

WOLF ON MORAL SAINTS

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Intro Philosophy

I don't know whether there are any moral saints. But if there are, I am glad that neither I nor those about whom I care most are among them. (p. 419, Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints", *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982): pp. 419–39)

Moral saint: a person whose is "as morally worthy as can be." (p. 419)

...moral perfection, in the sense of moral saintliness, does not constitute a model of personal well-being toward which it would be particularly rational or good or desirable for a human being to strive. (p. 419)

1. Criticism of moral saints

Criticism 1: crowding out

For 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 nonmoral virtues, as well as many of the interests and personal characteristics that we generally think contribute to a healthy, well-rounded, richly developed character.

In other words, if the moral saint is devoting all his time to feeding the hungry or healing the sick or raising money for Oxfam, then necessarily he is not reading Victorian novels, playing the oboe, or improving his backhand. (p. 421)

Criticism 2: blandness

A moral saint will have to be very, very nice. It is important that he not be offensive. The worry is that, as a result, he will have to be dull-witted or humorless or bland. (p. 422)

Criticism 3: motivational structure

...the ideal of a life of moral sainthood disturbs not simply because it is an ideal of a life in which morality unduly dominates. The normal person's direct and specific desires for objects, activities, and events that conflict with the attainment of moral perfection are not simply sacrificed but removed, suppressed, or subsumed. The way in which morality, unlike other possible goals, is apt to dominate is particularly disturbing, for it seems to require either the lack or the denial of the existence of an identifiable, personal self. (p. 424)

2. The puzzle

How could there be anything *wrong* with someone who is perfect?

Answer one: adopt a morality that doesn't require you to be a saint.

Answer two (Wolf's answer): moral ideals are not the best personal ideals

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...a person may be *perfectly wonderful* without being perfectly moral. (p. 436)

3. What does “best” in Wolf’s answer mean?

- Not “morally best” (moral ideals are the *morally* best personal ideals)
- Not “best from the point of view of self-interest”
- Rather, it means: best from the point of view of *individual perfection*

For these judgments are not concerned with what kind of life it is in a person's interest to lead, but with what kind of interests it would be good for a person to have, and it need not be in a person's interest that he acquire or maintain objectively good interests. (p. 436)

4. Metamorality

If morality and individual perfection conflict, what should I do?

For the claims of this paper do not so much conflict with the content of any particular currently popular moral theory as they call into question a metamoral assumption that implicitly surrounds discussions of moral theory more generally. Specifically, they call into question the assumption that it is always better to be morally better. (p. 438)

But what is this “better” here? Seems like yet another perspective.