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What Moral Saints Look Like

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Most of us have never met a moral saint, and so it may be difficult for us to imagine what such a person would be like. Even before thinking too deeply about what it takes to be a moral saint, we tend to think that being a saint must be quite difficult. We might even think that the difficulty of being a moral saint — the sacrifice it involves — is in fact a *burden*, a project so all-consuming that it causes a person to be deprived in certain important ways. If this deprivation is severe enough, the life of the moral saint begins to look awfully bleak. Indeed, the most influential philosophical account of moral sainthood paints a rather bleak picture. But is it really so bad to be a moral saint? If we look more carefully at just what is required for moral sainthood, and if we observe the life of a living, breathing moral saint, we find that it is not so bad after all.

In her famous paper 'Moral Saints,' Susan Wolf argues that it is not rational to want to be a moral saint. A moral saint is someone who is 'as morally worthy as can be,' and such a person, Wolf claims, would be quite unattractive, because sainthood is incompatible with many of the personalities and lifestyles we tend to find desirable (Wolf, 1982, 419). This poses a problem for anyone who thinks that the life of the moral saint is the *best* life, because it makes little sense that the best life could

be so unattractive. Wolf's thesis may even pose a problem for those who think that the life of the moral saint must be a *good* life, for how can an undesirable and unpalatable life be a good life?

There are two central claims in Wolf's argument. The first is that the life of the moral saint — that is, the morally best life — is not the best life from what Wolf calls 'the point of view of personal perfection' (437). The second claim is that a lack of correspondence between the *morally* best life and the best life from the point of view of personal perfection is problematic, because it presents us with a paradox of sorts: we are committed to the idea that the life of the moral saint is the best life, all told, and yet when we examine that life, we find that it is not a 'palatable ideal' (419). In what follows I focus mainly on the first claim. I argue that moral saints are not nearly as unattractive as Wolf claims, because moral commitments do not grossly distort an agent's personality to the extent she proposes.

Wolf concedes that our discontent with the moral saint as the model of an ideal life is at least partly motivated by 'the egoistic, hedonistic side of our natures' (426). While it is widely acknowledged that being moral is not necessarily always in our self-interest, Wolf seems to be making a stronger claim: that leading the supremely moral life is *necessarily not* in one's self interest, or more broadly, that in virtue of its very nature, this life does not and cannot accord with a model of a well-rounded life, where a well-rounded life leaves room for at least *some* satisfaction of our egoistic and hedonistic desires. In what follows, I argue that these strong claims are not true. That is, I argue that even if we agree that the moral point of view is not automatically more authoritative than the point of view of personal perfection — even if we concede that the two points of view draw on incommensurable criteria — still, the best life from the moral point of view (the life of the moral saint) is not necessarily unattractive from the point of view of personal perfection.

On Wolf's account, a saint is someone we want neither to *be* nor to *be around*, because the saint cannot devote himself to hobbies, cannot tell certain jokes or laugh at them, cannot be cynical or pessimistic, and must generally be so engrossed in his moral mission as to be almost irritating. I respond to these claims in several steps. After giving a brief summary of Wolf's account, I introduce Dr. Paul Farmer, a real-life moral saint who acts as a counter-example to Wolf's view. With the case of Paul Farmer in mind, I then challenge Wolf's claims about both the character traits and the activities of a moral saint. Next I argue that if Wolf's account of these traits and activities were correct, then moral saints would be self-defeating. Finally, I suggest that much of what underlies the claim that moral saints are irritating is a failure to distinguish a motivation to act morally *de dicto* from the same motivation *de re*.

II Wolf's Argument

Wolf equates moral saintliness with 'moral perfection' and thus defines the moral saint as 'a person whose every action is as good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be' (419). She further claims that our common sense, pretheoretical notion of moral sainthood necessarily includes that 'one's life be dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole' (420). This commitment can be discharged in two ways. Wolf's 'Loving Saint' helps others because his happiness 'would truly lie in the happiness of others, and so he would devote himself to others gladly, with a whole and open heart' (420). On the other hand, the 'Rational Saint' helps others out of duty; he 'sacrifices his own interests to the interests of others, and feels the sacrifice as such' (420).

These two conceptions of sainthood align quite nicely with our folk notions of saints as being either unusually compassionate or unusually dutiful. Indeed, Wolf's 'Loving Saint' and 'Rational Saint' mirror the two options first proposed in J.O. Urmson's seminal paper 'Saints and Heroes' (1958). According to Urmson, there are two ways to commit a saintly or heroic action: 'without effort' (like Wolf's 'Loving Saint'), or through 'self-control' in the face of countervailing self-interest (like Wolf's 'Rational Saint') (Urmson, 1958, 201). Of course, a Loving Saint must also sacrifice personal interests, but perhaps does not feel such sacrifices *as* sacrifices in quite the way that the Rational Saint does.

While Wolf acknowledges that the Rational Saint and the Loving Saint present two quite different pictures of motivation, she thinks their 'public personalities' would be similar (421). Indeed, the bulk of Wolf's argument for the claim that moral saints are horribly unattractive proceeds without reference to the distinction between Rational Saints and Loving Saints. Moral saints may vary a great deal in certain cosmetic details, but their core character traits will be constrained by sainthood. It is only these essentially saintly traits that Wolf finds problematic. Joviality, garrulousness, and athleticism, for example, don't matter (421). What does matter, however, is that the saint 'will have the standard moral virtues to a nonstandard degree' (421). As such,

> He will be patient, considerate, even-tempered, hospitable, charitable in thought as well as in deed. He will be very reluctant to make negative judgments of other people. He will be careful not to favor some people over others on the basis of properties they could not help but have. (421)

These traits may seem uncontroversially saintly. As I shall argue in a later section, however, these traits are problematic if we interpret them in such a way as to make sense of Wolf's ultimate claim that the saint is unattractive.

Wolf makes a helpful distinction between *practical* obstacles to moral sainthood and *logical* obstacles. Having nonmoral interests or hobbies is merely a practical obstacle, because these hobbies would eat up time that would otherwise be spent benefiting others. So hobbies like 'reading Victorian novels, playing the oboe, or improving [one's] backhand,' which might seem to play an essential role in a 'life well lived,' are in most cases prohibited for the moral saint, but only for practical reasons, such as lack of time (421). If the moral saint could maximally benefit others *and* have hobbies, this would be unproblematic. In reality, though, Wolf thinks the moral saint will only have non-moral interests when doing so allows him to further his moral project, as when a 'a good golf game is just what is needed to secure that big donation to Oxfam' (425). The moral saint cannot pursue the golf game for its own sake; the fact that getting to play golf sometimes goes along with saving the world is a mere 'happy accident' (425).

There are other sorts of traits, though, that Wolf thinks present *logical* obstacles to sainthood. These traits are in 'more substantial tension' with being a moral saint (421). For example, Wolf argues that certain sorts of humor would be off limits for the saint because they go 'against the moral grain' (422).

> For example, a cynical or sarcastic wit, or a sense of humor that appreciates this kind of wit in others, requires that one take an attitude of resignation and pessimism toward the flaws and vices to be found in the world. A moral saint, on the other hand, has reason to take an attitude in opposition to this — he should try to look for the best in people, give them the benefit of the doubt as long as possible, try to improve regrettable situations as long as there is any hope of success. This suggests that, although a moral saint might well enjoy a good episode of *Father Knows Best*, he may not in good conscience be able to laugh at a Marx Brothers movie or enjoy a play by George Bernard Shaw. (422)

These remarks about humor echo Wolf's earlier claims about other character traits: just as the moral saint must display positive traits like patience and charity, he must also have an overwhelmingly *positive* sense of humor. He must not only favor lighthearted humor but in fact *resist* and *oppose* dark humor. In the sections that follow I argue that this is simply not the case. Dark humor is not only permissible in a moral saint, but in some cases desirable. And even if certain kinds of humor were an obstacle to sainthood, it would be a practical obstacle, not the stronger 'logical' obstacle Wolf describes.

After making these claims about the kinds of traits, activities, and humor that conflict with a saintly disposition, Wolf argues that the moral saint in no way resembles what we might call the 'perfectly cool' person. 'A moral saint,' she writes, 'will have to be very, very nice. It is important that he not be offensive. The worry is that, as a result, he will

have to be dull-witted or humorless or bland' (422). She then argues that the moral saint *is* dull-witted, humorless and bland, because he does not embody the sort of nonmoral ideals we admire in 'athletes, scholars, artists — more frivolously … cowboys, private eyes, and rock stars' (422). The moral saint cannot have 'Katherine Hepburn's grace' or 'Paul Newman's "cool"' (422). These traits, Wolf argues, 'cannot be superimposed upon the ideal of a moral saint' (422).

What Wolf is trying to show is that the 'ideal moral agent' is not ideal insofar as he is not someone we would necessarily want to *be*. Wolf claims that 'a person may be *perfectly wonderful* without being *perfectly moral*' (436). Here she is introducing what she calls the 'point of view of individual perfection' (437). This point of view is not exactly moral, not exactly egoistic, but certainly contains elements of both of those perspectives, as well as perhaps a strong aesthetic component. She describes this point of view as follows:

> Like moral judgments, judgments about what it would be good for a person to be are made from a point of view outside the limits set by the values, interests, and desires that the person might actually have. And, like moral judgments, these judgments claim for themselves a kind of objectivity or a grounding in a perspective which any rational and perceptive being can take up. Unlike moral judgments, however, the good with which these judgments are concerned is not the good of anyone or any group other than the individual himself. (436)

The problem, of course, is that we now have competing normative standards for evaluating lives. From the moral perspective, one ought to desire to be a moral saint, and from the perspective of individual perfection, one ought to desire to be well-rounded in the ways Wolf describes.

Here it might be useful to revisit the analysis of Wolf's argument I gave earlier. Her argument, I proposed, is made up of two claims: first, that moral saints are unattractive from the point of view of personal perfection, and second, that their unattractiveness from this point of view is *problematic*, because it means that the morally best life is not the best life all told. My main task is to challenge the first claim, by showing that moral saints can have all the traits that make for an attractive and well-rounded life. In challenging the first claim, though, I will implicitly challenge the second claim. After all, if saints are not unattractive, then we don't have to worry about their unattractiveness being *problematic*. Nonetheless, my argument leaves untouched much of what is philosophically interesting about the interplay between Wolf's two 'points of view.' While I challenge the claim that the personal point of view rules out certain morally extraordinary lives, I am *not* challenging the claim that certain personally interesting lives (e.g., that of the great violinist or single-minded athlete) might be ruled out from the moral point of view. I take it these are two different, though related, problems.

III An Attractive Counter-Example

Some commentators have argued that Wolf's conception of moral sainthood gets it wrong by favoring moral perfectionism over a relationship with the divine, or by setting the bar for sainthood far too high.[1] I shall claim, however, that we can challenge Wolf's thesis about the attractiveness of moral saints without departing from her underlying conception of a moral saint as a *truly extraordinary moral agent,* an agent whose uncommon qualities and achievements are not essentially religious.

Consider Dr. Paul Farmer, a man of extraordinary moral achievement who serves as a counter-example to some of Wolf's claims about moral saints. I take Farmer to be an uncontroversial example of a real-life moral saint, and yet he looks almost nothing like the person Wolf describes. Her saint is irritating, obsessive, and bland; Farmer is charismatic and funny. Her saint is holier-than-thou and no fun to be around; Farmer attracts friends and followers like a magnet. Wolf acknowledges that there are a 'variety of types of person that might be

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1 Robert Adams (1984) has argued that *real* saints (that is, Saint Francis, Mother Teresa, etc.) are not bland, and thus a conception of moral saints according to which they are bland cannot be correct. Moreover, he takes issue with what I shall call Wolf's 'perfectionist rationality.' He disagrees that perfection in moral value 'depends on the maximization of that type of value in every single action of the person' (393). This maximization 'lies behind much that is unattractive in Wolf's picture of moral sainthood; but I believe it is a fundamental error' (393).

Adams thinks the solution is to return sainthood to its religious roots. Real saints are not single-minded, he argues. Rather, 'they commonly have time for things that do not *have* to be done, because their vision is not of needs that exceed any possible means of satisfying them, but of a divine goodness that is more than adequate to every need' (396). For Adams, saints are not moral perfectionists, but rather 'people in whom the holy or divine can be seen' (398). But the sort of saint Adams describes is not necessarily a *moral* saint. While various historical examples of religious saints might turn out to be moral saints as well, moral sainthood itself is something we can describe without reference to the holy or the divine.

Whereas Adams responds to Wolf by appealing to a religious conception of sainthood, Edward Lawry goes in a different direction in his article 'In Praise of Moral Saints' (2002). He argues for a much more lenient, inclusive conception of sainthood. 'I have a sense,' Lawry writes, 'that [Wolf] is not talking about *real* moral saints' (1). In order to accommodate the several people he has known personally and believed to be moral saints, Lawry develops a theory according to which moral value is a 'coming together of a life in integrity' (1). Displaying a high degree of integrity is what characterizes 'good human beings, or, moral saints' (1). Notice that Lawry's notion of sainthood is so weak that 'good human being' and 'moral saint' seem to be taken as synonyms. This strikes me as mistaken. We all know some people who seem to display much more integrity than the rest of us. Nonetheless there seems to be a notion of truly *extraordinary* moral achievement that is worth exploring.

thought to satisfy [the conditions for moral sainthood],' but claims that 'none of these types serve as unequivocally compelling personal ideals' (419). Farmer, I shall claim, satisfies the conditions for moral sainthood as well as perhaps any living person can, and yet also serves as an 'unequivocally compelling personal ideal.' If there is any doubt that he is sufficiently compelling, whatever minor tweaks he would need are things that could be changed without sacrificing the quality of his moral achievements.

Paul Farmer is a doctor and medical anthropologist at Harvard Medical School. His non-profit organization, Partners in Health, runs clinics that treat the world's poorest, sickest patients. Farmer treats thousands of these patients himself, and he is world-renowned as an advocate for the poor and an expert on tuberculosis. In *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003), Tracy Kidder's celebrated book about Farmer, we are treated to a magnificently rich case study of a contemporary moral saint. We learn that Farmer grew up in an eccentric and unprivileged family. For much of his childhood the family of eight lived in an old bus parked in a trailer park, and later on a fishing boat moored in the shallows of Florida's Gulf Coast (Kidder, 2003, 47-54). Despite his odd upbringing, Farmer's stellar intellect drove him to Duke and ultimately Harvard, where he excelled and earned both an M.D. and PhD in anthropology, despite missing most of his classes to be in Haiti, working at the rural health clinic he built from the ground up (84). That clinic was the beginning of Partners in Health, which now oversees public health projects all over the world.

What is most interesting about Paul Farmer is not what he has accomplished but how he has accomplished it. Although he is almost maniacally driven by morally good pursuits, he does not describe the pursuits to himself as such. He simply wants to help the poor and the sick, and he does so not with the angelic purity Wolf imagines, but rather with an acerbic wit and a willingness to do what is necessary to further his cause: curse the inaction of others, pay bribes to soldiers at checkpoints, and accommodate the dangerous mythologies of his patients. Farmer's life is, to be sure, marked by asceticism: he takes no salary (23); he sleeps no more than four hours a night (23); he lives alternately in a hut and in the basement of his office (151); he does not buy new clothes (255); he has little time to himself; he hikes for hours and hours to make housecalls (36-41). Nevertheless, we don't find his life unattractive on account of this asceticism; on the contrary, we admire him partly *because* of it.[2]

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2 Farmer is not ascetic on *principle*. Though he does not seek them out, he seems to

While Farmer may appear to have the drive of a perfectionist, he doesn't suffer from the sort of obsessive maximizing that makes Wolf's saint so unattractive. He certainly wants to help as many people as he can, and often lobbies for the sort of efficient measures that make this possible, like lowering the prices of drugs and following rational protocols for treating infectious disease. But he also works with people face-to-face and thus finds himself compelled to make gestures that are more heartfelt than efficient. He sends a Haitian boy to Boston for surgery at great expense (262-79). He spends hundreds of dollars to replenish a malnourished man with vitamin shakes when the money could have been spent otherwise (25). He signs an entire paycheck over to a patient who is facing eviction (95). He buys a six-pack of beer for a homeless alcoholic patient, wraps it in wrapping paper and delivers it on Christmas Day (16).

Farmer doesn't cultivate hobbies or personal interests to anywhere near the extent that Wolf seems to find necessary for a well-rounded life, but his life is far from 'barren.' Indeed, you might say that his work is so consuming that it creates its own hobbies: travel, foreign languages, and the study of religion and mythology in different cultures. While he denies himself most of the creature-comforts available to someone in a rich country, his self-denial is endearing; we can see that he gets satisfaction, and often great pleasure, from the kind of work his self-denial makes possible. He packs only three shirts for a two-week trip, but in so doing he frees up space in his luggage to act as a courier for all manner of objects that his patients ask him to deliver to family in the States, a task that surely brings him great joy (190-2). He's efficient without being robotic. 'Traveler's tip number one thousand seventy-three,' he tells Kidder, 'If you don't have time to eat, and there's no other food on the plane, a package of peanuts and Bloody Mary mix are six hundred calories' (191). As unappetizing as this meal sounds, it doesn't make me 'glad I'm not a moral saint,' as Wolf might suggest. Rather, it makes me wish I were so motivated to help poor people that I were willing to subsist on airplane snacks, even for a day.

In fact, we ought to go further than simply to say that Farmer's life is *not barren*. On the contrary, he *flourishes*. What could be more interesting, more fulfilling, more deeply satisfying than a life devoted to using one's talent and intellect to improve the lives of thousands of people,

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enjoy the finer things in life on occasion, as when Kidder takes him to a restaurant with fine wine (Kidder, 2003, 7). He also enjoys reading *People Magazine* in airports. He claims he reads it in order to stay in touch with his patients, but one gets the sense he finds some pleasure in getting lost in thoroughly unserious matters once in a while. We also learn that he likes action-adventure movies.

indeed to prevent people from *dying*, and to do so in places where no one else is prepared to help them but you? Farmer's life is, of course, marked by great sacrifice, and we may wish, for his sake, that he had to make fewer sacrifices. But a self-sacrificial life can still be a good life on the whole. Indeed, we might even think Farmer's lifestyle — in which self-sacrifice makes possible staggering moral accomplishments and countless meaningful human interactions — yields a *net benefit* of well-being. This doesn't mean that Farmer is blissful and content. Rather, he is chronically unsatisfied, and that is what keeps him going.

Thus far I have argued that the life of a moral saint does not have all the costs Wolf claims it does, and furthermore that the life of a moral saint is attractive *despite* its costs. In other words, I have tried to show that it would not be so bad to *be* Paul Farmer. But Wolf claims that we prefer not only not to *be* a moral saint, but not even to be *around* a moral saint. Farmer is a counter-example to this claim as well.[3] While Wolf's moral saint is annoyingly obsessed with 'morality' so described, Farmer is obsessed with the content of his commitments. His obsession is more comical than unattractive. For example, he speaks in his own shorthand idiolect of acronyms and catchphrases. He wants to find an 'O for the P' ('preferential option for the poor') and he often exercises an 'H of G' ('hermeneutic of generosity') (174, 217). He gets annoyed when someone commits a 'seven-three' ('to use seven words where three would do') or a 'ninety-nine one hundred' ('quitting on a nearly completed job') (217). Yet his hyper-awareness of the endless task of healing the world's sick doesn't render him fanatical. Rather, it displays that he is vividly acquainted with a fact that escapes most people: that the desire for a clean shirt or an extra hour of sleep pales in comparison to the needs of the world's sickest and poorest people. When Kidder remarks on Farmer's insane schedule, Farmer responds, 'The problem is, if I don't work this hard, someone will die who doesn't have to. That sounds megalomaniacal. I wouldn't have said that to you before I'd taken you to Haiti and you had seen that it was manifestly true' (191). Clearly, Farmer is obsessed with his work — and how could he not be, given that lives depend on it? Nevertheless, his obsesses about the *object* of his concern — the poor, the sick — and not the moral goodness of being so concerned. As I will argue in section VI, this distinction is

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3 There are several instances in Kidder's book where Kidder himself, and people he interviews, express frustration at the fact that being around Farmer often makes one feel guilty about one's own shortcomings as a moral agent. Nevertheless, it is clear that, on balance, Farmer is someone others want to be around. Indeed, he seems to fare better on this criterion than the vast majority of people; not only do others not mind being around him, but they seem to seek out time with him.

significant when we evaluate the attractiveness of moral saints from the point of view of personal perfection.

Farmer displays precisely the cynical and sarcastic sense of humor that Wolf thinks the moral saint is not entitled to. When a Haitian patient tries to pay him with 'milk in a green bottle with a corncob stopper,' Farmer thanks her profusely in Creole and then turns to Kidder and says, 'Unpasteurized cow's milk in a dirty bottle. I can't wait to drink it' (26). He regularly refers to his poor patients as 'the shafted' and refuses to charitably accommodate the politically correct notion that all suffering is equal, believing instead that there are important differences in the 'degree of hose-edness' of various groups (216). When Kidder asks him who is paying for his trip to Cuba, Farmer answers, 'Capitalists, commies, and Jesus Christers' [the Soros Foundation, the Cuban government, and a church group] (184).

Farmer is also a counter-example to Wolf's claim that moral saints are not pessimistic. Before giving two speeches in Cuba, he tells Kidder, 'One speech is for clinicians, how to deal with HIV and TB coinfections. The other is why life sucks' (198). This pessimism doesn't seem to make Farmer any less saintly. In fact, if anything it seems to make him *more* saintly, because it shows that he has a certain hardened realism in the face of grave challenges, rather than a cheery naiveté. Yet his cynicism doesn't degenerate into *resignation*. Instead of giving up in the face of immensely difficult tasks, he simply expects others to rise to the challenge. For instance, when other public health experts deem certain patients too difficult to treat, Farmer simply ignores the experts and finds a way. He takes day-long hikes to treat isolated patients in their huts, bringing small items they have asked him for, even when the link between these items and treating the disease is tenuous. 'We can spend sixty-eight thousand dollars per TB patient in New York City,' Farmer says, 'but if you start giving watches or radios to patients here, suddenly the international health community jumps on you for creating *nonsustainable* projects. If a patient says, I really need a Bible or nail clippers, well, for God's sake!' (42).

As this brief glimpse has shown, if Paul Farmer is a moral saint, then he causes quite a few problems for Wolf's account. He is obsessed but not fanatical, ascetic but not self-righteous. He is sarcastic and cynical without being resigned. He is funny and fun, and no less morally admirable for it. He thinks unconventionally, in a way that seems only possible when a quirky, imperfect human mind is unleashed on a complex problem. What makes him so interesting is that he is a distinctly *human* moral saint, not a humorless robot. He proves that someone who exhibits all of the important features of a moral saint *can* be the sort of person we want to be.

IV The Traits of Sainthood

With the case of Paul Farmer in mind, we can now examine Wolf's account of the traits and activities of sainthood in more detail. Recall that she claims the saint must be 'patient, considerate, even-tempered, hospitable, charitable in thought as well as in deed' and also 'very reluctant to make negative judgments of other people' (421). Some of these traits, like even-temperedness, strike me as uncontroversially conducive to benefiting others. Others may be problematic. Patience, for example, seems virtuous only when it is warranted. In my view, the moral saint should have no patience for the person preaching hatred on the street corner, unless patience could eventually conduce to changing his mind. Nor should the saint have patience for corruption or incompetence in government if outrage would better conduce to ending it. In fact, public displays of impatience might be *obligatory* in many cases. We would expect the moral saint to display impatience when fear or self-interest would cause most people not to. Paul Farmer, for example, seems to be an incredibly impatient person. (Of course, being impatient does not require being rude or belligerent; one could express one's impatience in a polite and patient manner, and perhaps we should expect a moral saint to do this.)

Similarly, it seems that the moral saint should be 'charitable in thought' only when charity is warranted. To be sure, charity of thought is often helpful in guarding against premature dismissal of other's views or premature conclusions about their motives. But *automatically* or *universally* interpreting the words or deeds of others in the most favorable light seems downright naïve and certainly inimical to the project of benefiting others. The same goes for being 'very reluctant to make negative judgments of other people.' If Wolf means this as a *general* virtue, then perhaps she is failing to recognize that making negative judgments *when they are warranted* is an *essential* component in the project of benefiting others. Of course, there can be reasons not to display an attitude, even if it is warranted or fitting. For example, you might have a *moral* reason not be angry at the person preaching hatred on the street corner, if your anger might provoke him to become violent against innocent bystanders. But this is merely a reason not to *display* your anger, not a reason to refrain from *feeling* it, as Wolf's view seems to demand.

We might charitably assume that Wolf means for all of the above exceptions to be built into her notions of patience, charity, and the like. Perhaps she means, not that a saint should *always* and *automatically* be patient and charitable, but rather that a saint would be particularly good at discerning when patience and charity are *called for*. Farmer, for example, surely exercises more patience when dealing one-

on-one with a sick person than he does when navigating the bureaucracy that determines how quickly that person can get a needed drug or treatment. Perhaps this is all that Wolf means: the saint should be patient and considerate when it comes to legitimate needs (say, a sick person's need to understand important medical instructions and not be condescended to), but need not display these traits in response to illegitimate demands (say, the demands of the bureaucracy to receive multiply redundant paperwork). Yet this interpretation, according to which the moral saint displays these positive traits only when they are warranted, is simply inconsistent with the conclusions Wolf draws about her patient and charitable saint. For she considers these traits to be *so* saintly that they make the saint 'too good' (421). Here we get the first taste of Wolf's ultimate thesis: that these saintly traits '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). But Wolf has not yet provided any good reasons to think that the moral saint *can't* be well-rounded. A well-honed ability to know when positive traits are warranted and to display them accordingly doesn't seem to make a person *too good*, nor does it seem to be at odds with well-roundedness.

Perhaps Wolf is simply calling for a *reluctance* to be negative, as a way of compensating for the human tendency to be *too* negative. But this reading also fails to support Wolf's conclusion. For surely a reluctance to be negative — surely any trait that is fostered as a way of moderating tendencies toward extremism — is not the sort of thing that would prevent someone from being well-rounded. A healthy, compensating dose of reluctance would not make someone 'too good,' where 'too good' refers to the notion that too much of a good trait can be a bad thing. So it seems that Wolf faces a dilemma. Either the saint is so positive and charitable that it interferes with his well-being and renders him irritating, or he is only moderately positive and charitable (that is, he displays these attitudes mainly when they are warranted). If the first is true, then Wolf's conception is too extreme, since knee-jerk positivity and unrestrained charity of thought do not seem to be requirements of sainthood, and indeed may be in tension with sainthood. Yet if the second horn of the dilemma is true — and I think it is — then the saint no longer comes across as unattractive, and Wolf's thesis suffers.

What is true of patience and charity is true also of most of the other character traits Wolf attributes to moral saints. Take, for example, the qualities of 'looking for the best in people' and giving others 'the benefit of the doubt.' Either the moral saint *limits* how much he gives others the benefit of the doubt, in which case he does not appear unattractive, or he rampantly and indiscriminately gives others the benefit of the

doubt, in which case his blind optimism is likely to undermine his ability to effectively pursue morally good projects.

It might be objected that I have interpreted Wolf's list of character traits too harshly. According to this objection, saints don't 'look for the best in people' merely because doing so is conducive to performing good deeds. Rather, saints 'look for the best in people' (and are patient, charitable, etc.) because to do so is the mark of a truly virtuous person. That is, there are certain traits that *essentially moral*, just as there are others that, as Wolf puts it, 'go against the moral grain' (422). On this view, there are certain traits a moral saint must have even if it means, as I have argued above, that she is not accurately responding to the features of the world. In fact, *not* accurately responding to the features of the world might be an *essential* component of these virtues.

Julia Driver (1989) argues that some moral virtues *do* involve this sort of blindness to the facts of a situation.[4] These virtues — modesty, blind charity, and the refusal to hold a grudge — 'involve ignorance in an essential way' (Driver, 1989, 374). Modesty, for example, involves ignorance of one's worth. Driver claims that it would be 'counterintuitive' to suggest that these traits are not virtues (384). 'We value the virtues of ignorance' she claims, 'because of the psychological states that underpin them, but we value these psychological states for instrumental reasons' (383). So, for example, we value modesty because it involves an underlying psychological state ('reluctance to take in one's own accomplishments fully' (383)) that tends to improve social interaction by reducing jealousy and envy. To be modest is to be 'less troublesome' (384).

We ought to examine Driver's analysis of the virtue of 'blind charity' in a bit more detail. If Driver's argument succeeds, it lends credence to Wolf's claim that a moral saint must 'look for the best in people' and be 'charitable in thought' and 'very reluctant to make negative judgments of other people' to such an extent that she becomes unattractive as a result (Wolf, 1982, 421-2). According to Driver,

> A person who is blind in charity with others is a person who sees the good in them, but does not see the bad. Blind charity differs from charity in that it is usually the case that, when one is merely charitable toward another, one favors that person in some respect, *in spite of* perceived defects or lack of desert. For example, in employing the principle of charity, one interprets a person's views in the best possible way, even though one perceives certain possible defects. Blind charity is a disposition not to see the defects, and to focus on the virtues of persons. (381)

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4 I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting that I engage with Driver's argument here.

I find it rather difficult to understand just why blind charity is meant to be a *good* thing, and even more difficult to understand how it could be a *morally* good thing. As Driver points out, blind charity requires a kind of ignorance: the inability to see the bad in people. This sort of charity 'cannot be reflective' (382). On the face of it, unreflectiveness does not seem like the mark of a virtue. Of course, if we suppose that most people are mostly good, and that their defects are not usually important, then perhaps blind charity is useful in most cases. The blindly charitable person may have more pleasant, and more productive, interactions with most people; she won't perceive their flaws, and so she won't be hung up on them. Yet our appreciation or admiration for blind charity in such cases seems almost aesthetic rather than moral. We find the person who is blind in charity to be endearing, innocent, and pure; we admire such a person for her 'sweetness,' as Driver says of the character Jane Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*. But what happens when the blindly charitable person interacts with people whose bad qualities are relevant, significant, and not to be ignored? It seems that blind charity could cause one to trust the untrustworthy, to rely on the unreliable, or worse, to ally oneself with evil. In such cases, blind charity seems indistinguishable from *naiveté*. Naiveté is only rarely an admirable quality in an adult, and so it would be odd if it were supposed to count as a moral virtue. The naiveté of blind charity might enhance a large number of relatively insignificant social interactions, but this would be outweighed by the fact that it could spoil a small number of quite significant interactions, potentially causing a great deal of harm.

Wolf's version of charity might not be as 'blind' as Driver's blind charity. Where Driver's charitable agent has a true perceptive *defect* — a *blind spot*, as it were — Wolf's moral saint may simply have a tendency to accentuate the positive and minimize the negative. But Wolf's moral saint faces the same problem whether she is completely blinded to the flaws of others or only partly blinded. As I argued earlier, Wolf's claim that positive character traits like charity make a moral saint unattractive leads us to a dilemma: either the saint is charitable in an *undiscriminating* way (roughly, blind charity), in which case she will be much less effective, and much less admirable, as a moral agent, or she is only charitable when charity is *called for*, in which case she is not unattractive on account of this trait. The first horn of the dilemma is only a problem if blind charity *does* cause a person to be less effective and less admirable as a moral agent. Driver has suggested the opposite: that virtues of ignorance, like blind charity, can ease social interaction, and that such traits are so admirable that it would be 'counterintuitive' to suggest they are not virtues. But as I have argued, the considerations that count in favor of blind charity don't seem to be *moral* considerations, and in many contexts blind charity would in fact *undermine* moral goals. In

any case, the second horn of the dilemma represents the more plausible account of moral saints. Moral saints should indeed be charitable, but not blindly charitable. Paul Farmer calls his own principle of charity his 'hermeneutic of generosity' ('H of G'). He exercises it toward Kidder when he says, 'I know you're a good guy. Therefore I will interpret what you say and do in a favorable light' (214). Nevertheless, Farmer's 'H of G' is not a type of *blind* charity. He does not lack the ability to see the bad in people. In fact, Farmer is a particularly astute moral critic. This allows him to shame others into action when leading by example does not work on its own.

Wolf's argument about character traits extends to humor. She claims that a cynical and sarcastic wit requires 'resignation and pessimism toward the flaws and vices to be found in the world,' and that a moral saint could not have these attitudes (422). It seems reasonable enough that cynical wit involves pessimism, but why can't the moral saint be pessimistic? Insofar as pessimism is simply a belief about how things tend to work out, it could actually be to the moral saint's *advantage* to be pessimistic.[5] Indeed, Paul Farmer is surely *more* saintly on account of his pessimism. He is motivated to help the poor precisely because, as he says, 'life sucks,' and his patients are 'the shafted.' He is pessimistic about how his patients will fare without his help, but this allows him to do *more* good.

We might also call into question Wolf's claim that cynical wit requires an attitude of 'resignation.' Is an attitude so extreme as resignation really necessary for cynical or sarcastic humor? Resignation seems to connote hopelessness or futility. But if cynical and sarcastic humor were built on hopelessness and futility, then cynical or sarcastic commentary about bad situations would come out sounding sad or mean rather than funny. That is, if in referring to his patients as 'the shafted' Farmer were *resigned* to the notion that their plight was permanent, or hopeless, we would consider his use of the term to be mean-spirited. But he's not resigned. Quite the opposite: he fights to treat his sickest patients when the world's public health authorities are resigned to letting them die.

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5 Now, perhaps we ought to clarify what sort of attitude pessimism is. If pessimism is just having the negative attitudes and beliefs that are warranted by the evidence, then this certainly poses no problem for the moral saint, unless it brings her down and thus makes her less productive. However, on this conception, pessimism is really just another world for 'realism.' Suppose pessimism is instead the tendency to have negative attitudes and beliefs *regardless* of the evidence. *This*, I concede, might be (practically, not logically) problematic for the moral saint. But only the first, weaker sort of pessimism seems necessary for a cynical wit.

V Wolf's Moral Saints Are Self-Defeating

By appealing to Paul Farmer as a case study, I have tried to suggest that Wolf's account of moral sainthood places unnecessary restrictions on the sorts of traits and attitudes a moral saint can have. Lurking beneath my analysis, however, is an argument for an even stronger claim: that if we *granted* all of these restrictions, Wolf's moral saint would be self-defeating. Here I want to make that stronger argument more explicit. Following Wolf's distinction between 'logical' and 'practical' obstacles to sainthood, I will argue that her moral saint is both logically and practically self-defeating. We'll call a saint 'logically self-defeating' if two or more necessary components of sainthood cannot consistently be instantiated in the same person. A saint is 'practically self-defeating' if, as a contingent matter, it often happens to be the case that the real-world exercise of one component of sainthood gets in the way of the exercise of another component thereof.

Wolf's moral saint is logically self-defeating insofar as this saint must display a vast repertoire of positive, optimistic traits, some of which conflict with each other. Wolf describes the moral saint in the following way: she is patient, considerate, even-tempered, hospitable, charitable (in deed and in thought), reluctant to make negative judgments, always looking for the best in people, very nice, not offensive, not pessimistic, not resigned, not cynical, humorless, dull-witted, and bland. Wolf doesn't mention that moral saints must be *sincere*. But surely sincerity is a virtue that belongs on the above list, and perhaps on any plausible list of the virtues of a moral saint. After all, if a moral saint cannot be pessimistic, then she certainly cannot be insincere — surely insincerity goes 'against the moral grain.' But the virtue of sincerity is in tension with the other traits Wolf attributes to moral saints.

The problem, it seems, is that it would be quite difficult to display all of Wolf's positive traits without being insincere. Now, one might reply that I have not sufficiently idealized my moral saint; the *average* person, who is not perfectly positive and optimistic, could not display all of these positive traits without being insincere. But the moral saint really *would* be optimistic, patient, charitable, nice, and so on, and thus would not have to be insincere to display such traits. But this would dissolve the inconsistency *only* if the moral saint displayed the positive traits exclusively when they were *warranted*. As I suggested earlier, a sincere person can be considerate of the needs of others when those needs are deserving of consideration: when they are genuine, legitimate, consistent needs. So, for example, Paul Farmer ought to be considerate of his patients and their legitimate demands, but he ought not be considerate or patient when it comes to arbitrary and harmful bureaucratic practices. Thus, if Wolf demands that her moral saint *always* be considerate,

regardless of whether this attitude is fitting, then she is also demanding insincerity. The moral saint cannot *sincerely* be considerate of illegitimate demands, unless she is completely unaware of their illegitimacy. As I argued earlier about the 'virtues of ignorance,' it is difficult to see how being accommodating in such an unthinking, undiscriminating way can be a positive moral trait. It may be positive in the sense that so accommodating a person would be very nice and agreeable, but it seems also negative insofar as such a person would be neither responding to the normatively relevant features of her environment nor helping to counteract the effects of harmful policies.[6]

My argument that Wolf's moral saint is logically self-defeating succeeds only if (1) sincerity is a necessary condition of sainthood, and (2) saints display positive traits even when they are unwarranted. The argument that Wolf's moral saint is *practically* self-defeating is more straightforward. Her moral saint is practically self-defeating because, in not allowing himself any of the pleasures of life that normally keep a person sane, he deprives himself of the very rejuvenation that would make extended good works possible. It is widely acknowledged that in order to maximize his pleasure, the hedonist ought not seek it, and that in order to maximize the good, the utilitarian ought not calculate the relative utility of every possible action.[7] Similarly, in order to maximize moral goodness, it is best that one not always aim at doing the most morally virtuous thing possible, if for no other reason than that the *deliberation* that must go into determining which action is as morally good as possible *itself* takes up time that could better be spent *doing* morally good actions. Wolf's moral saint, who exhibits a brute maximizing perfectionism, is thus self-undermining. After all, her saint is someone 'whose every action is as morally good as possible' (419), and as I shall argue later, she expects the saint to be driven by this fact *de dicto*.

Thus there are perhaps two different ways in which Wolf's moral saint is practically self-defeating. The requirement of moral perfection is self-defeating *in the short run*, since it would result, at best, in a sort of deliberative inefficiency, and at worst in what Peter Railton (1984) calls a 'paralyzing regress' of deliberating about whether to deliberate (154).

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6 I presume Edward Lawry (2002) is referring to this same phenomenon when he writes 'But the inoffensive niceness of a person seems surely to be an objectionable moral trait when righteous indignation is called for. It seems that even trying to characterize the moral saint in this way is a self-defeating enterprise' (Lawry, 2002, 4).

7 For a particularly lucid and concise explanation of the 'Paradox of Hedonism' see Railton (1984), 140-1.

In the short run, the saint would miss opportunities to do the morally right thing. The requirement that the saint 'justify every activity against morally beneficial alternatives' is also self-defeating *in the long run*, because it would mean systematically deciding to forgo personal interests in favor of morally beneficial alternatives; over time, the saint would become burned-out, thus undermining her ability to do the morally right thing (Wolf, 1982, 422).

Now, it seems natural to argue that the moral saint must take time for personal hobbies and pursuits because she would need to account for the potential of becoming burned-out. Moreover, these personal hobbies and pursuits must be undertaken for their own sake — not instrumentally, as in the case of Wolf's donation-seeking golfer — otherwise they might not yield any genuine rejuvenation. Perhaps, however, it is better to argue that the saint can enjoy personal interests *because a more plausible picture of a moral saint will not require that she justify each action against morally beneficial alternatives.* For although it is true that a well-rounded life might better conduce to improving the welfare of others than an exhaustively single-minded life, it might be difficult for a moral perfectionist to alter her deliberative habits in light of this fact. For she would have little reason, in any *particular* instance, to prefer well-rounded pursuits to moral pursuits, as long as she were confident she could carry out the very next moral pursuit without dire personal consequences. In other words, preventing oneself from becoming burned-out might require a sort of foresight and long-term thinking that is in tension with particular act-level decisions.

Peter Railton (1984) has offered a way out of these kinds of deliberative problems, which are often considered to be particularly problematic for consequentialists.[8] He distinguishes between 'subjective consequentialism' and 'objective consequentialism'. Subjective consequentialism demands that one aim to maximize the good in every action by using a distinctively consequentialist mode of decision-making — weighing the expected consequences of acts and carefully choosing the act that appears optimal (Railton, 1984, 152). Objective consequentialism, on the other hand, 'is the view that the criterion of the rightness of an act or course of action is whether it *in fact* would most promote the good of those acts available to the agent' (152, emphasis added). It might turn out that the course of action that would *in fact* most promote the good is not the action that a subjectively consequentialist decision-making procedure recommends. So, for example, it might turn out that a moral saint

8 I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting that I make use of Railton's distinction here.

ought in fact to allow himself the pleasure of personal hobbies, because it prevents him from becoming burned out and unable to do any good. This is true even if subjective consequentialism would not have recommended personal hobbies. Railton thus coins the term 'sophisticated consequentialist.' A sophisticated consequentialist is 'someone who has a standing commitment to leading an objectively consequentialist life, but who need not set special stock in any particular form of decision making and therefore does not necessarily seek to lead a subjectively consequentialist life' (153). Sophisticated consequentialists might seem a little odd in any particular situation — they often choose actions that seem far from optimal — but they are more effective overall.

Railton's framework is useful because it allows us to think more carefully about whether Wolf's moral saint really is self-defeating. Perhaps Wolf's saint is actually a *sophisticated* moral agent. A 'sophisticated moral saint' can play golf even when a big donation to Oxfam does not depend on it, because playing golf keeps her sane, and staying sane means doing more good in the long-run. Recasting Wolf's moral saints as sophisticated in this way would certainly defeat my objection that these saints are self-defeating. But this would only push the problem back one step further. For sophisticated moral saints would not be *unattractive* in the ways Wolf claims, and so her argument would still be on shaky ground. After all, a large part of the saints' unattractiveness hinges on their decision-making procedure — their need to 'justify every action against morally beneficial alternatives' (422). This causes them to forego personal interests, become bland, and turn into the sort of people we don't like to be around. If we replace this decision-procedure with a more sophisticated one, the unattractiveness disappears. Here we arrive at yet another dilemma: Wolf's saints are either 'naïve' deliberators or 'sophisticated' deliberators.[9] If naïve, they are self-defeating, and if sophisticated, they are not unattractive in the ways necessary for her argument ultimately to succeed.

In the end, it matters little whether Wolf's requirement that the saint justify all actions against morally beneficial alternatives can be shown to accommodate personal interests, or whether this requirement should be abandoned altogether, for Wolf includes the lack of personal interests as an *additional* feature of a moral saint. In other words, she seems to think that the moral saint is *essentially* dull-witted, humorless, and

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9 As I've tried to indicate, it seems rather clear from the text that Wolf intends them to be 'naïve' deliberators. So the dilemma here is really between the characterization given in the text and an alternative characterization we might offer as a charitable modification of her view. It's not a choice between two equally plausible interpretations of the text.

bland. He is this way by his very constitution, not simply as a consequence of his perfectionist rationality. It is not merely that his project of benefiting others leaves him no *time* to be well-rounded, but rather that well-roundedness is itself antithetical to moral perfection. This is what Wolf means, presumably, when she says that certain pursuits are 'against the moral grain' (422). Such pursuits don't run against the grain because they take up time that could be spent otherwise; they run against the grain by their nature. This is why her saint is self-defeating: he must be *both* ascetic and maximally beneficial to others, but being ascetic would likely undermine his ability to help others.

VI Passion for Morality *De Dicto*

Despite the arguments I have made so far, Wolf's picture of the moral saint as horribly unattractive might remain plausible. Here I want to offer an explanation for that nagging plausibility, by arguing that part of the reason we think of moral saints as being so boring and irritating is that we are confusing different types of moral motivation. Wolf describes the moral saint as someone whose life is 'dominated by explicitly moral commitments' (423). There is a way of reading this according to which it is a bad thing, and that is the reading Wolf intends. Among the heroes of history and literature, Wolf argues, we 'prefer' those whose characters are mixed rather than uniformly saintly. From this preference Wolf draws the conclusion that 'there seems to be a limit to how much morality we can stand' (423). This seems right, but I shall argue that it is only true in the following limited sense: once a person becomes obsessed with 'morality' *de dicto*, we can no longer stand it. However, morality *de re* — in the sense of morally good actions — strikes me as something for which we have an almost limitless appetite. Perhaps this distinction will help us to interpret Wolf's claim that

> [T]here is something odd about the idea of morality itself, or moral goodness, serving as the object of a dominant passion in the way that a more concrete and specific vision of a goal (even a concrete *moral* goal) might be imagined to serve. Morality itself does not seem to be a suitable object of passion. (424)

Wolf's distinction here between 'morality itself' and 'a concrete moral goal' is precisely the distinction between a motivation to do 'what is right' read *de dicto* and that same motivation *de re*. She seems to think that a moral saint must be motivated by 'morality itself' *under that description*, as an abstract concept, rather than being motivated directly by those things in the world that the concept picks out, like the relief of suffering.

Passion for 'morality itself' *would* be rather odd. Imagine approaching a stranger and asking him 'What's your life's passion?' and getting

the answer 'Morality.' Or asking 'What are you going to do today?' and getting the answer 'Morally good things.' But is that how a real moral saint would answer? The moral saint as I conceive of him would answer with the *content* of his moral commitments, not the fact that he is so committed. To 'What's your life's passion?' he would answer 'healing the sick' or 'eradicating tuberculosis.' To 'What are you going to do today?' he would answer, in similar fashion, 'see patients' or 'raise money.' Although I can imagine a person who answers instead 'do morally good things,' I can only imagine him giving this answer facetiously or ironically, or as some sort of pep talk to himself, to stay motivated in the face of obstacles. To give the answer 'do morally good things' sincerely, one would have to be, oddly, a little cold. After all, *describing* one's commitments to oneself as moral is perhaps a consequence of being committed to them *as moral*. Yet in most cases what makes someone saintly is a commitment to various moral pursuits *for their own sake*.[10]

One problem with people who are committed to or obsessed with 'morality' so described is that whatever it is they are describing as 'morally right' might not actually *be* morally right. Many of us associate an obsession with morality *de dicto* with the tendency to have false beliefs about what morality demands. Think, for example, of Jerry Falwell's 'Moral Majority' or any organization that describes itself as being on a 'moral crusade.' At the very least, there is a correlation between the tendency to have *fanatical* moral beliefs and *de dicto* moral obsession. Indeed, Wolf acknowledges that her view seems to paint the moral saint as a 'disgusting goody-goody or an obsessive ascetic' (425).

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10 Indeed, Wolf acknowledges this exact same problem — the problem of *de dicto* commitments — in a different context. When discussing what might be unattractive about a utilitarian moral saint (as opposed to the common-sense morality version of the moral saint, to which the bulk of her criticisms are directed), Wolf claims that, insofar as this saint can have any sort of hobbies or interests outside of helping others, 'he values these things only because of and insofar as they *are* a part of the general happiness. He values them, as it were, under the description "a contribution to the general happiness"' (429). Here Wolf is arguing that the sort of means-end reasoning that allows the utilitarian moral saint to engage in enjoyable activities renders those activities less legitimate or genuine. They are valued *de dicto* and not *de re*. She's right that enjoyable activities ought to be enjoyed for their own sake. But I'm not sure that the utilitarian moral saint can't enjoy them for their own sake. After all, if the utilitarian moral saint needs to build leisure pursuits into his life so as not to become burned out (that is, so as to remain a productive utility-maximizer), it is probably *necessary* that he enjoy them for their own sake, otherwise they might become less enjoyable. We can grant that leisure pursuits are a strategically optimal part of a utility-maximizing life without thereby rendering the relationship the saint has to those pursuits merely instrumental.

But what is disgusting about a goody-goody is not that she *does* morally good things, but rather that she describes them as morally good, takes their moral goodness as a mark of her own superiority, basks in the glory that accompanies doing good things, and is concerned more about the *appearance* of moral goodness than the actuality. We don't find a goody-goody by looking for someone who makes a significant moral impact on the world; we find her by looking for someone whose self-image is unhealthily tied to her reputation for making such an impact. Thus in addition to confusing genuine *de re* moral motivation with *de dicto* moral motivation, Wolf's saint has the further problem of being concerned about her moral self-image rather than about her moral projects themselves. Her superficial *de dicto* moral motivation is perhaps derived from her desire to improve her moral self-image.

The same goes for the obsessive ascetic. What is unattractive about such a character is not that he sacrifices his own desires to help others — helping others is rarely unattractive — but that he elevates the self-sacrifice to the level of an obsession, and that he thinks the sacrifice *itself* intrinsically good. Thus the underlying problem with a commitment to morality *de dicto* is that, even if the person with this commitment has obsessions that actually *are* morally good, he seems to have them for the wrong reason. He seems to be benefiting others because it's the 'moral thing to do' (and because the outward appearance of concern for the 'moral thing to do' will increase his moral self-image) and not for the beneficiaries' own sakes. Paul Farmer calls these misguided people 'do-gooders.' People of this sort — fanatical, obsessive, ascetic, goody-goody — tend to behave in such a way as to provoke others to refer to them as 'saints,' where 'saint' is an epithet. But we are not interested in people who can only be described as saints if 'saint' is an epithet. Looking for real saints among the goody-goodies would be like looking for excellent fathers by rounding up men who wear 'World's Greatest Dad' t-shirts.[11]

Thus we can see that a moral saint whose life is 'dominated by the motivation to be moral' is much less unattractive when we interpret this motivation as being toward doing morally good things *de re* rather than solely *de dicto* (431). If the saint is motivated by precisely the things the term 'morally good' picks out, rather than being motivated by the concept morally good itself, he will do all the things Wolf's moral saint does without being annoying or fanatical. No one seems to find an obsession with healing the sick, by someone who is actually working to do so, unattractive. In fact, the moral saint need not even *think of himself*

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11 I assume something like this is underlying the worry that Railton's character Juan has when he says, 'I haven't met any real saints lately, and I don't trust people who think they *are* saints' (Railton, 1984, 150).

as being wholly devoted to moral perfection. 'Morality,' *de dicto*, need not even be on his radar screen.

Michael Smith (1994) has taken this point even further. Though he does not consider moral saints in particular, he claims that the motivation to do the right thing *de dicto* is so implausible as part of a moral theory that metaethical externalists are in trouble insofar as their theory entails such a motivation. Common sense, he claims, tells us that 'good people care non-derivatively about honesty, the weal and woe of their children and friends, the well-being of their fellows […]' etc. (Smith, 1994, 75). Since moral saints are the limiting case of 'good people,' we would expect that they, too, are motivated *non-derivatively* to heal the sick or help the poor. Otherwise, moral saints would be, as Smith says, motivated by 'just one thing: doing what they believe to be right, where this is read *de dicto* and not *de re*' (75). Such *de dicto* motivation is, he argues, '*a fetish or moral vice, not the one and only moral virtue*' (75, emphasis added). The idea here is that *de dicto* motivation is *alienating*. It disconnects the agent from her actions by acting as a filter through which her otherwise direct concern for moral projects muss pass, rendering that concern merely derivative and hence illegitimate.

Wolf's moral saint is so unattractive precisely *because* she exhibits the sort of moral obsession that can be called a fetish or a vice. And as I have argued above, Wolf's conception of sainthood clearly involves a *de dicto* motivation to be moral. On the basis of Smith's argument, we might then conclude that it is the *de dicto* motivation *itself* that is causing the fetishism. What I would like to suggest, however, is that it may not be the *de dicto* commitment itself, but rather the notion that it must exist *in the absence of* a corresponding *de re* motivation, that is problematic. Wolf's account seems to rely, as does perhaps Michael Smith's, on the idea that *de re* and *de dicto* motivations to be moral are to some extent mutually exclusive. We can see this in her discussion of the difference between 'morality itself' or 'moral goodness' being the object of a dominant passion and 'a concrete moral goal' being the object of that passion (424). It seems that she disapproves of a person whose dominant passion is for *morality itself* at least partly because she is assuming that this person cannot *also* have a passion for concrete moral goals. But why must this be the case?

Several commentators have responded to Smith's argument by defending *de dicto* moral motivation, and by pointing out that *de re* and *de dicto* motivation are not mutually exclusive.[12] Sigrun Svarvarsdottir (1999) argues that there is no reason to conflate a genuine concern

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12 See Lillehammer (1997), 191-2; Copp (1997), 49-50; Svarvarsdottir (1999), 199-206; and Olson (2002), 91.

for morality (*de dicto*) with an obsession or moral fetish. *De dicto* moral motivation does not rule out also having a direct, non-derivative concern for moral projects for their own sake. Indeed, *de dicto* motivation conveniently fills in the gaps when such direct concern is missing, especially after we have changed our moral judgments. Svarvarsdottir explains this connection as follows:

> Admittedly, we expect a good person to develop a deep commitment to an end she has come to see as morally valuable and to pursue it for its own sake.… The presence in the good person of the desire to be moral certainly does not prevent her from forming such a commitment. Although her desire to ϕ may initially be derived from her desire to be moral, it may subsequently come to operate psychologically independently of the latter. (Svarvarsdottir, 1999, 205-6)

In the morally best people, we will want to say not just that the desire to ϕ *may* develop into an independent, underived desire, but that it *must*. That is to say, a *de dicto* desire to be moral by itself is not sufficient in the morally best people.

While *de dicto* moral motivation may never be sufficient on its own, it may in some instances be necessary. Consider an essentially moral value like justice: it may indeed be necessary or even *admirable* not only to respond to the features which make an act just or unjust, but also the fact that it is 'just' or 'unjust.'[13] When we respond to justice or injustice, it may be impossible to respond directly (*de re*) to the features that make an act just or unjust without at the same time responding to the act under the description 'just' or 'unjust.' If, for instance, I am working to counteract voter disenfranchisement, I may be motivated directly by concern for the disenfranchised, but at the same time I may be responding to what Wolf would call the 'abstract and impersonal consideration' *because it is unjust*. In other words, the object of my motivation might be *that people in one neighborhood had ample opportunity to vote, but people in another neighborhood were intimidated from voting*. But does this motivation differ from a concern to fight *an injustice*? The disenfranchisement would obviously be unjust whether I described it that way or not, but in responding to what is morally significant about it, I cannot help but respond to it under the description 'injustice.' Indeed, if I fought

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13 There are a few instances where Paul Farmer seems to display *de dicto* moral motivation, but never at the expense of *de re* motivation, and never in a way that is fetishistic, self-righteous, or otherwise objectionable. One is that he keeps a screen saver on his laptop computer that says 'Seek Justice' (Kidder, 2003, 207). The other is that he and his colleagues often discuss 'areas of moral clarity.' These 'AMC's' are 'situations, rare in the world, where what ought to be done seemed perfectly clear' (101).

injustice *de re*, without being able to describe it or conceptualize it as 'injustice,' I would seem to be lacking a crucial deliberative mechanism — the mechanism that picks out, in a non-arbitrary way, the special force of this wrong.

Justice seems to be an extreme case of this phenomenon, though. In many cases, an agent — even the moral saint — need not be interested in the 'rightness' of her action. If the saint helps sick people because they are in pain and she can make it go away, this seems sufficient for praiseworthiness even if she does not think of what she is doing as 'morally good.' We would hope, of course, that with some reflection she could come to recognize her work as morally good. And we would be troubled if, upon reflection, she came to recognize her work as morally bad, but did it anyway. But we would not expect her to be motivated, at least not primarily or dominantly, by the fact that her action could be described as 'morally good,' and we would be disappointed if she were overly concerned about the way her actions were labeled or rewarded.

We can now see where Wolf's account of moral saints goes wrong. There is a benign, perhaps even admirable, way of caring about the rightness of your actions *de dicto* — it manifests itself in reflective people who are concerned about how their actions can be classified in the abstract, while being primarily motivated by their moral projects *themselves*. While it is beyond the scope of this article to explore this point in greater depth, I have suggested that there is reason to think that *this* sort of *de dicto* motivation need not result in moral fetishism. However, Wolf builds a far less admirable and far more common way of caring *de dicto* about the rightness of one's actions into her notion of a moral saint. Her saint cares *more* about the description of his actions as 'right' than the right-making features of the actions themselves, indeed cares about the former at the *expense* of the latter, since Wolf implies he cannot care about both. Furthermore, Wolf's saints are prone to a constellation of troublesome behaviors — what I call 'moral imposterisms' like fanaticism and do-gooderism — that tend to correlate with the presence of this *de dicto* motivation, and hence to be automatically associated with it, even if they are not in fact caused by it. But there is no reason to attribute to the moral saint a general *de dicto* moral motivation in the *absence* of corresponding *de re* motivations. Nor is there any reason to attribute to the moral saint an annoying, self-righteous asceticism or a superficial concern for his moral image. Since there is no reason to think moral saints must be motivated in these ways, there is no reason to conclude that saints are unattractive on that basis.

VII Conclusion

Wolf's paper is wide-ranging and full of important arguments. I've tried to show that just one small part of her paper — the substantive account of what moral saints look like — is overly restrictive. My criticisms of this part of the paper do, of course, have implications for her broader argument: if saints can be attractive and well-rounded after all, then there is less conflict between the morally best life and the optimally well-rounded life. Yet I agree with Wolf that there is still substantial tension between moral ways of evaluating a life and other normative standards for evaluating lives, like the point of view of personal perfection. Indeed, I agree with so many of Wolf's big-picture claims that one might wonder whether she and I are talking past one another when it comes to the traits of sainthood. Are we simply talking about different things when we use the term 'moral saint'?

Perhaps the definition of moral saint that Wolf was intending all along was something like 'a person who only responds to moral reasons, and cannot respond to non-moral reasons, except when doing so either augments her ability to respond to moral reasons or has no effect whatsoever on this ability.' If this is the definition Wolf intends, perhaps many of my criticisms fall flat. After all, this sort of moral saint would *surely* be unattractive, and no one as interesting as Paul Farmer could meet this standard. A person who was incapable of responding to the rich variety of non-moral reasons in the world, or was simply prohibited from responding to them, would be robotic and humorless. As far as hobbies and leisure pursuits are concerned, this person could only spend time on an activity if it were absolutely necessary for reducing stress and making it possible to continue responding to moral reasons, or if it directly served those moral reasons, as in Wolf's example of the golf game that is used 'to secure that big donation to Oxfam' (425).[14]

This notion of sainthood as reason-responsiveness captures many of Wolf's concerns, but it cannot be exactly what she intended. The problem with treating an ideal moral agent as an ideal moral reason-responder is that it treats moral motivation as if it were an isolable, removable part of human psychology. But a moral saint is a *person*, not just a deliberative faculty. When asking what a perfect moral agent would look like, we are asking what happens when we plant optimal moral motivations in a real person, with all the nuances and flaws of human psychology. After all, if we are interested in examining and evaluating the many

14 Things would be more complicated, of course, from a broadly virtue-ethical standpoint, where virtues like perfecting your talents might count as moral reasons.

ways in which one could choose to live one's life, we probably ought to eliminate at the outset any paths that require turning us from humans into androids. So it seems unlikely that Wolf is interested in anything other than the sort of moral perfection that can plausibly be instantiated in real people without stripping them of what makes them human. Thus it seems unlikely that we are talking past each other. Rather, we simply disagree about what it looks like when a real person approaches moral sainthood. Using Paul Farmer as a paradigm case, I have argued that real-life moral saints are not irritating, dull-witted, or bland. Rather, such people can be charismatic, cynical, and darkly witty. They can be the kind of people we admire and even aspire to be, and the kind of people whose company we enjoy.[15]

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