

There is such a special feature of nuclear threats. The point is often made that nuclear deterrence can tolerate no failures, that is, no instances of nonconforming behavior (assuming that such an instance would be or would lead to nuclear war). If there was an instance of nonconforming behavior, the likely result of destruction of society would mean that the system of deterrence as a whole had failed. The system would have proved ineffective in an absolute sense, because, as one might put it, it would not have brought about fewer instances of nonconforming behavior than what is necessary to allow the social order to continue. (Likewise, a system of legal deterrence would have no absolute deterrent value if it did not succeed in avoiding complete social chaos.) For nuclear deterrence to have absolute deterrent value, we may say, the probability of its failing (say, per year) must be so low that it is very unlikely that a failure would occur over decades or even centuries. If nuclear deterrence cannot guarantee that it is very unlikely to fail over an extended number of years, it must be regarded as ineffective in an absolute sense. Unless nuclear deterrence can do a substantially better job at deterring aggression than history has

shown general military deterrence has been able to do, then nuclear deterrence is absolutely ineffective, because general military deterrence can tolerate a much higher rate of failure without social breakdown (or destruction) than nuclear deterrence can.

If nuclear deterrence is substantially more effective over the long haul than general military deterrence, it must have a substantial, not merely minimal, marginal deterrent value in comparison. But our argument does not support this: the advantages in effectiveness of nuclear deterrence over conventional military deterrence are matched by its disadvantages. As a result, there is reason to believe that nuclear deterrence has no absolute deterrent value and so no marginal deterrent value over conventional military deterrence. Having nuclear deterrence would then be worse than having no system of military deterrent threats at all.

—Steven Lee

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How Good a Person Do I Have to Be?

How good a person am I? This is a question most of us care about being able to answer, and most of us, I suspect, know what we would like the answer to be. I, for one, would like to think that I'm a pretty good person, not saintly, but as good as most and better than some of my colleagues and friends. I'd like to be able to pat myself on the back but also to point a finger at others; I want the requirements of morality to be lenient enough so I'll score high, but tough enough so that my high score still means something. It would be nice if it turned out that however good I am is just about exactly how good a person ought to be. Contemporary moral philosophers have given a good deal of attention to these questions. What kind of a moral report card would the rest of us get from them?

Being a Good Person

If my household's gross income last year was \$40,000 and I gave away \$2000 to charity, am I (a) a splendid person; (b) a good person; (c) an okay person; (d) a bad person? A 1984 Rockefeller Brothers Fund survey reports that the average family with an income in that range donated \$1,060, but while that lets me know that my level of giving is somewhat higher than average,

it doesn't tell me whether it is enough to satisfy the demands of morality. When I think of friends who probably gave less, I feel like leaving my income tax return casually lying around so they can see what a good person I am. But when I think about the amount of human suffering to be alleviated in the world, my contribution suddenly seems much less generous.

Most of us tend to decide what we owe others in part by seeing what's left over after we've secured a moderately comfortable—but not extravagant—standard of living for ourselves. We feel we shouldn't be faulted for aspiring to a middle class lifestyle; the wealthy, on the other hand, have a good deal to apologize for. Not surprisingly, surveys show that 95 percent of Americans consider themselves middle or working class. The rich—those who ought to be "soaked" to provide benefits for the rest of us—are invariably those who have \$10,000 a year more than we have.

I confess that I recently bought a \$1500 stereo system. That sum of money, as the UNICEF literature reminds me, can purchase a lot of vials of penicillin at 25 cents each. But, I hasten to explain, this is the first nice stereo I've ever bought in my whole entire life. And I know

for a fact that many of my friends have stereos worth five times as much. *That's* selfish, in a world where millions of people go to bed every night hungry. Of course, someone who sold her stereo to raise money for the homeless will view me much as I view my stereophile colleagues. The difference between their lifestyle and mine is far less than the difference between my lifestyle and that of starving children sleeping on the streets in Calcutta. True enough. But a St. Francis who gives all that he has to the poor is just that: a saint. I'm not expected to be morally magnificent, but only morally decent, a middling sort of person, who does my share and then goes home to listen to *Don Giovanni* on my compact disc player. To do more is to qualify for moral extra credit.

Some philosophers define the boundaries of what we have a right to keep for ourselves more narrowly,

however. Utilitarians are notorious for denying the whole category of moral extra credit. On their view, not to do a good thing is just the same morally as doing a bad thing, so every time we pass up an opportunity for a good deed, we not only forgo canonization but invite moral criticism. Peter Singer, for one, argues that "if it is in our power to prevent something very bad happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we ought to do it." The trouble is that given how many very bad things are happening in the world, and how very bad they are, little else is of comparable moral significance, which means we may be called upon morally to give up a *lot*. Singer gives a partial list: "color television, stylish clothes, expensive dinners, a sophisticated stereo system, overseas holidays, a (second?) car, a large house, private schools for our children. . . ."



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"John Stuart Mill taught that the happiness of the individual is paramount. He didn't name names, but I suspect that you and I are the sort of individual he had in mind."

Nor are utilitarians the only ones who saddle the rest of us with burdensome obligations. Rights theorists are likely to think that if somebody has a right, somebody else has a duty, and the somebody else, as often as not, turns out to be us. Henry Shue, writing in *Basic Rights*, maintains that "One is required to sacrifice, as necessary, anything but one's basic rights in order to honor the basic rights of others." It sounds suspiciously like that involves sacrificing our stereotypes.

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These arguments suggest, moreover, that we not only ought to *have* less but we ought to *do* more. It's true that a poet earning \$10,000 a year can give only so much before cutting into her own basic needs. But maybe she should consider a new career on Wall Street. Maybe the moral high road doesn't involve earning as little as you can, but earning as much as you can, so as to have more to give away. Philosophers who would make the rest of us feel guilty for not giving more may be at fault themselves for remaining in a non-lucrative profession when they could be more gainfully if less happily employed elsewhere. Whoever said you had a right to do just what you please?

Well, a number of philosophers have said, not that we have a right to do whatever we please, but that it's important to be able to make certain key choices that give meaning and coherence to our lives. In a famous argument against utilitarianism, Bernard Williams rejects the view that one is required to abandon one's own deepest commitments whenever they fail to advance the greatest good of the greatest number. To require someone to surrender his chosen life's work or his passionate creative pursuits would be "to alienate him in a real sense from his actions and the source of his actions in his own convictions. . . . It is thus, in the most literal sense, an attack on his integrity." Moreover, the project of going around all day making other people happy can only get off the ground if there are at least some "first-order projects," if there is at least somebody *being* happy. After the Revolution there has to be somebody left to do the *living*.

One problem here is that while we want some selfishness to turn out to be justified, we don't want *all* selfishness to turn out to be justified. The challenge, according to Shelly Kagan, philosopher at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, is a complex one: we want to explain why "it is sometimes permissible to refuse to perform an optimal act. But all those unwilling to embrace egoism must at the same time avoid arguments that rule out the possibility of there being

any moral requirements at all. Thus the explanation must also account for the fact that sometimes a given optimal act *is* required by morality." If we try to establish some protected zone of self-interest, we will have trouble showing that this zone can ever be legitimately encroached upon. And if we argue that reasons of self-interest sometimes outweigh moral reasons, then we will have to say that moral sacrifice is sometimes actually *unjustified*. But certainly we want it to be permissible, even if not required, for the moral saint to go the extra mile. Kagan concludes that it is difficult to set principled limits to what morality may demand of us.

In any case, some cold comfort may be derived from the fact that almost without exception philosophers who call for moral sacrifices fail to practice what they preach. They themselves are not rushing off to sign up with Mother Teresa. Some of them drive very nice cars. And insofar as they propose any specific guidelines for moral behavior, these tend to be calculated to reassure. Singer advocates (at minimum) giving "a round percentage of one's income like, say, 10%—more than a token donation, yet not so high as to be beyond all but saints." *That* isn't too bad, we might think. Shue points out that worldwide poverty could be reduced significantly with relatively modest sacrifices by affluent nations: "The affluent are expected not to enjoy less, but only to acquire more at a somewhat slower rate than they would if they maximized their own interests, narrowly construed." One feels uneasy, however, at Kagan's challenge: why this much and no more?

Being a Sainly Person

Despite our fond wishes otherwise, it may turn out that morality is uncomfortably demanding. Its bare minimum may look a lot like our maximum: maybe Mother Teresa herself should be doing more than she is. But those of us who don't want, frankly, to be a whole lot more moral than we are may want to reply instead: All right, morality demands a lot. But do we have to do *everything* it demands?

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Susan Wolf, a philosopher at The Johns Hopkins University, suggests that being as morally good as we can be isn't in fact an admirable goal. Glad that she herself and her loved ones are not "moral saints," she argues that "moral perfection . . . 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." In a moral saint, she argues, the moral virtues (all present and all 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." Someone who devotes all his time to raising money for Oxfam "necessarily is not reading Victorian novels, playing the oboe, or improving his backhand." Thus his is "a life strangely barren." Nor can the moral saint, it would seem, encourage in himself otherwise delightful characteristics that go "against the moral grain," such as a cynical or sarcastic wit. A moral saint, Wolf observes, "will have to be very very nice." Nice, and dreary company.

Wolf cautions, however, that "the fact that models of moral saints are unattractive does not necessarily mean that they are unsuitable ideals. Perhaps they are unattractive because they make us feel uncomfortable—they highlight our own weaknesses, vices, and flaws. If so, the fault lies not in the characters of the saints, but in those of our own unsaintly selves." But she notes that some of the qualities the moral saint necessarily lacks are *good* qualities, qualities we *ought* to admire, "virtues, albeit nonmoral virtues, in the unsaintly characters who have them."

Thus, Wolf concludes that "moral ideals do not, and need not, make the best personal ideals. . . . we have sound, compelling, and not particularly selfish reasons to choose not to devote ourselves univocally to realizing [our] unlimited potential to be morally good." On Wolf's view, we needn't be defensive about the fact that our lives are not as morally good as they might be, because "a person may be *perfectly wonderful* without being *perfectly moral*." It is not always better to be morally better.

Conclusion

If Wolf is right, we can concede that morality is demanding, but we can devote our lives at least in part to other pursuits than making ourselves maximally moral. Her view is not a rationalization of selfishness, however, not the view that if God hadn't meant for us to grab as much as we could he wouldn't have given us two hands to grab it with. Instead, it's a call for a broader and more diverse ideal of human excellence, for an opportunity to cultivate in ourselves a rich array of both moral and nonmoral excellences.

There is little immediate danger, of course, that most of us will knock ourselves out being too good. Whatever the optimal balance between moral and nonmoral excellences (and Wolf leaves it open how this balance should be struck), most of us err on the side of selfishness pure and simple. Nothing Wolf says gives any reason not to adopt, say, a policy of tithing.

But perhaps we have reason not to become overly obsessed with moral report cards. What's tiresome is not so much being good, but harping on goodness from morning to night. We could all probably stand to be a lot better morally than we are, and a lot better nonmorally as well, but maybe a first start toward progress would be simply to do more and to talk less.

—Claudia Mills

Sources quoted in the article are: Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), Chapter 8 ("Rich and Poor"); Henry Shue, *Basic Rights* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980); Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Shelly Kagan, "Does Consequentialism Demand Too Much?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 3 (Summer 1984); and Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 79, no. 8 (August 1982).

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