Taylor’s ‘Deadly’ Vices

- The ‘deadly’ vices are sloth, envy, avarice, wrath, pride, gluttony and lust.
- Their deadliness lies in the harm they do their possessors.
- Each involves self-defeating attempts to satisfy a reflexive, but not unreasonable, desire.
- This leads to vulnerability and self-deceptive self-protection.
- This results in psychological isolation, blocking access to objective values.
- This destroys the possessor qua agent, putting evaluative judgements and language beyond her reach.

Which Vices? Which Forms?

Taylor does not claim that all forms of the seven vices traditionally classified as ‘deadly’ are deadly. Rather, she claims that each of these vices is deadly when it occurs in a particular form — when somebody is ‘in the grip of’ the vice.

So the deadliness is not a feature of all instances of these vices. We might say that a little bit of envy or avarice or sloth won’t kill you. It may harm you to some extent or it might, just in itself, be essentially harmless. But Taylor claims that the deadliness of the deadly forms gives you reason to monitor, mitigate and contain even the harmless forms of these vices. If you possess even a harmless form of one of the seven, you are vulnerable to a kind of ‘slippery slope’ leading to the deadly form of that vice i.e. to the form which will truly destroy you. You are subject to a certain kind of temptation, and you must ensure that you control this temptation rather than allowing it to control you.

Discussion: Terminology

- In a group, discuss questions 1, 2 and 5 (theses and terminology).

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1 More specifically, the ‘deadly’ vices are specific types of these characteristics. Other forms may not be deadly or, even, vicious.

Emotions, Moods & Objects

Taylor presents what I take to be a somewhat muddled description of Greenspan’s view (Greenspan 1988; Taylor 2006b, 14–15). Or, at least, Taylor does not make clear where exposition of Greenspan’s position ends and Taylor’s divergent view begins. In particular, the distinction between emotions, on the one hand, and moods, on the other, does not seem to reflect Greenspan’s analysis or the implications she takes the distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ objects to have for the classification of various affective phenomena.

In any case, here is a (somewhat simplified) explanation of Greenspan’s distinction between emotions’ ‘internal’ and ‘external’ objects.

Suppose that I imagine my cat being abducted by aliens and experience fear. Then the ‘internal’ object of my emotion (fear) is the threat of aliens abducting my cat. This is what my fear is directed towards — it is what I am afraid of. This is evaluative: it is an assessment of my cat’s being abducted by aliens as a threat rather than, say, a delightful surprise. The ‘external’ object of my emotion is aliens abducting my cat (figure 1). This is non-evaluative. It is what my evaluative assessment is about. The first object is ‘internal’ because it is internal to the emotion: it is part of what fear is that it involves an evaluation of something as threatening.

I need not believe that there was, is or will be any threat of aliens abducting my cat. I may even believe that (i) there are no aliens who could abduct...
my cat, (ii) if there were such beings, they would be very unlikely to visit Earth and (iii) if they did visit Earth, they would certainly have better things to do than abduct cats.

Discussion: The Argument

- In a group, please discuss questions 6 and 9. What is Taylor’s argument?
- Clarify the conclusion.
  - The conclusion is the claim that the author is trying to persuade you of.
  - What are the premises of this argument?
    - Premises are claims which an argument relies on i.e. the points it starts from.

Taylor cites Kant (1977) when discussing his views on idleness and work. This corresponds to Kant (1997, AK:27:382–383), which provides a more recent edition which is part of the well-regarded translations of Kant’s works published by Cambridge. Kant’s point seems to be that mere enjoyment, understood as the passive perception of enjoyable sensations, does not make for a satisfying life because it does not involve the active use of our capacities for achieving things.

Reflection

• Are the vices on the list all really self-defeating (Miller 2007, 412)?
• Are the most significant vices even on the list (Pugmire 2008, 405)?
• A key feature of the account is its ability to specify the harm done by the deadly vices to the vicious on their own terms. But, if so, why do we condemn their possessors rather than pitying them (Hurka 2007)?
• Are the deadly vices self-destructive because self-defeating, as Taylor claims, or might they be self-defeating because self-destructive?
• Is the damage done by the deadly vices to the self better explained by their harmful effects on that self’s ability to relate to others than by their being self-defeating (Mason 2008, see

Discussion: Evaluation

• In a group, please discuss question 10. Is Taylor’s argument a good one?
• Is the argument valid?

An argument is valid if, and only if, the conclusion follows logically from the premises so that the premises could not possibly be true without the conclusion being true as well.

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• Is the argument sound?
  - An argument is sound if, and only if, two conditions are satisfied. First, the argument must be valid. Second, all of the premises must be true. It follows that the conclusion of a sound argument is true.

Table 1: The deadly forms of the ‘deadly’ seven (Taylor 2006a)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vice</th>
<th>Deadly Form</th>
<th>e.g.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sloth</td>
<td>‘avaricious miserliness’</td>
<td>e.g. Oblomov (Goncharov 1954)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avarice</td>
<td>‘avaricious miserliness’</td>
<td>e.g. Silas Marner (Eliot 1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>envy</td>
<td>‘sophisticated destructive state’ envy</td>
<td>e.g. Mr Casaubon (Eliot 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pride</td>
<td>‘arrogant’ pride</td>
<td>e.g. Cousin Bette (Balzac 1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anger</td>
<td>‘resentful’ anger</td>
<td>e.g. Coriolanus (Shakespeare 1988a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gluttony</td>
<td>‘openly aggressive’ anger if based on vicious pride</td>
<td>e.g. Mr Pugh (Thomas 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lust</td>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. Coriolanus (Shakespeare 1988a)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. Mrs Clenham (Dickens 1997)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. Don Giovanni (Mozart’s)</td>
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Whereas the distinctive feature of the deadly vices, on Taylor’s view, is their destructive (because self-defeating) effects on their possessor, the damage they do is not entirely self-regarding. Neither is the damage to others always collateral. Noting this, an alternative account of the nature of the self-harm that the vices inflict on their possessor presents itself: might not their deadliness rest in the effects of their constitutive other-regarding attitudes on the possibilities for relationship with one’s fellows, quite independently of whether they are self-defeating in structure? …

Neither does Taylor address the plausibility of treating most of the deadly vices (envy, avarice, pride, anger, and lust, at least) on an alternative Aristotelian model, one that emphasizes their being inappropriate (understood independently of self-defeating) responses within the relevant sphere of human life.

Mason (2008, 744)

Figure 2: In what does the deadliness of the deadly vices consist?

References


