

## Review of Taylor

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Gabriele Taylor, *Deadly Vices*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006. 163pp. ISBN 0-198-23580-1, \$45.00 (Hb).

Much attention in the recent resurgence of interest in virtue ethics has been paid to the virtues. At the same time, however, comparatively little has been written about vices. In *Deadly Vices*, Gabriele Taylor aims to remedy this by offering a detailed discussion of the vices that are traditionally labeled the seven deadly sins: sloth, envy, avarice, pride, anger, lust, and gluttony. Among her central claims about them is that they are each focused primarily on the self, and that they lead to self-destruction and inhibit our flourishing in ways that we can understand without having to appeal to an objective account of flourishing. Taylor takes her conclusions to “offer at least negative support for some central claims of an Aristotelian-type virtue-theory” (p. 1).

Two of the central characteristics of slothful people, according to Taylor, are indolence and boredom. For slothful people, the world is regarded as not worth engaging in, and such people become uninterested in themselves as well. Feelings of inertia are bound up with a cognitive judgment that engaging with the world is not worthwhile. In addition, slothful persons are responsible for their state of character because they implicitly assent to having their moods of boredom and indolence. That sloth is a vice should be apparent, as slothful persons are no longer fully agents pursuing their projects.

Taylor notes that covetousness might be realized in at least three different ways in the form of people who are miserly avaricious, spendthrifts, or greedy (p. 31). Focusing just on the miserly, she argues that such a person treats the possession of money as an end, even though the function of money is merely to serve as a means to making purchases. A likely explanation for what motivates avaricious people is fear of losing a certain position in life that they hold dear, and so money is hoarded to try to secure their standing. But this leads to self-destruction since to attempt to protect ourselves in a miserly way “is self-defeating and irrational, and the thought that it can be achieved harmfully self-deceptive: in narrowly focusing on the aim of self-protection he prevents himself from properly assessing his circumstances and hence corrupts his belief-forming processes and capacity for sane judgement” (p. 37).

Taylor’s focus is not on envy directed merely at a good another person has, which she calls “object-envy”, but rather on envy directed at a person who has a particular good, which she calls “state-envy” (p. 43). In state-envy a person sees another as being in an advantageous position, and wants to eliminate that advantage. Taylor distinguishes between two ways of eliminating such an advantage – “emulation envy,” in which the person in question improves herself to get to the same level as the person she envies, and “destructive envy” in which the person in question aims to destroy the advantageous position held by the other (p. 44-45). For Taylor, it is only the form of envy that is both state directed and destructive that should be called a deadly vice. Such envy is prompted by a perception of the superior position enjoyed by another person which is taken to undermine the image the person in question wants others, and in particular himself, to have of his own position. Thus, ultimately what is desired by envious people is a self

which is worthy of esteem (p. 48), but destructive envy will lead to unhappiness since the “desire to attain a certain good is frustrated by the desire to remove any reminder that she still lacks that good” (p. 49).

For Taylor, the three main types of pride are vanity, conceit, and arrogance. Focusing on arrogance, Taylor notes that arrogant people are concerned wholly with themselves and regard themselves as being superior to other people; indeed, they even consider themselves to be like gods. As such, arrogant people do not have any way of discriminating between what they prefer and what is objectively good or right, and so, according to Taylor, they lack a proper grasp of axiological language. To make evaluative judgments, on Taylor’s view, we must have a concept of things being good or right according to an objective standard, and of our own views as being subject to evaluation by such a standard. Since arrogant people take themselves to be the sole standard of value, they act only on the basis of their desires and are thus merely wantons rather than genuine agents (pp. 78-79).

Openly aggressive anger, if it is to be a deadly vice, seems to require the prior existence of pride, and so seems to not stand as an independent vice in its own right. Resentful anger, however, is independent of pride, and so qualifies as a deadly vice according to Taylor. Resentful people feel undervalued by others, but keep their feelings of injustice and desire for retaliation private, where they are only strengthened by festering in such a person’s mind. These feelings in turn damage the self-esteem of the person in question. But to express them is to exhibit weakness, since such expression would betray the fact that the person’s self-esteem depends on what other people think of him. Like the other vices, then, “resentment is thus self-nourishing and self-frustrating:

the agents' desire to be properly valued by others and consequently by themselves cannot be fulfilled through the means which they adopt" (p. 90).

Gluttons are typically understood to desire pleasurable sensations which are essentially connected to food. Such sensations are non-intentional, and so their concern is with something outside the domain of their wills (p. 96). Since gluttons do not think in terms of objective values, they do not form reasoned evaluations, and like prideful people, fail to meet the conditions of human agency (p. 98). In addition, according to Taylor a more careful understanding of gluttony also involves construing such a person as desiring more long lasting and healthy pleasures associated with nourishment, rather than just transient gustatory experiences (p. 99).

Lust on Taylor's account involves in part the provocation of a response in another person, but that response need not rise to the level of love or commitment. Instead, "For the satisfaction of their pleasure it is enough that the other is aroused by recognition of their desire that they be aroused" (p. 103). The other person is not individualized, but rather represents all women. Once pleasure is achieved with a particular person, the lustful can move on to another, since each woman represents all womanhood, and so such a person is naturally promiscuous (p. 105). Yet such fleeting sexual relationships are not satisfying in the long run, and lustful people turn out to be highly needy persons who must continually renew their image as sexual conquerors. After discussing these seven vices individually, Taylor concludes *Deadly Vices* with a chapter on the ways these traits can harm other people, as well as a final chapter on the countervailing virtues which correspond to such vices.

*Deadly Vices* is clear and highly interesting. Many of Taylor's observations are intuitively compelling, and are often reinforced with excellent examples chosen from works of literature. In addition, Taylor makes important claims about the nature of selves, agency, and valuation. One general concern about *Deadly Vices* is that it contains almost no engagement with other literature in this area, whether this be discussions of vices by Aquinas and Kant or more recent work in virtue ethics. While there are passing references to prominent historical figures, we do not get any sense of what the rival accounts of, for example, gluttony might be, and what advantages Taylor's view has over the already existing ones. Another surprising omission is any description of empirical work in social psychology. Given recent publications by Gilbert Harman, John Doris, and Maria Merritt on the alleged trouble that experimental work poses for the empirical adequacy of virtue ethics, it is surprising to find no mention of whether there is any published research which supports the numerous psychological claims that Taylor makes. If such research exists on the vices, it might provide a new avenue for virtue ethicists to use in responding to the objections by Harman, Doris, and Merritt.

Taylor argues that believing that certain things are objectively valuable is a crucial component of competence in using evaluative language and in being an agent rather than a mere wanton who only acts based on his desires. Such claims are controversial, but let us grant them for now. More problematic is the application that Taylor makes of such claims to arrogantly proud people, who allegedly "cannot have a proper grasp of the language of values at all because they have no access to any form of objectivity" (p. 78). This claim is supposed to follow from the assertion that such a person "lives in a world apart, seeing himself as special and the centre of the universe,

and so the sole arbiter on what is to be accepted as worthwhile” (p. 79). But while this might be true of many arrogant people, it is not clearly true of arrogant people as such. It seems that there could be someone who believes that there is an objective standard of values which he had no role in creating, and furthermore he thinks he has both exhaustively discovered what that standard is and consistently abides by it in his own behavior. He will not even listen to other opinions about what that standard might be; indeed he thinks, for no good reason, that no one else is intelligent enough to grasp such a standard. There could be people like this who would deserve to be called arrogant, and yet there is no reason to deny that they could form evaluative beliefs and exhibit agency in the world. That such people happen to be deeply close-minded and overly impressed with their reasoning abilities should not disqualify them from making value judgments.

Similar remarks apply to Taylor’s treatment of gluttony. She claims that the glutton “cannot properly think in terms of values at all, for these require a degree of objectivity which is lacking in his case . . . he does not engage in practical reasoning at all, and consequently lacks a vital feature of human agency” (p. 98). Again, while this might be true of many gluttons, it is hard to accept as a constitutive claim. Someone who obsessively pursued and consumed food for the pleasurable sensations provided could at the same time form value judgments about the desirability of such sensations. He might think, for example, that they are objectively good, and that nothing else in life has greater objective value. Clearly his judgments would be erroneous, but Taylor offers us no reason as to why the formation of them would be in principle incompatible with his being properly considered to be a glutton.

Despite such concerns, *Deadly Vices* is important reading for anyone working on virtue ethics and related areas of ethics and the philosophy of action.

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