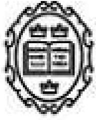

OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Mind Association

Review
Reviewed Work(s): Deadly Vices by Gabriele Taylor
Review by: Michelle Mason
Source: *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 117, No. 467 (Jul., 2008), pp. 742-744
Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the Mind Association
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/30166338
Accessed: 12-09-2018 15:23 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Mind Association, Oxford University Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Mind*

This content downloaded from 128.148.254.57 on Wed, 12 Sep 2018 15:23:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

from it, thanks to the rich and varied linguistic ideas and psychological findings that Stainton brings into the discussion. It is clearly written and organized, and its philosophical argumentation is consistently rigorous, deftly applying many subtle distinctions.

Department of Philosophy KENT BACH
San Francisco State University
San Francisco, CA 94132
USA
doi:10.1093/mind/fzn105

Deadly Vices, by Gabriele Taylor. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. 176. H/b £30.00.

Not since Iris Murdoch has Anglo-American moral philosophy enjoyed the combination of the acute psychological insights of the novelist and the conceptual care of the philosopher on display in Gabriele Taylor's most recent work. Add to this the creative twist that Taylor brings to the time-worn question of the connection between ethical virtue and individual flourishing and one has a rare philosophical accomplishment: a book that advances a philosophical debate in a manner compelling not only to the professional philosopher but to anyone with an interest in the nuances of human psychology.

Taylor's topic is the so-called 'deadly sins': sloth, envy, avarice, pride, anger, lust, and gluttony. Whereas the traditional interest in these dispositions was motivated by the Christian theologians' concern with their deadly effects on the soul, Taylor considers them in the context of a secular, Aristotelian, theory of virtue. Her claim is that we properly regard the deadly sins as vices, that is, as personal qualities whose possession destroys the self and thwarts one from flourishing. If she can sustain that claim, then her account of the deadly vices lends indirect support to the Aristotelian view that virtues, in contrast, conduce to the benefit of their possessor. (Virtues such as courage, prudence, patience, and self-control, at least, help correct the moral solipsism that the deadly vices encourage.) Moreover, Taylor's case concerning how the deadly vices thus harm their possessor proceeds without appeal to values whose appeal may lie outside the concerns of the vicious agent herself. Her strategy thus avoids a move that some find problematic. Although this is arguably an advantage of Taylor's approach, the main advantage she claims for her strategy is that 'it is possible to be much more precise about the nature of the damage inflicted on the agent by some specific vice on the given list than to be about the possible benefit enjoyed by her through possession of virtue' (p. 3).

Such precision is on ample display in Taylor's psychologically rich account of the deadly vices, an account according to which they all share a self-undermining structure. In the case of each of the deadly vices, the person in the grip of the vice desires something of value but is mistaken about how to achieve

 © Mind Association 2008

This content downloaded from 128.148.254.57 on Wed, 12 Sep 2018 15:23:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

what she desires. The nature of her mistake, moreover, renders her self-defeating: her way of pursuing her desired goal ensures that she will not achieve it. Take, for example, what Taylor calls 'destructive, sophisticated envy'. Taylor artfully portrays the psychology of the person in the grip of this vice by way of the example of Shakespeare's Iago. Iago desires something good, namely, an esteem-worthy self (p. 48). Perceiving a threat to his esteem from Cassio's position as Othello's lieutenant, Iago mistakenly thinks that destroying Cassio and Othello will increase his own esteem-worthiness. Iago's subsequent behaviour is self-defeating because it cannot help him achieve his aim of an esteem-worthy self. If Taylor's analysis is correct, then Iago has a reason for ridding himself of his vice, a self-interested reason that Taylor is able to attribute by appealing solely to Iago's own aims, not to some externally imposed standard of what constitutes a good or flourishing human life (pp. 3 f.).

Taylor has written an enviable work of normative moral psychology at a time when so-called empirical philosophy is an increasingly prominent trend. One would search in vain, however, for a reference to empirical psychological work in support of the acute descriptions Taylor offers of the sloth, the envious and covetous, the angry and proud. Instead, as in the case of Iago, we are treated to the opportunity to direct philosophical attention to the likes of Goncharov's Oblomov, Greene's Querry, Eliot's Silas Marner and Rosamond, and Shakespeare's Coriolanus. Considering the rich, and psychologically resonant, accounts of these characters' psychologies, the proverbial philosophical armchair—so long as it is occupied by an intellect as acute as Taylor's and located within reach of literary masterworks—looks to be a very profitable site of psychological research indeed. Are we to suppose that a demonstration that the moral psychological intuitions of a statistically significant number of survey participants agree with the literary 'data' would strengthen its status as evidence? Or that a demonstration to the contrary would correspondingly weaken its import? I see no good reason to think that.

The statisticians of moral intuitions are unlikely to be of much use in illuminating Taylor's project. More to the point would be some indication that clinical psychology, specifically clinical psychopathology, vindicates the cognitive structure Taylor takes to underlie each of the deadly vices. Consider, again, Iago's envy of Othello. If Taylor's account of the structure of such envy is correct, one would expect that one concerned to save Iago from himself would do well to take measures that would increase Iago's self-esteem. While that strikes me as a plausible expectation, it would be useful to know whether experience shows it to be correct. It would be useful, moreover, not only for thinking about how Iago might be reformed but also for the purpose of assessing the success of Taylor's attempt to forego appeal to externally imposed standards of the good human life in demonstrating the irrationality of vice. Is an esteem-worthy self an accurate account of what Iago ultimately desires in desiring Cassio's demise? If not, then Taylor's claim to the self-defeating character of Iago's vice, and her attribution of the reason he has to avoid it, fail.

 © Mind Association 2008

This content downloaded from 128.148.254.57 on Wed, 12 Sep 2018 15:23:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

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? Taylor allows that the deadly vices are likewise 'capital vices' in giving rise to distinct, and other-regarding, vices such as cruelty. That they give rise to these other-regarding vices is explained on her view by the fact that (at least in the case of the proud, envious, miserly avaricious, resentful, and lustful) 'The desire structure of their relevant vice is such that, in various ways, they are predisposed towards aggressive behaviour which is harmful to others' (p. 121). Taylor appears less impressed with the likelihood that the other-regarding progeny of the capital vices, considered as distinct vices, contribute to the (further) detriment of their possessor.

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. In light of the philosophical stature of that model, and considering remaining questions about the status of Taylor's claim about the deadly vices' self-defeating psychopathology, it is a disappointment to find Taylor silent here. These, however, are minor flaws in a work whose virtues are on such evident display.

Department of Philosophy
University of Minnesota
271 19th Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55455
USA

MICHELLE MASON

doi:10.1093/mind/fzn106

Normativity and the Will, by R. Jay Wallace. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. 347. H/b £53.00, P/b £19.99.

Normativity and the Will: Selected Papers on Moral Psychology and Practical Reason collects various of the essays of R. Jay Wallace from the past dozen or so years. The volume is divided into three parts: I. Reason, Desire, and the Will, II. Responsibility, Identification, and Emotion, and, III. Morality and Other Normative Domains. Here we will focus our remarks on the essays contained in parts I and II. It is in these essays that Wallace characterizes and defends an original account of rational agency grounded in his volitionalist moral psychology. Although they are exemplary, we tread lightly upon the largely critical

 © Mind Association 2008

This content downloaded from 128.148.254.57 on Wed, 12 Sep 2018 15:23:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms