

The Case of the Nonmoral Saint

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The problem with morality, according to Susan Wolf, is that the moral virtues "...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." (421). She argues quite convincingly that we shouldn't want this to happen to ourselves, nor anyone else that we care about, because "...some of the qualities the moral saint necessarily lacks are virtues, albeit nonmoral virtues, in the unsaintly characters who have them." (426). It seems that moral saints are lacking something necessary for a full life. Nevertheless, she states that "...the desire to be as morally good as possible is apt to have the character not just of a stronger but of a higher desire [than the nonmoral virtues], which does not merely successfully compete with one's other desires but which rather subsumes or demotes them." (424). In other words, moral virtues seem to always have a higher priority over the nonmoral virtues. After considering various alternatives to the moral point of view, she concludes that we should not structure our values hierarchically, but rather from a more even perspective that she calls "the point of view of individual perfection" (437-8). From this perspective we can "...consider what kinds of lives are good lives, and what kinds of persons it would be good...to be." (437). But while I agree with Wolf that it would not be good to be a moral saint, her account does not answer the following questions:

1. Why is it that the moral virtues seem to dominate the nonmoral virtues?
2. What is the normative source for the "point of view of individual perfection"?

So long as these two questions remain open, we cannot be said to have a satisfactory account of a non-hierarchical system of values, because the moral virtues *really do seem* to supersede the nonmoral virtues, and we are lacking a normative source for claiming that they *really do not*.

The answer to the first question is quite simple, and yet the reasons behind it are quite mysterious. One reason why the moral virtues seem to dominate the nonmoral virtues is because we tend to bind them together under the rubric of “morality”, whereas the nonmoral virtues are typically considered singularly. Wolf continues this tradition in the following passage:

One might suspect that the essence of the problem is simply that there is a limit to how much of any single value, or any single type of value, we can stand. Our objection then would not be specific to a life in which one's dominant concern is morality, but would apply to any life that can be so completely characterized by an extraordinarily dominant concern. The objection in that case would reduce to the recognition that such a life is incompatible with well-roundedness. If that were the objection, one could fairly reply that well-roundedness is no more supreme a virtue than the totality of moral virtues embodied by the ideal it is being used to criticize. But I think this misidentifies the objection. For the way in which a concern for morality may dominate a life, or, more to the point, the way in which it may dominate an ideal of life, is not easily imagined by analogy to the dominance an aspiration to become an Olympic swimmer or a concert pianist might have. (423)

Here the confusion is most apparent, for while Wolf seems to recognize that morality is a type (or class) of values, she then compares morality as a whole to individual nonmoral pursuits such as being a concert pianist. What we need to realize is that “morality” is not a virtue — it is a whole class of them, and it cannot be compared to *individual* nonmoral virtues. To make this more apparent, we should consider the case of the nonmoral saint.

A nonmoral saint would be someone who exemplifies all of the nonmoral virtues to a very high degree, viz. he is intelligent, charming, and witty; he is an excellent conversationalist, and a shrewd debater; he is exceptionally talented, and can do almost anything at all; he is creative, having artistic talents in several media and is a master of several musical instruments;

he is calm and collected in all situations; he bathes regularly and is a snappy dresser; he is something of a culinary expert, and can produce a five-star meal like you've never tasted; the list goes on and on — the point is that this is probably the coolest dude (or dudette) ever to walk the face of the earth. Here is someone that, unlike the moral saint, we really would (and should) want to be like. His only flaw is that, while he isn't a *bad* person, he isn't particularly generous; and while he might loan you twenty bucks if you promised to pay him back soon, he never donates a single cent of his money, nor a second of his time, to charity. I think that, in this case, we could forgive him — we wouldn't really care that he wasn't a generous person in the same way that we wouldn't care if a moral saint wasn't a snappy dresser. The nonmoral virtues, considered together, will completely swamp any individual moral virtue in the same way that the moral virtues, considered together, will completely swamp any individual nonmoral virtue.

Perhaps I have painted too attractive a picture of the nonmoral saint. I certainly don't intend to claim that we should abandon the virtues that we collectively refer to as "morality"; my only intention is to mitigate their perceived dominance. So let us revisit the nonmoral saint, but this time we shall suppose that he is completely lacking in the moral virtues. Here we have someone as described above, only he is a cheat and a liar, a backstabbing double-crosser, a philandering pervert, and a thief. In this case, we cannot overlook his shortcomings in the moral virtues; we wouldn't want to have anything to do with such a person. By carefully considering this case, we have leveled the playing field among *all* the virtues, but we may still wonder how it is that we ever came under the illusion that the moral virtues are so preemptory. This mystery (I think) has much to do with our religious heritage, and while I care not to speculate on the historical basis for it, I think that our way of thinking is still very much polluted by it (even

among non-believers). “Morality” has been passed down to us from our more religious-minded forbearers – it’s high time we threw it out.

The other reason that the moral virtues seem to dominate the nonmoral virtues is that there is, from the perspective of each individual, only one “self”, while there are many “others”. However, I fail to see how the singular fact that there are many of “them” and only one of “me” somehow gives “them” precedence over “myself”, especially when we consider that each of “them” *is* an “I”, and that we are all not the *same* “I”. That the world is carved up this way seems to imply that each individual should be most concerned for their self, rather than other selves. This notion of self could extend out towards others, however, in a graduated manner, subsuming spouses and children, family and friends, countrymen and fellow human beings. But it must always be remembered that the source of this concern is the self, and without it, there can be no concern at all.

The answer to the second question is a bit trickier. I think that the virtue ethicists’ answer must involve some notion of what it is to be a human being, and while this doesn’t necessarily force a Platonic form of “human being” upon us, it will have to involve something like an Aristotelian essence or universal similarity relation. But human beings come in wide varieties, and the species is in a constant state of flux, which seems to rule out such a conception. Utilitarianism, on the other hand, attempts to solve this difficulty by being directed toward others. Here the self becomes lost in its concern for others. If all of humanity adopted a strict form of utilitarianism, we would be as a colony of ants which, while being good for survival of the species, doesn’t quite provide for the rich sort of life that we truly require. At least deontology recognizes a self in the form of a transcendental ego. But what has always struck me about deontology is that it fails to offer a convincing account of why we should care about

others. I think that, deep-down, deontology relies on our innate concern for others in order to trick us into thinking that rationality provides some basis for extending our own sense of self to them; in reality, rationality is a cold-hearted beast, and would be served just as well if none of us existed at all.

Recognizing that we are all somewhat different, and that there is no one single standard by which to make moral judgements, we would do best to cast morality aside. Our hesitance to do this reveals the true appeal of morality — it promises one single objective standard for human interactions — and it is difficult to admit that there is none. This gives way to a looser notion of what it means to be a human being, which demands a great deal of tolerance. But insofar as we do have some similarity to one another, we can arrive at a sort of consensus on what is right and what is wrong. And we can do better if we consider what sorts of actions are truly harmful to others and which are not; but I think that this is the best we will ever be able to do.

Utilitarianism, with its extreme directedness on others, would make us all as ants, lacking any sense of self. And whereas Deontology recognizes the self, there is no rational basis for extending any concern to others, so it would make us all extreme egoists. It seems to me that Aristotelian virtue ethics provides the only way out of this dilemma. However, we must be willing to accept the consequences of such a view: since there is no one single normative basis for ethics, conflict will always remain as an unfortunate consequence of life.

References

Wolf, Susan. Moral Saints. *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 79, No. 8 (Aug., 1982), pp. 419-439.