

**Phil 104, Friday, December 3, 2010**  
**Wolf, “Moral Saints”**  
**Williams, “Persons, Character and Morality”**

**The problem of moral saints:**

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

Such people...

- according to **commonsense morality**, would have personalities and lives dominated by the commitment to improve the welfare of others: e.g., feeding the hungry, healing the sick, raising money for UNICEF.
- according to **utilitarianism**, would be very similar: they would have personalities and lives dominated by the commitment to maximize happiness.
- according to (at least one interpretation of) **Kantianism**, would also be similar: they would have personalities and lives dominated by the commitment to fulfill the *imperfect* duties of aiding others and perfecting their own rationality.

This means that a moral saint...

- would have no time or energy left for other tastes, pursuits, skills, etc.: e.g., reading “Victorian novels, playing the oboe, or improving [one’s] backhand.”
- could not use resources for “luxury” activities: gourmet cooking, interior design, fine arts.
- would have to avoid or root out traits that “go against the moral grain”: “a cynical or sarcastic wit, or a sense of humor that appreciates this kind of wit in others, requires that one take an attitude of resignation and pessimism toward the flaws and vices to be found in the world.”
- would have to be nice and inoffensive, and therefore “dull-witted or humorless or bland.”

Wolf’s **conclusion** about moral saints:

- *Not* that it is not morally good to be a moral saint. It is *morally* good to be a moral saint.
- *Not* that it is not good *for* the person to be a moral saint: that is, not in that person’s *self*-interest. This conclusion wouldn’t be very surprising. (It certainly wouldn’t surprise, say, Sidgwick.)
- Instead that a moral saint is not *a good kind of person to be* or *a good life to lead*—in a sense of “good” that is wider than “morally good” and less subjective than “good for” the person. As Wolf variously puts the point:
  - The moral saint lacks certain “nonmoral virtues.”
  - It is not always *better* to be *morally* better.

What distinguishes *moral* goodness from Wolf’s more general notion of a *good life to lead*, or a *good sort of person* to be? *Nonmoral* virtues, unlike moral virtues...

1. often involve things that are not under one’s *control*. (One might simply have no *talent* for cooking, music, sports, or joke-telling.)
2. relatedly, cannot be *required* of one.
3. are not things that one should *blamed* for lacking.

4. are not informed by an “*impartial*” *standpoint*: a “point of view one takes up insofar as one takes the recognition of the fact that one is just one person among others equally real and deserving of the good things in life.”

*Question:* Can’t we imagine contingent circumstances in which it *is* morally good to develop or express these traits? E.g., by being charming, one can charm donors into giving more to charity.

- *Still too restrictive:* Such circumstances will be rarer than the circumstances in which, we think, it is good (in the general sense) to develop or express these traits.
- *Involves “one thought too many”:* Even if such circumstances are common, the moral saint cannot *think* of the development and expression of these traits as good *in itself*. These traits “can be given at best the status of happy accidents—they cannot be encouraged for their own sakes as distinct, independent aspects of the realization of human good.”

This comes out most clearly, perhaps, in the sort of case that Williams considers: in which we are doing something for *our loved ones*. It would be very troubling to learn that your friend, spouse, parent was caring for you *only* because (or perhaps even *in part* because) they felt morally required to do so!

[S]urely *this* is a justification on behalf of the rescuer, that the person he chose to rescue was his wife? It depends on how much weight is carried by ‘justification’: the consideration that it was his wife is certainly, for instance, an explanation which should silence comment. But something more ambitious than this is usually intended, essentially involving the idea that moral principle can legitimate his preference, yielding the conclusion that in situations of this kind it is at least all right (morally permissible) to save one’s wife... But this construction provides the agent with one thought too many: it might have been hoped by some (for instance, by his wife) that his motivating thought, fully spelled out, would be the thought that it was his wife, not that it was his wife and that in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one’s wife.

*Question:* “Wouldn’t a world in which *most people* were moral saints contain *less* happiness?”

- Yes, but it doesn’t follow that you, *individually*, would not produce more happiness by striving to be a moral saint.

### **Responses to the problem:**

1. Should we place an *upper bound* on the moral worth of beneficence? Should we say that, for example, giving 1% of one’s money to charity is morally good, but giving 10% is not morally better?

- But this seems wrong. Surely Mother Theresa is a *morally* better person for devoting her life to caring for others, even if she isn’t necessarily a *better* person. “A moral theory that does not contain the seeds of an all-consuming ideal of moral sainthood thus seems to place false and unnatural limits on our opportunity to do moral good and our potential to deserve moral praise.”

2. Should we change the *content* of morality to *include* the “nonmoral” virtues? (Wolf describes this as “a more Aristotelian... approach to moral philosophy.”) See Review Questions below.

3. **Wolf’s response:** There is nothing wrong with the *content* of moral theories. Instead, we should accept that morality, whatever its content, should play only a partial and limited *role in our lives*. Morality is not the pervasive, dominating, supreme value that should structure our lives and personalities. It is instead only one value among others.

**Review Questions:**

1. What does Wolf mean when she writes: “The flaws of a perfect master of a moral theory need not reflect flaws in the intramoral content of the theory itself”?
2. What is Wolf’s objection to the suggestion that we should change the *content* of morality to *include* the “nonmoral” virtues?