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WHO WANTS TO BE A SAINT?

Gregory W. Dawes

Susan Wolf famously argued that a saintly life – one totally dedicated to moral concerns – would be 'a life strangely barren'. It would mean neglecting many activities that make human life worthwhile. But her argument assumes that our moral duties are simply duties to others, that a perfectly moral person would always act selflessly. It may be, however, that we also have duties to ourselves, which include the cultivation of so-called 'non-moral' virtues. On this view, morality is pervasive, relating to all features of a human life, and has architectonic status, being capable of shaping all that we do.

Is single-mindedness a virtue? Is it good to devote all our time and energy to the pursuit of a single goal? Very often we think that it isn't. We hold in esteem the well-rounded person, who has a wide range of interests. Parents and teachers encourage children to spread their attention over a wide range of activities. Obsessive attention to any one of these is seen as undesirable. We may admire the dedication of top sports people, whose every waking moment seems dedicated to the achievement of their goals. But we suspect that it comes at a cost: perhaps the neglect of family and friends and a certain narrowness of mind. 'Single-mindedness', wrote Aldous Huxley, 'is all very well in cows or baboons; in an animal claiming to belong to the same species as Shakespeare it is simply disgraceful'.[1]

There is, however, one form of single-mindedness that generally escapes suspicion. It is that which is associated with a saintly life. Saints, in popular thought, are people

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whose every effort is directed to living up to moral ideals and whose lives display extraordinary levels of generosity, patience, and thoughtfulness. Such people may make us uncomfortable, but we would find it difficult to criticise them. Yet is saintly devotion to a moral life really a virtue? Huxley's remark about single-mindedness was directed at the seventeenth-century thinker Blaise Pascal, whom he regarded as obsessively committed to Christian ideals. Pascal, Huxley wrote, 'sinned against life by a consistent excess of holiness'.[2] Why should this form of single-mindedness be regarded as more admirable than any other?

It is important to be clear about the question being addressed here. It is not whether those customarily thought of as saints are really saintly. Many people, for instance, regard Mother Teresa of Calcutta as a paradigmatic example of a moral saint. But there are those who disagree. Christopher Hitchens, for example, criticizes Mother Teresa for her defence of conservative ethical positions, her association with powerful figures of doubtful character, and for promoting a cult of suffering that neglected the very people she is thought to have served. We may or may not agree, but it has nothing to do with the point being made here. We can assume, for the sake of the argument, that those popularly thought to be saints really are good people. Nor am I asking whether what we take to be virtues really are virtues. Bertrand Russell, for instance, once criticised the concept of duty, particularly the idea that we have a duty to work hard. He argued that it is most often used to induce people to labour, not for their own benefit, but for that of their masters. This, too, may be true, but is not the issue. The issue is whether we should regard the cultivation of moral goodness as the central aim of human life.

In an essay published in 1982, philosopher Susan Wolf suggested that we should not, that moral perfection should not be our overriding goal. Why is this? Wolf conceives of moral behaviour as behaviour dedicated not to one's own needs but the needs of others. She argues that if meeting

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the needs of others becomes an overriding ideal, then it will tend

> to crowd out the non-moral virtues, as well as many of the interests and personal characteristics that we generally think contribute to a healthy, well-rounded, richly developed character. ... 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.[3]

A life in which such non-moral virtues are not pursued would, according to Wolf, be 'a life strangely barren'. For all its moral idealism, we would not consider it an ideal human life. Similarly, there exist personal characteristics we value that a moral saint will not allow herself to develop, such as a cynical or sarcastic wit. There will also be enjoyable but wasteful activities, such as gourmet cooking, that she could not justify pursuing.

One obvious response to this argument is that the word 'saint' is here being misused. It is, one might argue, a religious term and the saintliness Wolf describes is not the *religious* ideal. In a sense this is true, and Wolf implicitly acknowledges this by entitling her essay '*Moral* Saints'. I shall come back to the religious ideal of sanctity shortly, but for the moment let me just say that the religious ideal embraces the moral ideal. At least in the Christian tradition a saint is expected to live a life that approximates the ideal of moral perfection, although she does so with a very particular motive, namely a love for God. Before the Catholic Church declares someone to be a saint, its authorities must have evidence that the person exhibited the various virtues 'to a heroic degree'. So insofar as religious saints are expected to exhibit lives of moral perfection, then Wolf's criticisms would also apply to the religious ideal of sanctity.

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Another objection holds that Wolf is mistaken on simply factual grounds. Journalist Larissa Macfarquhar, for example, has interviewed a range of people whose lives exhibit what she calls 'extreme morality': people who donate kidney's to complete strangers, give away almost all the money they earn to Oxfam, or adopt a series of children with special needs. She argues that their lives are not as 'strangely barren' as Wolf suggests. This may well be true. One could, however, argue that Wolf's central claim remains accurate. An overriding commitment to the needs of others would leave us with little time or energy for the kind of 'non-moral' pursuits that Wolf values. So for the sake of the argument let me concede this point. Let me assume that such a life would lack some valuable human characteristics.

What I want to pursue is a third and more serious objection to Wolf's position. It is that the idea of moral goodness with which she is working is too narrow. A life totally dedicated to others' needs may not be a desirable way of life, but it is also not what morality demands. Indeed it is contrary to the demands of morality. A person whose life was completely dedicated to the needs of others would not be a saint at all, since she would lack at least one of the moral virtues. Her failure to cultivate the qualities that Wolf values – such as an ability to play an instrument or to appreciate fine literature or food – would be itself a moral failing and would make her less than saintly.

This may seem a surprising idea. The idea that saintliness involves a life of selfless dedication to the needs of others is deeply ingrained in our culture. Susan Wolf makes no claim to being a religious thinker, let alone a Christian one, but I cannot help wondering if her ideal of moral sanctity is not influenced by Christianity (or at least by a popular understanding of Christianity). To those under the sway of this ideal, the idea that a saint should *not* be wholly dedicated to others' needs may seem scandalous. But if we are interested in *moral* ideals, I would argue, we ought to abandon this popular conception of sanctity. Wolf

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is right to argue that we should not strive to live in a way that is completely dedicated to the needs of others. She is, however, wrong to think that this is what moral perfection would demand.

The easiest way of understanding this line of argument is by way of the idea of duty. We do not, of course, have to formulate moral judgements in terms of duties, but we often do so. If we do think in this way, we can say that Wolf conceives of moral obligations as duties to others. I am not, of course, denying that we have duties to others. If I borrow money from you, I have a duty to repay it. But what if we also have moral duties to ourselves? These would include what the eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant called 'a duty to cultivate one's natural powers', powers 'of spirit, mind, and body'.[4] The point is that cultivating one's natural powers would mean engaging in the very activities that Wolf regards as foreign to a saintly life. For Kant, who is often thought of as the most unworldly of philosophers, this even extends to physical exercise, keeping oneself fit. It is difficult to imagine the great philosopher jogging around the streets of Königsberg, but perhaps on his famous daily walks he walked briskly. If he did, and did so for the sake of his health, he would have regarded it as one way of fulfilling a moral duty.

He could have fulfilled it in other ways, for the duty of which Kant writes is a general one. It would not commit us to any *particular* activity, such as reading Victorian novels, playing the oboe, or becoming skilled at tennis. Perhaps we prefer James Joyce to George Eliot, have no ear for music, and prefer cycling. That's perfectly acceptable. Kant described duties of this kind as 'imperfect' or 'incomplete' duties. They leave us, as individuals, free to decide just how they should be fulfilled. Such a duty would, nonetheless, commit us to choosing and seeking to develop *some* of the abilities that we have. If this view is correct, we are not only permitted to cultivate our natural powers; we are morally obliged to do so.

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This broader view of the demands of morality can be developed in differing ways. Kant's approach is by way of the idea that we are rational beings. His supreme rule of morality is that we should live in accordance with maxims that can be consistently applied. It is, on this view, *reason* that dictates that we have a duty to ourselves. But we could also make use of a broadly Aristotelian view of morality, which makes reference to a particular conception of human nature. A view of this kind has recently been defended in the form of the 'capabilities' approach developed by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen. Nussbaum, for example, lists ten capabilities that she regards as 'central requirements of a life with dignity'. These include not just bodily health and integrity, but also the ability 'to imagine, reason, and think', to engage in social interactions, and to play and 'enjoy recreational activities'.[5] Although Nussbaum is here reflecting on the demands of justice, the same ideas could be used to think about duties to oneself. These would include the duty to develop at least some of these capabilities, depending on our particular preferences and talents.

This duty is sometimes referred to as an obligation to 'improve' or 'perfect' our own personalities. Robert Johnson, for example, has recently defended the Kantian view in a book entitled simply *Self-Improvement*. But while strictly accurate, such language may be misleading. To many hearers it may suggest a kind of 'narcissistic individualism', an attitude of selfish absorption in one's own needs.[6] In fact, however, this ethical ideal is neither narcissistic nor individualistic. It does not, first of all, mean simply satisfying our desires, for cultivating our own powers may involve a high degree of self-discipline. Think, for example, of the effort it requires to practice a musical instrument daily. Secondly, this ideal should lead us to focus, not on our own needs, but on the activities in which we come to be engaged. A person lost in a good novel or captivated by beautiful music can hardly be regarded as self-absorbed. Finally, such a view is not equivalent to any kind of ethical

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egoism, in the sense of always favouring own interests over those of others. A follower of Kant will insist that a rationally guided morality will take into account the needs of all humanity. It will regard others as deserving of the same rights as one claims for oneself.

I have developed this conception of morality in terms of a duty to oneself. But the idea that we can have duties to ourselves is often thought of as incoherent. Firstly of all, it is widely assumed that duties come with corresponding rights. If, for example, I have a duty to care for my children, they have a corresponding right. They are entitled to claim this care from me. But if duties correspond to rights, a duty to myself would also come with a corresponding right. There would be something that I am entitled to claim from myself. Perhaps we can make sense of this idea, but to many philosophers it seems nonsensical. There is a further problem, which Kant himself remarks on. If the duty in question is one that I impose upon myself, as a rational being, then presumably I would also be free to release myself from this duty. This, too, seems problematic, for a 'duty' from which I can release myself at will seems to be no duty at all.

Let's take each of these objections in turn. Does the idea that I have a duty to myself imply that I have a corresponding right against myself? There are philosophers who have cast doubt upon the idea that rights always involve corresponding duties. More to the point, there are others who deny that duties always involve corresponding rights. But rather than wading into this discussion, I would like to make use of a distinction developed by Keith Burgess-Jackson, which is related to (but not identical with) Kant's distinction between perfect and imperfect (or complete and incomplete) duties. Burgess-Jackson's distinction is that between a duty to perform a certain kind of action and the duty to become a certain kind of person. Let's say, for example, that we have a duty to be charitable. One could understand this as an imperfect duty to perform charitable actions. But it is, perhaps, better understood as a duty

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to become a charitable person. What is important here is that the duty to become a certain kind of person does not entail any corresponding right. My duty to become a charitable person does not, in itself, grant anyone else a right to my charity. Duties to oneself, I would argue, are duties of this kind.

What about the idea that a duty to myself would be one from which I could release myself at will, and hence no duty at all? This, too, seems mistaken. If a have a duty to repay a debt, then the person to whom I owe the money can release me from this obligation. But this is because the duty rests on an implicit agreement, or contract, between two parties. A duty to myself would not be a duty of this kind: it does not depend on any kind of agreement. It depends on the fact that I am a rational being enjoying certain capabilities. Moreover, if moral duties arise from rational reflection, as Kant believed, then we are not free to release ourselves from such obligations. To say that we are would be akin to saying that we are free not to accept the rule of *modus ponens*. ('If all men are mortal and Socrates is a man, then Socrates is mortal.') Perhaps I could bring myself not to believe this, but it would hardly count as a rational act.

What about the sharp distinction Wolf makes between moral and non-moral virtues? Wolf not only makes such a distinction, but sets it up in such a way that moral and non-moral virtues can be in competition. Our moral aspirations, as she understands them, can be in conflict with our aspirations towards other goals. But this tension between the demands of morality of those of a fully human life is an unfortunate one. It is also unnecessary. It arises from a view of morality that is no longer rooted in a conception of our shared humanity. On the Kantian view, as we have seen, being human means exercising our rationality and acting consistently. On Nussbaum's view, it entails having certain capabilities, which can and should be developed. If we adopt a view of this kind, we can integrate the demands of morality and those of humanity. We can accept that there

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are non-moral virtues, in the sense of ideals we can pursue without being morally obliged to do so. (No one, however musically gifted, is obliged to become a violinist, or a skilled player of any particular instrument.) But we will also insist that these non-moral virtues fall within the scope of an overall moral obligation.

On this view morality is both pervasive and has what Robert Louden calls an 'architectonic' status. It is pervasive in the sense that 'no voluntary human action is in principle resistant to moral assessment'.[7] This does not mean that we *must* assess our every action from a moral point of view. We can certainly perform some actions spontaneously, without any such reflection, simply because we enjoy them. But it means that every action *can* be assessed morally, if the need arises. Morality has an 'architectonic' status insofar as it provides an overall framework within which we pursue our various goals, just as the architect's plans provide a framework within which builders, plumbers, and painters can make their particular decisions.

This observation brings us back to the religious ideal of sanctity. In his response to Wolf's essay, Robert Merrihew Adams focuses on the religious ideal, arguing that 'saint-hood is essentially a religious phenomenon' and so cannot be properly understood outside of this context.[8] The religious ideal of sanctity, he argues, is not that of a person focused on the achievement of moral perfection; it is that of a person focused on, and whose life attempts to reflect, the infinite goodness of God. But the infinite goodness of God goes beyond what we might think of as 'moral' goodness. As Adams writes,

> as the author of all things and of all human capacities, [God] may be regarded as interested in many forms of human excellence, for their own sake and not just for the sake of their connection with what would be classified as *moral* concerns in any narrow sense.[9]

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It follows that sanctity is compatible with the pursuit of these other kinds of excellence. A great artist or musician or intellectual could also, on this view, be a saint.

Now I have no desire to argue about the use of the word 'saint'. If someone wants to insist that it is properly used only in a religious context, then I am happy to use some other term. Indeed I have occasionally spoken of 'moral perfection' rather than 'sanctity'. But whatever terms we use, the question being addressed here is an important one. What *are* our moral ideals? What kind of life should we aspire to? Adams's argument suggests that the popular view of sanctity – that of complete dedication to the needs of others – may be mistaken, even from a Christian perspective. To this extent, we are in agreement. But we can also ask if there is any secular insight that corresponds to his theological one.

It seems to me that there is. The kind of life we should aspire to, on the broad view of morality that I have been defending, will be one that is dedicated to the pursuit of that which is true and good. There is no need to conceive of goodness in a Platonic fashion, as a spiritual reality that is merely reflected in the good things of the phenomenal world. There are many ways of conceiving of that which is good, and a liberal society (as John Rawls has argued) should leave room for differing conceptions of the good life. But the general idea that there exist goals that are valuable for human beings to pursue is relatively uncontroversial. A life dedicated to the pursuit of goodness – the pursuit of valuable goals – will certainly include a concern for the needs of others. But it will involve much more. There is no reason to believe that such a life would be 'strangely barren'.

What I have argued so far is that the ideal of moral sanctity could embrace rather than exclude what Wolf calls 'non-moral' virtues. But this leaves untouched another objection found in her essay. It is that if we pursue these 'non-moral' virtues with a moral motivation, then we have what Bernard Williams famously called 'one thought too many'.[10] In other

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words, we would not, on the Kantian view, be motivated by the goodness of the activities in question. Rather, we would value them as a means to an end, that is to say, the attainment of a moral goal. But a person who played the oboe, for example, out of a stern sense of moral obligation might seem a figure to be pitied rather than emulated. Surely it would be better to appreciate these activities for their own sake: to take up a music instrument out of a love for music or to become a skilled tennis player because of the pleasure such activity brings.

This objection is surely well founded. But the observation on which it rests is not inconsistent with the idea of a general moral obligation, covering the activities in question. The situation here would be similar to that of a parent in relation to her children. Most parents, thankfully, do not need to be reminded that they have a moral obligation to care for their children. They love their children in a way that is independent of any obligation. But that does not mean they do not have such an obligation. Indeed sometimes we may need to be reminded of this obligation, so talk of duty here is not completely redundant. In a similar way, we may take up a sport feeling that we ought to engage in some exercise, and only after doing so discover that we actually enjoy it, coming to appreciate it for its own sake. We no longer need a moral motivation, although we continue to be under a general obligation to engage in some such activity.

So who wants to be a saint? If being a saint means living a life completely dedicated to the needs of others, then I hope none of us wishes to be a saint. Such a life may not only be undesirable, it may also be impossible, in practice. Perhaps some of the corruptions of sanctity – the vices into which those dedicated to its pursuit tend to fall – are products of the fact that such an ideal could never be attained. It runs too deeply against our other needs, as human beings. As the Roman poet wrote, 'You can drive nature out with a pitchfork, but she will always return' (Horace, *Epistles* I.10.24). The mistake here, however, is not a dedication to living a moral life; it is a

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misunderstanding of what the moral life involves. Rightly understood, the moral life just is a fully human life, which is surely an ideal towards which we can confidently aspire.

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Notes

[1] Aldous Huxley, 'Pascal', in *Do What You Will: Essays*; The Thinker's Library (London: Watts & Co., 1936), 240.

[2] Ibid., 228.

[3] Susan Wolf, 'Moral Saints', *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 79, no. 8 (1982), 421.

[4] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by Mary Gregor; Texts in German Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 239.

[5] Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 76–78.

[6] Robert B. Louden, 'Can We Be Too Moral?', *Ethics*, vol. 98, no. 1 (1988), 369.

[7] Ibid., 374.

[8] Robert Merrihew Adams, 'Saints', *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 81, no. 7 (1984), 395.

[9] Ibid., 398.

[10] Bernard Williams, 'Persons, Character, and Morality', in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–80* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 18.

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