



“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.”



## Moral Saints

Susan Wolf

## + A 'Moral Saint'



- A person whose every action is as morally good as possible.
- “A necessary condition for moral sainthood would be that one’s life be **dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others** or of society as a whole.”

# + Wolf's Main Claim

## **A common view**

- One ought to be as morally good as possible.

## **Wolf's view**

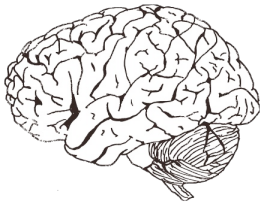
- Moral perfection, in the sense of moral saintliness, does not constitute a model of personal well-being toward which it would be particularly rational or good or desirable for a human being to strive.

# + A Tale of Two Saints



## The Loving Saint:

- Promoting the welfare of others makes her truly happy.
- Acts out of **love**.
- Is different from most of us.



## The Rational Saint:

- Promoting the welfare of others does not make her happy.
- Acts out of **duty**.
- Is like us. She doesn't enjoy sacrificing her own interests.
- But is unlike us because she actually makes the sacrifice.

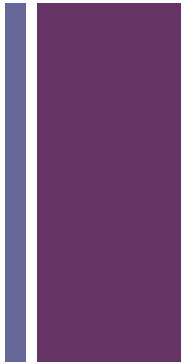
# + What is the moral saint like?

- Patient
- Considerate
- Even-tempered
- Hospitable
- Charitable
- Reluctant to make negative judgments about people.
- Careful not to favor some people over others.

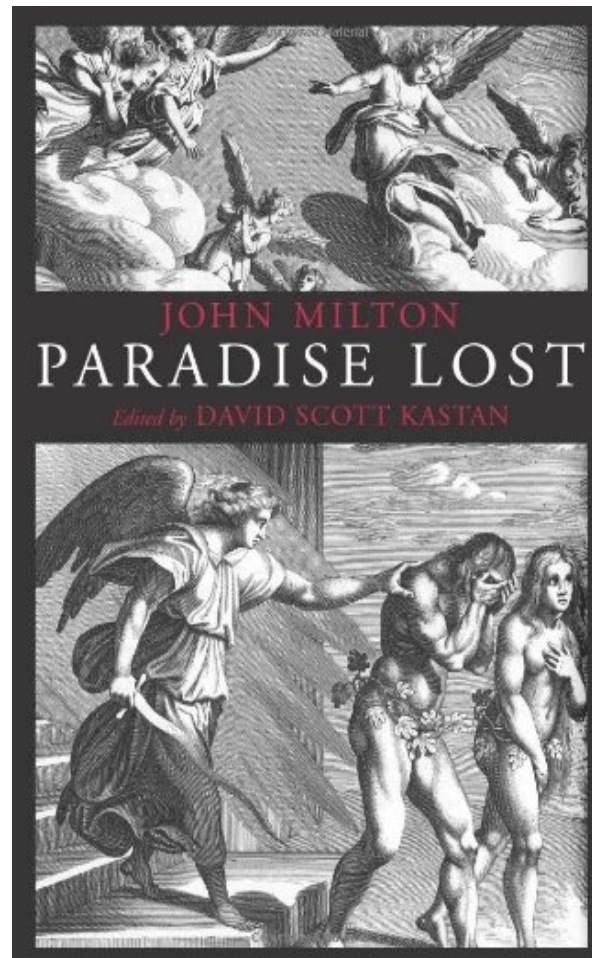
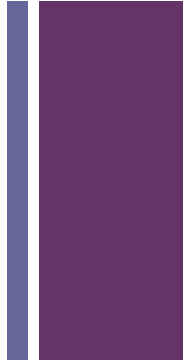
They have **standard moral virtues to a non-standard degree.**

# + Qualities the moral saint lacks

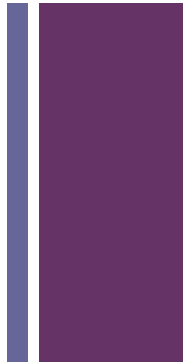
- A cynical or sarcastic wit
- An interest in gourmet cooking
- An interest in art or high fashion
- Athletic prowess
- “If the moral saint is devoting all his time to feeding the hungry or healing the sick or raising money for Oxfam, then he is not reading Victorian novels, playing the oboe, or improving his backhand.” (421)



# + An Example



# + Saints and the Simpsons



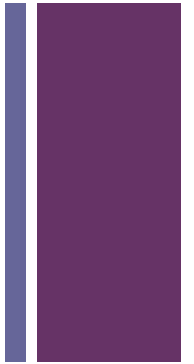


# + Wolf's Worry

The moral virtues, when held to an extreme degree, **will crowd out the non-moral virtues.**

## **Why is this bad?**

- The non-moral virtues contribute to a healthy, well-rounded, richly developed character.

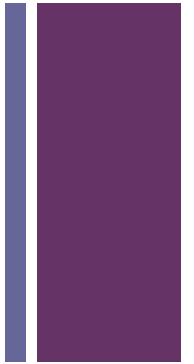


# + Which people do we admire?

- “One would hope . . . that they [those we idealize] are not *just* morally good, but **talented** or **accomplished** or **attractive in non-moral ways** as well. We may make ideals out of **athletes, scholars, artists** -- more frivolously, out of cowboys, private eyes, and rock stars. We may strive for Katharine Hepburn's grace, Paul Newman's "cool"; we are attracted to the high-spirited passionate nature of Natasha Rostov. Though there is certainly nothing immoral about the ideal characters or traits I have in mind, they cannot be superimposed upon the ideal of a moral saint.” (Wolf 422)

# + Who lives a flourishing life?

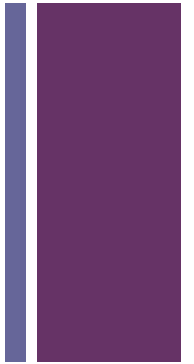
- Somebody whose moral achievements occur in conjunction with or are colored by some interests or traits that **have low moral tone.**
- **There is a limit to how much morality we can stand.**



# + Three Sources of Conflict

The conflict between moral sainthood and the development of other (nonmoral) virtues is due to:

1. The amount of time a person has.
2. The allocation of resources.
3. The necessity of certain personality traits.

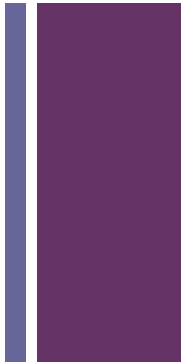


# + Objection 1: Is this a more general problem?

**Is the problem just that there is a limit to how much of *any single value* we can stand?**

- If so, this isn't a criticism specifically of *morality*.
- E.g., someone who dedicates their whole life to writing a novel, or being an Olympic swimmer, or becoming the greatest chef, etc.

# + Wolf's reply



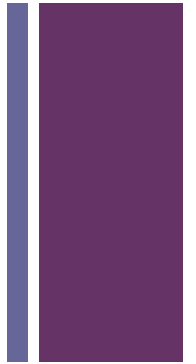
**There is something especially dominating about morality.**

- The saint's obsession is all-encompassing, while others are not.
  - Master Chefs, tennis players, and oboists have families and friends and personal lives and clearly do things other than cook or play tennis or play the oboe.
- In the moral case, for virtually anything I do there could be a morally superior alternative.

# + Objection 2: We're selfish and biased

**Are moral saints unattractive to us because they highlight our own weaknesses, vices, and flaws?**

- Do moral saints make us uncomfortable because the fault lies in our (unsaintly) selves?
- If so, our failure to find the moral saint admirable is due to a fault of ours, not theirs.



## + Wolf's reply



1. Some of these are *good* qualities.
2. They are ones we *ought* to have.
3. They are *virtues*.

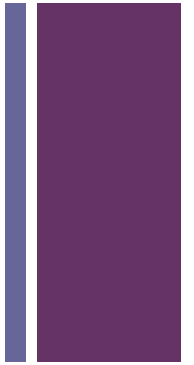


# + A Counter-Example?

Dr Paul Farmer



+ Do we need an upper limit on morality?



# + A Way Out?

## **Broaden the things we count as moral?**

- For example, creativity, a sense of style, taking care of oneself (etc.) are *moral* virtues.

## **Reply**

- It's unlikely that any list of such virtues would adequately capture the full range of possible ways of living a flourishing life and realizing human potential.

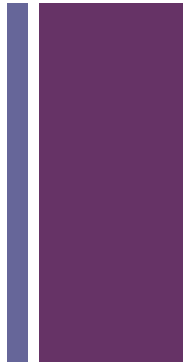
# + Two points of view

## **The Moral Point of View:**

- One recognizes the fact that one is just one person among others equally real and deserving of the good things.

## **The Perfectionist Point of View:**

- The view from which we consider what kinds of lives are good lives, and what kinds of person it would be good for ourselves and others to be.



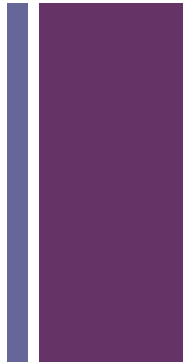
# + Is the 'point of view of individual perfection' a selfish one?

- Wolf says, No!
  - “This perspective yields judgments of a type that is neither moral nor egoistic.” (436)
  - “It would be misleading to say that these judgments are made for the sake of the individual himself.” (436)
  - “For these judgments are not concerned with what kind of life it is in a person’s interest to lead, but with what kinds 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.” (436)

# + The authority of morality

- “It may not be the case that the perfectionist point of view is like the moral point of view **in being a point of view we are ever *obliged* to take up** and express in our actions. . .

. . . Nonetheless, it [the perfectionist point of view] provides us with reasons that are independent of moral reasons for wanting ourselves and others to develop our characters and live our lives in certain ways.”



# + Morality's authority

“It goes without saying that we **need to take moral considerations seriously**. In my opinion, however, the importance of morality in directing our lives **tends to be exaggerated**. Morality is less pertinent to the shaping of our preferences and to the guidance of our conduct—it tells us less of what we need to know about what we should value and how we should live—than is commonly presumed. It is also **less authoritative**. Even when it does have something relevant to say, it does not necessarily have the last word.”

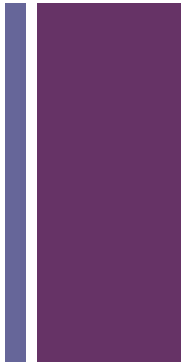
The Reasons of Love

Harry G. Frankfurt

Author of the best-selling  
*On Bullshit*

# + More to life than morality

- Moral vs. non-moral values?
  - Are moral values the only values? (i.e. pluralism)
  - Are moral values the ultimate values (i.e. priority).
- Does morality demand impartiality?
- The importance of interpersonal love?
- What values give our lives meaning?

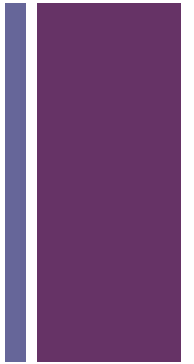




# + A meta-moral theory?

## How to decide when and how much to be moral?

- “The philosophical temperament will naturally incline . . . toward asking, “What, then, is at the top -- or, if there is no top, how are we to decide when and how much to be moral?”
- “In other words, there is a temptation to seek a meta-moral theory that will give us principles, or, at least, informal directives on the basis of which we can develop and evaluate more comprehensive personal ideals. . . .”
- “I am pessimistic about the chances of such a theory to yield substantial and satisfying results. For I do not see how a meta-moral theory could be constructed which would not be subject to considerations parallel to those which seem inherently to limit the appropriateness of regarding moral theories as ultimate comprehensive guides for action.” (Wolf, 438)



# + Wolf's conclusion

- Morality should not be a comprehensive guide to conduct.
- The moral point of view does not exhaust the ways in which our actions, characters, and their consequences can be objectively evaluated.
- It is not always better to be morally better.

**Could moral value still be the most important kind of value?**

# + An unanswered question

- We can agree that: looking at life from a *purely* moral standpoint is narrow and impoverished.
- **But Wolf doesn't tell us *when* the moral perspective is important.**
  - What circumstances should incline us to take a moral perspective?
  - There are situations in which the moral considerations are so urgent that thinking about novels and sunglasses would be wrong.
  - Isn't this precisely Singer's point?
  - Singer says this kind of situation is *always* happening.

# + A Final Thought



- Does Singer's argument imply that we should all be 'moral saints' in Wolf's sense?

