

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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