As Murray explains, ancient thinkers often regard immorality as the result of ignorance. Roughly speaking, the thought is something like this:

- Nobody would willingly and wittingly choose a worse option rather than a better one.
- Hence, nobody would willingly and wittingly choose anything but the best option (or one of the best).
- Immorality/wrong-doing is never best.
- So, nobody would willingly and wittingly do wrong.
- Certainly people often do wrong willingly.
- Hence, they must do so unwittingly — they must mistakenly believe that what they do is the best option.

The remedy for wrong-doing is, hence, knowledge: dispel wrong-doers’ ignorance and they will cease being wrong-doers.

1 Murray

Murray rejects this view, but aims to show that there is something right about it.

2 Methodology

- Start with a set of vices.
- Try to identify the common features which make them vices.

An analysis of ‘vice’ is satisfactory iff\(^1\) the features identified are:

- not features of non-vices;
- features of all vices;
- essential to the vices i.e. what makes them vices.

3 ‘Vice’

‘Vice’ is ambiguous:

- ‘Vice’ can mean an ethically bad character trait. ‘Virtues’ are typically understood as ethically good character traits e.g. courage or wisdom. In contrast, ‘vices’ are not merely the absence of virtue (e.g. cowardice or foolishness) but positively bad traits. The seven ‘deadly sins’ we discussed last week are (allegedly) vices of this kind:
  1. *acedia/disidia* (sloth, joylessness, apathy)
  2. *avaritia* (avarice, greed)
  3. *gula* (gluttony)
  4. *invidia* (envy)
  5. *ira* (anger)
  6. *luxuria* (lust)
  7. *superbia* (pride)

- ‘Vice’ can refer to a particular kind of temptation e.g. drink, drugs, gambling, sex etc.

In the current literature, ‘vice’ is usually used primarily in the first sense.

Murray is not using it in either of these senses. Although he begins with the second and is not much interested in vices such as greed or envy, he is concerned with character, broadly conceived. In looking at drink, drugs and gambling, he is trying to look into the character traits which explain the appeal and danger of these temptations.

4 Vicious cycles

Vicious cycles arguably play an important role here. Some addictions, for example, make it difficult for people to realise other goods e.g. healthy relationships; satisfying work; intellectual, aesthetic and sporting achievements; meaningful leisure activities etc.

5 Queries

- *But is Tolstoy really right about nicotine?*
- *To what extent are these effects due to stigmatisation and social disapproval, and to what
extent are they the result of indulging such vices as such?

6 Murray’s analysis

Murray’s account of ‘vice’:

- The vices all involve illusion.
- The illusion is itself the end i.e. the aim or purpose. The illusion is not instrumental i.e. to serve a further purpose. So, disillusion leaves nothing but ‘dust’.
- The illusion is not the result of a genuine effort to understand/cope with the world. The illusion does not get its possessor nearer the truth than would disillusion.
- The illusion isn’t a corrective for human weakness. It may result from and/or support human weakness, but it doesn’t mitigate or correct it. Rather, it is a manifestation of such weakness, perhaps exacerbating it.

Cruelty, selfishness and lack of concern for others are, therefore, incidental.

7 Queries

- Can these features come apart?
- Is this a satisfactory analysis?
- Is hunting for sport always vicious?
- Can’t I seriously grapple with a question and get things so seriously wrong that it amounts to vice? For example, thinking it my duty to convert the ‘natives’ at any cost to my faith?
- Can this analysis be applied to the seven deadly sins?
- Is slow destruction (e.g. sloth) really less vicious than fast destruction (e.g. megalomania)?
- What is the relation between megalomania and pride?
- Isn’t cruelty essentially vicious?

References