first sense and not in the second sense absolves a person from moral responsibility and consequently from moral blame or censure.

In order to decide whether it is more correct to say of a wicked person that he has no moral principles than to say of him that he acts on bad moral principles, let us ask, 'what is it for a person to have moral principles?' According to Nowell-Smith a person can be said to have a moral principle if (i) he has a pro-attitude which is relatively dominant i.e. which he would not allow to be overridden by any pro-attitude other than another moral principle and is concerned with an important matter; (ii) he does not regularly break it; feels remorse when he breaks it and acknowledges and avows it and expresses his genuine desire to act on it in his more reflective moments; and (iii) he is prepared to universalise it.<sup>18</sup>

A wicked person, say a dishonest man, cannot be said to espouse honesty as his moral principle because he does not satisfy the first two criteria mentioned above nor can he be said to espouse dis-



honesty as his moral principle firstly because he does not universalise it and secondly because he does not address himself in the language of 'ought'. A dishonest man does not say 'I ought to be dishonest' nor 'Everyone ought to be dishonest'. He might say, "I don't mind to be dishonest, or 'I don't care for honesty' but he does not feel morally obliged to be dishonest. He may always act dishonestly but he never claims that it is morally justified. A wicked person may be cruel, dishonest, unjust, malevolent but it would be absurd to suggest that he espouses these as moral virtues.

Thus if a wicked man (i) is not prepared to universalise his pro-attituded (ii) does not express his decisions in terms of 'I ought' but only in terms of 'I shall' (iii) is prepared to override moral consideration by considerations other than moral and has an utter disregard for morality then it would be absurd to say that he is acting on moral principles whether good or bad, that his action is an expression of a moral principle he espouses. In so far as his action is not guided or determined by moral consideration, it would be truer to say that he has no moral principles. A wicked person is correctly described as an unscrupulous or unprincipled man.

In so far as a wicked man is consistent in his actions or behaviour, we, from the spectators' point of view, can, discern certain principle of this behaviour. And the principle so discerned being condemnable, may be called wrong or bad. But this principle is only descriptive of the uniformity of his behaviour and has a predictive function. It would be absurd to suggest that the principle so discerned is one which he enunciates or espouses in lieu of the commonly accepted moral principles or that he holds different moral principles.

#### IV

Throughout this paper, I have vindicated the view that deliberate wrong-doing is not only logically possible but it is also a fact of moral life. According to the view developed here, a wicked person (i) Knows that what he proposes to do is wrong. He knows not only in the sense that he knows that the society disapproves of it but in the sense that he himself believes that the action is not justifiable on moral grounds (ii) and yet he deliberately decides to do it, for some considerations other than moral. Thus he does not consider moral principles to be overriding; (iii) He is not prepared

to universalise his decision and hence he cannot be said to act on principles, much less on moral principles; (iv) He does not feel remorse or does not try or think that he ought to try to do otherwise than what he actually did or proposes to do. If because of his upbringing, he feels uneasy, he may treat it as weakness and try to overcome it. And lastly (v) he does not try to defend his action as morally right.

Though rationality is the defining property of man, it is no contradiction to say that men behave irrationally. To refuse to be guided by moral considerations is one form of irrationality. When we come across a person who accepts beliefs for which there is no evidence or even beliefs against which there is an evidence, we cannot refuse to accept this fact and say 'he cannot accept a belief without or contrary to evidence.' Our proper reaction would be to say that 'he should not accept a belief without or contrary to evidence.' Similarly, when a person neither acts on moral principles nor does he have any explanation or excuse for his failure to act on moral principles, our proper reaction should be not that 'he cannot intentionally do wrong' but that 'he should not so behave' that 'his action is irrational.' As Thalberg puts it, "When something wicked, imprudent, disastrous, pointless or inept is done, we can always raise the question whether the deed was on accident, or due to constraint, mistake, oversight, aberration or some other mitigating circumstance—including at times 'bad luck'. Now since we find no justification or excuses for a man's voluntary and knowing failure to do what he believes best, we are at a loss to explain his action in our usual terms. It has no place within our scheme for assessing conduct. In exasperation, we wonder 'How could he?' The correct answer is not, however, 'He couldn't possibly have done Y voluntarily and knowingly, when he had better reasons to do X'. The correct answer is 'He shouldn't have' or 'He has no excuse for doing Y.'<sup>19</sup>

Nowell-Smith says, "A wicked character can be improved by moral censure and punishment."<sup>20</sup> But if a wicked person is represented as acting on moral principles which the spectator or the society considers to be bad or wrong, then it is hardly intelligible why he should be punished rather than educated. He deserves blame or punishment because he deliberately tramples down moral principles. It is because he has deliberately chosen the irrational

path that rational arguments or rational methods of persuasion and education cease to play any significant role. His action is inexcusable. Reason or scruples cannot prevent him from doing wrong. So the State has to use physical force, the method of punishment, which alone, if at all, may stop him from doing wrong any more.

P. G. Center of Philosophy  
Panaji Goa.

S. S. ANTARKAR

#### NOTES

1. P. H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics*, p. 265, Penguin, 1954.
2. H. H. Price, *Belief*, Chap. IX, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1969.
3. R. Bambrough, 'Socratic Paradox', *The philosophical quarterly*, Scotland The Uni. of St. Andrews, Vol. 10, No. 41, Oct. 1960, p. 295.
4. Aristotle — The Nichomachean Ethics, book vii, caps. 1-3,—Quoted in *Weakness of will* (Ed.) by G. W. Mortimore Macmillan, 1971, p. 67.
5. David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, Vol. II, Book III, Part I.
6. Irving Thalberg, "Acting against one's better judgement", *Weakness of Will* (Ed.) Mortimore, p. 234.
7. R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* — Quoted in *Weakness of Will* (Ed.) Mortimore, p. 98.
8. P. L. Gardiner, "On assenting to a moral principle" *Ibid*, p. 112.
9. S. S. Antarkar, 'Moral judgement & Motivation' *Proceedings of the Indian Philosophical Congress*, 45th Session, 1972, p. 1-8.
10. Op. cit.
11. Nowell Smith, *Ethics*, p. 307.
12. F. H. Bradley, "Can a Man Sin Against Knowledge?". *Collected Essays*, Oxford, 1935, Vol. I, p. 142-148.
13. *Ibid* — p. 142.
14. *Ibid* p. 148.
15. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics*, p. 265-266.
16. S. S. Antarkar, 'Moral Error' in *Quest for Truth*, Delhi, 1978, 1976, p. 622-634.
17. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics*, p. 267.
18. *Ibid*, p. 306-310.
19. Irving Thalberg, "Acting against one's better judgement" — in *Weakness of Will*, (Ed) Mortimore, p. 244.
20. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics*, p. 306.

## ANNOUNCEMENT

PUBLICATIONS OF FORMER "INDIAN INSTITUTE OF  
PHILOSOPHY" AMALNER ARE AVAILABLE FOR  
INTERESTED READERS AND INSTITUTIONS.  
THESE BOOKS ARE

No.	Name of the Book	Author	Price Rs. Ps.
<b>ENGLISH</b>			
1.	Metaphysics of Advaita Vedanta	G. R. Malkani	25·00
2.	K. C. Bhattacharya Memorial Volume Philosophical Essays	Distinguished writers	20·00
3.	The Subject As Freedom	K. C. Bhattacharya	10·00
4.	Sri-Pratapseth Diamond Jubilee Volume, Part III, Philosophical Essays	Different Writers	3·00
5.	A Life Sketch of the Founder of the Indian Institute of Philosophy and A Brief Account of the Advaitic System of Thought		
6.	A Study of Reality	G. R. Malkani	3·00
7.	Reality and Value	G. R. Malkani	5·00
8.	Metaphysics of Energy	G. R. Malkani	4·00
9.	Problem of Nothing	G. R. Malkani	3·00
10.	The Problem of one and the many	G. R. Malkani	2·00
11.	Reason and Its Limitations	G. R. Malkani	1·00
12.	Sin and Bondage	G. R. Malkani	1·00
13.	Sadhana	Sadhu Santinatha	5·00
14.	A Critical Examination of the Non-Dualistic Philosophy (Vedanta)	Sadhu Santinatha	5·00
15.	Sri Ramgita	M. W. Burway	7·00

**Note** :—These being rare books, they can be had only by sending V. P. P. without any discount. Contact :  
*The In-Charge, Pratap Centre of Philosophy, Amalner,  
Dist.-Jalgaon, Maharashtra State, India. PIN 425 401.*