

24.231 Ethics – Handout 22 Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints”

- (1) **What makes a moral saint? Is it what we do? Or what motivates us? Or what our character is like?** The difference is important – there may be a disconnect between good motives and good actions, between good or virtuous character and the ability to perform good actions...

Wolf defines a moral saint as “a person whose every action is as morally good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be.”

But the first clause is importantly different from the second. We might call the first person a “moral hero” and the second a “moral saint” (following Louis Pojman), to keep our ideas straight.

Pojman: “A hero is one who accomplishes good deeds when the average person would be prevented by fear, terror, or a drive of self-interest. A saint is one who acts for good when inclination, desire, or self-interest would prevent most people from so acting.”

- Admiral James B. Stockdale Lecture on Ethics and Leadership at the University of San Diego, April 13, 2000, “Moral Saints and Heroes”

Sometimes, being a hero might require not being a saint (we can talk about examples).

Wolf discusses two kinds of saints:

The Loving Saint, perhaps characteristic of the utilitarian ideal, whose own well-being simply consists in the well-being of others;

The Rational Saint, perhaps characteristic of the Kantian ideal, who retains some non-moral and even selfish desires, but, out of duty, does not act on them (except, I suppose, to the extent that morality permits doing so...)

- (2) **Is Wolf right that moral saints are less attractive human beings than they could be? That they are boring, humorless, and no fun?**

Wolf: Moral saints are unattractive because:

- They lack the "ability to enjoy the enjoyable in life"
- They are so "very, very nice" that they have to be "dull-witted or humorless or bland" – we like Han Solo better than Luke Skywalker
- They have no time for literature, music, or sports and so live a life that seems "strangely barren"
- What is missing in the saint's life are the non-moral virtues: a robust sense of humor, a refined musical or artistic ability, culinary acuity, and athletic prowess (she allows that a saint may have some of these virtues – by accident – if, for example, she became a saint late in life, but saintliness allows no time and energy to develop these talents.

- "The moral virtues, given that they are, by hypothesis, all present in the same individual, and to an extreme degree, are apt to crowd out the non-moral virtues, as well as many of the interests and personal characteristics that we generally think contribute to a healthy, well-rounded, richly developed character."

Does this seem right? Aren't many of these qualities going to be very useful to a moral saint (especially a certain level of pragmatism and sense of humor)?

It's true that a moral saint is unlikely to be a musical virtuoso or a wine connoisseur, but there are other ways to be an attractive person. And sometimes developing ones talents can be a very good means towards making a difference in the world – take, for example, Bill Gates.

(3) Is it good or bad *for us* to be moral saints? Moral heroes?

Eudaimonistic ethics, held by Aristotle and Plato among others, suggests that true happiness consists in being as morally perfect as possible. And it does seem that 'loving your neighbor as yourself' can protect you to some extent from suffering too much under your own burdens – it puts them in perspective.

But Wolf worries that moral saints would lack some qualities necessary to develop the kind of life we think is good for the person who leads it – personal interests and projects and special relationships...

Also, of course, a moral saint will often sacrifice her own well-being for the well-being of others – a definition of happiness that makes that impossible seems to be leaving something out.

(4) Do plausible moral theories tell us not to be moral saints?

Utilitarianism: Wolf says U would not support moral sainthood as a universal ideal, because a world peopled only by moral saints would be less good than it could be. But it remains possible that individual utilitarians should aim, in their own lives, at being as morally good as possible.

- Wolf is unconvinced, given the current state of the world, by the suggestion (found in Mill, for example) that we'd do best to promote the total happiness if we cared mainly for ourselves.
- It seems more plausible that we'd do better, by utilitarian standards, if we cared about some things non-instrumentally that on the utilitarian picture have only instrumental value.
- Wolf agrees that utilitarianism may leave the moral saint some *limited* room to develop her talents, etc., because she'll be a more effective promoter of the good that way.
- But, says Wolf, even when U allows this, it gives the moral saint "one thought too many" (B. Williams). The utilitarian saint would value projects and talents and relationships only as means to or at best as constituents of happiness, and be willing to sacrifice them as soon as another project or relationship could produce more happiness. This "shallow appreciation" for such projects or talents or relationships brings the utilitarian saint to

close to our common-sense picture of the saint from which Wolf began to escape her criticisms of that figure.

Kantianism: whether the Kantian moral saint comes too close to the common-sense moral saint to be an attractive ideal depends, Wolf says, on our reading of Kantianism.

- On a reading of Kantianism that emphasizes the requirement to take up the ends of others as our own, and to perfect ourselves, the Kantian saint will also have too little room to develop her own talents, relationships, and projects, and will have “one thought too many.”
- On an alternate, minimalist reading of Kant, that emphasizes not violating certain rules in our interactions with others, much more room might be left for pursuing non-moral virtues.
- But, Wolf argues, a moral theory that in this way puts an upper bound on what morality demands fails to capture the thought that, e.g., Mother Theresa, even if less attractive (on Wolf’s view) than, say, Katherine Hepburn, is nonetheless more *morally admirable*.

Need either the Kantian or the utilitarian saint have one thought too many? That will depend on what kinds of motives we recognize as morally admirable...

(5) What about Wolf’s broader claim about the proper place of morality, as one set of values among others, rather than an overarching thing that encompasses all other values and reasons?

Wolf notes that for the moral saint, it’s not just that moral values crowd out or outnumber or out-compete non-moral values – rather, nonmoral values are *subsumed* under moral ones. The moral saint can see these other values as valuable only to the extent that they contribute to the moral ideal. But, she says, this isn’t the right way to think of these other values:

“[T]he admiration of and striving toward achieving any of a great variety of forms of personal excellence are character traits it is valuable and desirable for people to have. In advocating the development of these varieties of excellence, we advocate nonmoral reasons for acting.”

Wolf doesn’t want us to revise our moral theories – the right response to the unattractiveness of the saint as a moral ideal isn’t to settle on a less demanding moral theory; rather, we should reassess the importance we give to morality in our picture of our reasons in general: things that matter *morally* aren’t the only things that matter: “The flaws in a perfect master of a moral theory need not reflect flaws in the intramoral content of the theory itself.”

This means giving up on the idea the *morality* can serve as the ultimate arbiter – the guidebook that can tell us, in all circumstances, what we have reason to do. Moral considerations won’t exhaust the considerations relevant to our decisions. As Wolf puts it, “It is not always better to be morally better.”

Questions: What is the domain of morality? Morality concerns features of a person’s life over which he has control and is largely restricted to aspects of his life that have significant effects for

other people. What reasons might we have that are not moral reasons? Even if moral reasons aren't the only reasons, are they important enough to override all other reasons when they conflict?

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