Hip to Be Square: Moral Saints Revisited

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ABSTRACT   I defend the continuing importance, and attraction of, moral saints. The objective of this paper is twofold; firstly, to critique Wolf's definition of sainthood, and secondly, to argue against her view that one should not desire to be a moral saint, nor emulate them. In section 1, I argue that moral saints are highly complex moral agents, and that Wolf's definition does not capture this complexity. My second argument is that Wolf's account that there are two kinds of saints, loving and rational, leads to a tension. Either: (1) the distinction between loving and rational saints is justifiable; but then arguments against the benefits of sainthood ought to be directed independently against each kind of saint which, Wolf does not do; or (2) the distinction is not justifiable, in which case the division is explanatorily impotent. In section 2, I will present Wolf's argument for why one should not want to be a moral saint, nor even know one. I counter that Wolf over-emphasises non-moral values, to the point that these values have a monopoly on what constitutes a well-rounded life. Wolf must provide a more definitive scope for non-moral values, as the distinction between moral and non-moral values is ambiguous. Finally, I argue that moral saints can serve as moral exemplars and visionaries. By admiring and emulating them, we can adapt our own moral behavior, and by example, moral saints can discover new and better ways of pursuing moral goods.

KEYWORDS   Moral saints; moral visionaries; exemplars; non-moral values; moral motivation

RESUMO   Defendo a importância contínua e a atração dos santos morais. O objetivo deste artigo é duplo: em primeiro lugar, criticar a definição de santidade de Wolf e, em segundo lugar, argumentar contra a sua opinião de que não se deve desejar ser um santo moral, nem imitá-lo. Na secção 1, defendo que os santos morais são agentes morais altamente complexos e que a definição de Wolf não capta essa complexidade. O meu segundo argumento é que a afirmação de Wolf de que existem dois tipos de santos, amorosos e racionais, conduz a um dilema. Ou: (1) a distinção entre santos amorosos e racionais é justificável; mas nesse caso os argumentos contra os benefícios da santidade devem ser dirigidos independentemente contra cada tipo de santo, o que Wolf não faz; ou (2) a distinção não é justificável, caso em que a divisão é explicatoriamente impotente. Na secção 2, apresentarei o argumento de Wolf para explicar por que razão não se deve querer ser um santo moral, nem sequer conhecer um. Contraponho que Wolf dá demasiada importância aos valores não-mo-

rais, ao ponto de estes terem o monopólio do que constitui uma vida completa. Wolf tem de fornecer um âmbito mais definitivo para os valores não-morais, uma vez que a distinção entre valores morais e não-morais é ambígua. Por último, defendo que os santos morais podem servir como exemplos e visionários morais. Admirando-os e emulando-os, podemos adaptar o nosso próprio comportamento moral e, através do exemplo, os santos morais podem descobrir novas e melhores formas de perseguir os bens morais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE   Santos morais; Visionários morais; Modelo/Exemplo; valores não-morais; motivação moral

Imagine there are people in the world who are truly saintly; otherwise ordinary folk who are exemplarily moral and accomplish extraordinary moral feats. Sometimes these people go beyond even what one might expect morality requires of them, thereby entailing high costs for themselves. One might well refer to such people as 'moral saints'. The possibility of moral saints primes certain questions: How are they constituted? How are they motivated? How do they behave? What does their existence entail for other moral agents? The answers to these questions can change the way one thinks about morality. I do not know whether there are any moral saints, but I would be glad if there are, and if I, or those about whom I care most, admire them.

Modern (and secular) discussion of moral saints began with J. O. Urmson's article 'Saints and Heroes' (1958; 214), wherein he postulated that moral saints are people who engage in supererogation, which broadly means: morally doing more than is due or expected.[1] The most influential account of moral saints since Urmson is Susan Wolf's 1982 article 'Moral Saints', in which Wolf claims we should neither wish to be, nor know, these moral agents. Wolf proposes her own definition of a 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" (Wolf 1982; 419), and claims that they are unappealing because they are lacking in non-moral virtues. I will critique Susan Wolf's claims from 'Moral Saints', and defend the continuing importance, and attraction of, moral saints. The objective of this paper is twofold; firstly, to provide a new analysis of Wolf's definition of sainthood, and secondly, to counter her view that one should not desire to be a moral saint, nor emulate them. In section one, I will begin by arguing that moral saints are complex moral agents, and that Wolf's definition does not adequately encompass this complexity. I then

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1   See also Gregory Mellema (1991; 3).

claim that Wolf's account that there are two kinds of saints, loving and rational, leads to a tension; either: (a) the distinction between loving and rational saints is justifiable, but then arguments against the benefits of sainthood ought to be directed independently against each kind of saint; or (b) the distinction is not justifiable, in which case the division is explanatorily impotent and the arguments against saints misses the mark. In section two, I will present Wolf's argument for why one should not want to be a moral saint, nor know one. I will show that Wolf over-emphasizes the importance of non-moral values, to the point that they have a monopoly on what constitutes a well-rounded life. Wolf ought to provide a more definitive scope for non-moral values, as the distinction between moral and non-moral on her account is ambiguous. Finally, I argue that moral saints can serve as moral exemplars, and visionaries. Specifically, moral saints can discover new and better ways of pursuing moral goods, and by admiring and emulating them we can change our own moral behavior for the better.

1   Defining Moral Sainthood

Why revisit Wolf's moral saints? One might find such a question strange, as though one needs special motivations to engage with Aristotle's *Categories or* Gottlob Frege's *Sinn und Bedeutung*. And yet the question remains: 'Why are moral saints back on the agenda?' Especially as talk of saints and sainthood has become unfashionable, even anachronistic. The simple answer is that so long as there are moral agents there is a need to moralise. Additionally, we live in a time, like all times, facing peculiar moral threats and complications. For instance, I suggest that one particularly acute issue we face is the moral landscape of globalization: an increasing interconnectedness between peoples, economies, environments, and ideas. For good or ill, the earth has globalized; local threats have become global threats, local solutions have become global solutions, and vice versa. Arguably, there is an increase in the efficaciousness of individual moral decisions, and the scale of the moral consequences of these decisions. Judith Lichtenberg in 'Negative Duties, Positive Duties, and the "New Harms"' suggests that for a moral agent to feel primarily responsible for the harm they have caused (through commission or omission), their action must be: 1) sufficient without any *novus actus interveniens*, that is there is no new action or event that

causes a disjunct between the consequence and the original action; and 2) generally near and immediate (Lichtenberg 2010; 4). Globalization has brought once geographic, economic and politically distant harms within our purview, making conditions (1) and (2) more readily satisfiable. I suggest that moral saints have a universal interest, and a renewed, and continued role to play in response to renewed and continued harms. So should we want moral saints in our lives? Contrary to Wolf's claim, I suggest the answer is a resounding

'Yes'!

What exactly constitutes moral sainthood? Is it the consequences of a moral agent's actions, is it their virtues, or is it their strict adherence to moral duties? Once we have criteria, we must determine how we judge moral saints and distinguish them from other moral agents. I suggest that this is a difficult task, and the account provided by Wolf is ambiguous and therefore insufficient. By explicating these details, I will enhance our understanding of what constitutes moral sainthood.

In 'Moral Saints', Wolf begins by asking one to consider the question: has one ever met someone who is a moral saint? Someone who embodies all the moral virtues, and who always seems to take the right course of action? If one answers in the affirmative, one might wonder why that person is so, well, saintly. Is it what they do or what motivates them? Maybe it is what their character is like? Maybe they want to be a good person and do the right thing, or maybe they feel compelled to do what is right, regardless of what they desire to do? Wolf posits that a moral saint is equated with "moral perfection", someone she defines as "a person whose every action is as good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be" (Wolf 1982; 419). Additionally, she claims that our commonsense, pre-theoretical 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" (Wolf 1982; 420). This broad definition strikes me as prima facie satisfactory, but there is in fact an important distinction between "a person whose every action is as good as possible", and "a person who is as morally worthy as can be". The distinction is important, because there may be a disconnect between good motives and good actions; between good or virtuous character and the consequentialist performance of good actions. I want to draw out this distinction by analyzing the role of moral motivation in relation to sainthood.

1.1 Two Kinds of Saints

Wolf subdivides her broad definition into two different kinds of moral saint: *loving*, and *rational.* Wolf says a utilitarian would be attracted to the *loving saint*, a saint who's own well-being is satisfied in the well-being of others (Wolf 1982; 427). The *loving saint* aids others because their happiness "would truly lie in the happiness of others, and so [they] would devote [themselves] to others gladly, with a whole and open heart" (Wolf 1982; 420). Additionally, the loving intentions of this saint are certainly morally worthy.

Wolf connects the *rational saint* with the characteristics of the Kantian ideal: someone who retains some non-moral – perhaps even selfish – motivations and desires, but whom, out of duty, does not act on them. The *rational saint* "sacrifices his own interests to the interests of others, and feels the sacrifice as such" (Wolf 1982; 420). The *rational saint* seems to be "a person whose every action is as good as possible," regardless of how worthy their motivations are. Now, Wolf acknowledges that the rational saint and the loving saint present two quite distinct pictures of moral motivation, but she thinks their "public personalities" would be similar (Wolf 1982; 421). Indeed, in much of Wolf's argument for the claim that moral saints are unattractive – which we will address in section two – she does not reference the distinction between *loving* and *rational* saints at all. She leaves these definitions behind to address some kind of generic or combinatory moral saint. I will explicate the distinction, and thereby show that Wolf's definition of moral saint is unsatisfactory.

Here is my formulation of Wolf's division of moral saints:

1. There are two kinds of moral saint, *S*: a *loving saint (LS)*, and a *rational saint (RS).*
2. *LS* and *RS* are constituted by distinct motivations: *LS'* actions are motivated by *lovingness*, such as altruism, *L*, and *RS'* actions are motivated by *rational* duty, *R*.

Firstly, Wolf's definition oversimplifies complex moral agents. Secondly, I think if there is such a distinction between loving and rational saints, then Wolf is mistaken to level her argument that saints are unappealing, against a hybrid of both kinds of saints, because although some criticisms might apply to both kinds, others are necessarily connected to

the specific motivation and actions of the independent kind. For these two reasons, Wolf faces a problem, either: (a) the distinction between loving and rational saints is justifiable, but then arguments against the benefits of sainthood ought to be directed independently against each kind of saint; or (b) the sharp distinction is not apt, in which case the division is explanatorily impotent.

This problem can be formulated as:

3. *S* can be motivated by both *L* and *R*. Therefore, arguments should address one kind of moral saint that is both *LS* and *RS*;

or

4. *S* is primarily motivated by either *L*, or *R*. Therefore, arguments should address two kinds of moral saint separately: *LS* or *RS* (where the disjunction is exclusive).

Premises (1) and (2) are the foundations of Wolf's theory, so we will take them as given. Of course, one might challenge this division; see LaFollette (1996), Frankfurt (1999), Solomon (2002), and Willigenburg (2005) for analysis of the relationship between rationality and reasons for loving. For our purposes, what is important is what conclusions follow from the premises.

Wolf's account presumes a hybrid of (3) and (4), but the account faces a tension: either one ought to focus their arguments against one kind of moral saint with two moral motivations or against different kinds of moral saints with different primary motivations.

1.2 *Against Two Distinct Kinds of Saints*

We will begin our analysis by arguing for conclusion (3). According to (3), it seems plausible for a single moral agent, *S*, to possess both loving and rational motivations. For example, *S* might work at a homeless shelter because they have motivation L, they enjoy feeding the hungry, and R, because they feel a duty to sacrifice an evening at the theatre so that a vulnerable person might satiate their hunger. In this scenario, it is not plausible to say there is a single motivation that defines *S*. However, perhaps we could show that one motivation overrides the other? We might ask *S*: 'Why did you volunteer at the homeless shelter instead of attending the theatre?' but they could respond: 'It was my duty to give up a few hours of pleasure to help the needy *and* volunteering is pleasurable in its own way'. In this

case, we might not be able to show that motivation L overrides R, or vice versa.[2] This is presuming said motivations are even scrutable to the agent.

Here are three reasons why it is difficult to prove there is a primary motivation. Firstly, if *S* themselves is not aware of one motivation being more salient then the other, then any division of an agent into either *LS* or *RS* sounds like a case of forcing the agent into an ideal category to fit one's theory, instead of the more appropriate approach of employing the theory to analyse real, non-ideal, and complex, moral agents. As Vanessa Carbonell (2009; 396) argues in 'What Moral Saints Look Like':

> 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.

Secondly, *S* may in fact enjoy working at the homeless shelter because they enjoy fulfilling moral duties, R, or they may feel it is a moral duty to enjoy charity, L. So, we can appreciate how they may not be aware of their own motivations.[3] In both cases, it is difficult to demonstrate a single, overriding motivation. Indeed, L and R motivations might be interconnected, or even symbiotically motivate one another; *S* may begin attending the shelter because R, but a few months later decide they no longer have a duty, but continue their charity because L. Finally, if the consequences of both kinds of motivation are identical, we should consider why we should care about the distinction at all. The homeless are being fed, regardless of which motivation is overriding, so maybe Wolf is unable to motivate this distinction in the first instance. Whether *S* is *LS* or *RS* is not an important factor for one to decide if moral saints are problematic if the motivation does not affect the outcome. Indeed, why should we decide whether *S* is *LS* or *RS* in order to accept or reject the importance of moral saints? Wolf does not provide reasons. For these three reasons therefore, it is plausible that there is no single, overriding moral motivation. Likely, *S* can have many motivations, differing in kind, to varying degrees. This means we have good reason to

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2   By way of example, in *On Jones' 'Practical Dualism'*, Brad Hooker discusses E. E. Constance Jones' idea that there are 'two supreme principles of human action, both of which we are under a "manifest obligation" to obey' (Hooker 2015; 64). One is the principle of 'rational benevolence' (equal concern for the good of all) and the other is the principle of 'rational self-love' (concern for oneself). However, Jones argues that 'Rational Benevolence implies or includes the Rationality of Self-Love' (Hooker 2015; 72).

3   This touches upon the nature of belief and its connection with motivations and action. See Williams (1973), Dennett (1978), Quine (1995), Papineau (2012), Crane (2013), Hawthorne, Rothschild and Spectre (2016), Quilty-Dunn and Mandelbaum (2018), and Pietrazewski and Wertz (2021).

treat moral agents as constituted by both L and R per (3), in which case Wolf's distinction is explanatorily impotent. However, we will now address counter-arguments that favour conclusion (4). If a distinction in motivations does entail a meaningful consequence for moral sainthood, then there is a valid reason to distinguish between two kinds of saint.

1.3 For Two Distinct Kinds of Saints

Perhaps it is the case that one type of moral motivation is dominant, such that we ought to divide moral saints into two kinds, per (4). However, if so, then Wolf is wrong to elide the two kinds in her denunciation of a single definition of moral sainthood, or she needs to explicitly explain how the distinction is relevant in her argumentation. Recall our two kinds of saint: *LS* is committed to moral supererogation for loving, L, reasons: altruism, concern for their fellow persons, and so on; *RS* is equally committed to moral supererogation, but their motivation is due to a rational, dutiful commitment to the idea of morality, R. In 'The Moral Problem', Michael Smith (1994) presents a relevant argument in his case against moral externalism that will draw forth this distinction. Smith claims that moral internalists are committed to a *de re* desire to be moral, but moral externalists are committed to a *de dicto* desire to be moral. He claims that an agent, such as one with R motivations, cares 'non-derivatively' about morality because they are committed to a *de dicto* desire to be moral: their motivation is only about doing what one believes is right, for instance remaining faithful to one's spouse as a general rule, not about the object of morality, such as remaining faithful to the person that is one's spouse, and keeping faith with that actual person. Smith claims that to be motivated in this way constitutes "a fetish or moral vice" (Smith 1994; 71-76). He suggests that *de dicto* motivation "alienates [the agent] from the ends at which morality properly aims" (Smith 1994; 76).

Leaving aside the moral internalism/externalism debate, we can still employ Smith's claim to show there is a real distinction in motivations.

One might expect the actions of a moral fetishist to be the same as a moral saint – Wolf does – but both kinds of moral saint cannot share these alleged negative qualities of the moral fetishist. Consider the claim:

(M) *S* desires to φ because to φ is to do what is morally right.

M is ambiguous between meaning:

> Ma: '*S* desires to φ because to φ is to altruistically help others'; and
> Mb: '*S* desires to φ because to φ is to do whatever morality demands'.

We can pair L motivations of *LS* with Ma, and R motivations of *RS* with Mb. The idea, borrowing from Smith, is that the motivation in Ma seems more saintly than Mb, because *LS* is motivated by the more admirable virtue of altruism. In Mb, *RS'* motivations appear less noble, perhaps even self-centred, because they desire to do whatever they happen to think is demanded by their sense of 'right', not by the moral consequences. So, the only motivation that remains is the one of being a good person. Of course, this may beg the question by suggesting altruism is a better kind of moral good, but we can still appreciate Smith's claim that RS' actions fetishize the moral idea over the moral act in Mb, because their motivation is not about the morality of the action. On this account, *RS* appears to be a person unhealthily obsessed with morality; they obsess over it to the detriment of every other kind of concern. Thus, we can dub *RS* a 'moral fetishist', as their motivation is allegedly misguided or pathological: we might think they are motivated in the wrong way.[4] Again, *LS* and *RS* come apart.

Not only does *RS'* motivation in Mb appear markedly different from *LS'* in Ma, but there is a second difficulty: R motivations as construed in Mb may not only be misguided, but might entail immoral behaviour. *RS* might encounter difficulty depending on what moral duty they expect is required of them; they are committed to undertaking an act they deem to be a moral duty, even if it is the wrong thing to do. For example, Brian McElwee (2016) in 'Demandingness Objections In Ethics' argues that moral demands of a theory, and objections to them, are not always clear.

He gives an example called *Saturday Afternoon* that demonstrates how moral theories can sometimes demand the wrong kind of things from an agent. McElwee asks us to "suppose some moral theory claims that I have a moral obligation to spend Saturday afternoon assaulting as many innocent strangers as I can". He suggests we should counter this 'moral' requirement by saying it is the wrong kind of demand (McElwee

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4   This is of course a contentious claim. See for example Kennett and Fine (2009) where they argue that people with autism have a Kantian morality.

2016; 4). On a Ma account, *LS* can easily say that this is the wrong kind of φ because the consequences are reprehensible, and they cannot altruistically justify it. However, if *RS* thinks this φ is morally required à la Mb, they might find themselves assaulting strangers, despite their misgivings. Of course, one agent certainly appears saintlier than the other in this scenario! If L and R motivations are sufficiently disconnected, which is the case considering Ma and Mb can result in conflicting behaviour, then we have evidence that there are two distinct moral motivations for moral saints. Further, these two kinds of motivation come apart in some scenarios. This is proof we ought to favour (4) over (3).

I have provided arguments in favour of both (3) and (4). On the one hand, L and R motivations are sufficiently distinct that we can imagine an *LS* being a moral saint and a *RS* being a moral fetishist when presented with the same scenario. On the other hand, it is not certain that moral saints possess *de dicto* moral motivation at the expense of a corresponding *de re* motivation. In our shelter example, *S* might still be unable to say if they are feeding the hungry because of Ma, or Mb. If *de dicto* or R motivations are not in all cases differentiable from *de re* or L motivations, then the two are not always mutually exclusive.

1.4 Moral Saints Defined By Motivation

I hold that both L and R can motivate *S*, and that how we regard *S*, as S alone, or as *LS* or *RS*, is contextual and must be judged on the particular case. If this is true, it weakens Wolf's argument. She claims that these two kinds of saints have distinct motivations, but states (Wolf 1982; 420-421):

> This difference would have limited effect on the saints' respective public personalities. The shared content of what these individuals are motivated to be – namely, as morally good as possible – would play the dominant role in the determination of their characters.

If this distinction is justifiable, then it is odd that Wolf has addressed criticism of moral saints against an elided definition. She ought instead to address each kind of saint separately, for what one might dislike about *RS* may not hold for *LS*, and vice versa. If the distinction is not justifiable, it is surprising that she draws attention

to it. I suggest that she does not explain why or how these distinct motivations play a role in her argument, so there is a missing premise in her argument.

2 Defending Moral Sainthood

2.1 Are Moral Saints Problematic?

The primary focus of 'Moral Saints' is the thesis that moral saints are unappealing because they cannot possess values that are not morally motivated, save by accident when the moral and non-moral correlate. For example, one might ask a moral saint if they enjoy reading a book, playing the oboe, telling jokes, or counting blades of grass. Wolf says they would respond with an emphatic 'No!' The only thing saints enjoy doing, is being moral. For some, like *RS*, they might not even enjoy that, but they do so regardless. Wolf claims that the goodness of the moral saints is so overwhelming that it crowds out any other considerations or values, what she calls 'non-moral' values, and this is (to put it bluntly) creepy (Wolf 1982; 421). Wolf introduces what she calls the "point of view of individual perfection" to justify the importance of these non-moral values (Wolf 1982; 437). On this view, judgements about what it would be good for an agent to do or be, are decided outside of the actual values, desires, and interests that agent currently possesses. These judgements are considered from an objective perspective – one that any rational agent can access – but unlike moral judgements, they are concerned only with the good of the individual (Wolf 1982; 436).

From the perspective of the point of view of individual perfection, one should assign significant worth to non-moral values. Allegedly, saints are lacking in these non-moral values, but they should possess them for their own good as individuals, despite the parallel pull of moral values. Without these non-moral values, so claims Wolf, one's character is underdeveloped, and their life is barren. As Wolf elegantly puts it (Wolf 1982; 421):

> The moral virtues, given that they are, by hypothesis, all present in the same individual, and to an extreme degree, are apt 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.

Consider Wolf's example. *S* is never witty, because being witty is amoral, not because it is particularly heinous, but because it is non-moral. *S* does not have time to spare telling jokes when they are feeding the hungry. Regardless, if *S* did happen to be witty, it would be the result of say a desire to entertain the miserable inhabitants at the homeless shelter. Thus, the only way for *S* to attain non-moral virtues or characteristics would be by treating non-moral values as a means to a moral end or adopting them via a "happy accident" (Wolf 1982; 425). Wolf thinks we should not want to be like this, or know people like this, because we do and should want to desire non-moral values too. *S*, she argues, should be able to tell a joke because it is fun, because they want to, and this independent, non-moral motivation is sufficient; non-moral values like being witty or cultured, are intrinsically good, independent of their moral worth. Of course, Wolf is not suggesting that everyone succumb to hedonism, but she is claiming that a life without any non-moral values is empty and shallow from the point of view of personal perfection, and therefore unattractive.[5]

We can appreciate why Wolf thinks that moral sainthood conflicts with ordinary, non-moral values, and why a moral saint is someone we want neither *to be* nor *be around*. Firstly, I think Wolf is wrong to claim that a moral saint cannot be well-rounded. Secondly, even if one would not want to be one, one should still appreciate that there are moral saints, for just because one might fear a life that is not well-rounded, it does not necessitate that others ought to feel likewise.

2.2 *Moral Saints Are Not Problematic*

Is Wolf correct that moral saints are not as well-rounded or developed as they should be? It is true that a moral saint is unlikely to be a football star or a famous chef because they spend too much time on charity – as is a non-moral saint – but these are not the only ways to be a well-rounded or developed person. First, before we counter Wolf's claim, we must address the concern that Wolf's argument targets a single definition of moral sainthood. As we have shown, on Wolf's own account, there may be *RS* and *LS*. Therefore, what might be a criticism of one may not be so for the other. For instance, the moral saint Wolf is arguing against treats morality in exactly the way that we might classify as a moral fetish. The kind of *S* Wolf describes

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5   We might draw a distinction between Wolf's non-moral values and what Donald Bruckner (2016) calls "quirky desires" which are desires whose moral or non-moral value is not as readily evident, for example the desire to count blades of grass. Sharon Street (2009) calls agents who possess such desires "ideally coherent eccentrics".

in her arguments is motivated not by L, or *de re* goods, but by R, or *de dicto* goods. Perhaps if all *S* were *RS* (and Smith is correct that R motivations are a moral fetish or vice), then Wolf's argument might be more compelling. However, for Wolf to direct her argument against only *RS* is to attack a strawman. Wolf should either explicitly state that RS are unappealing for distinct reasons to *LS*, or she should acknowledge that *S* can be motivated by a combination of L and R, and critique this more flexible, realistic definition. After all, these are her distinctions. Until then, her claim that moral saints fetishize morality to the detriment of non-moral values falls flat.

Wolf's argument still retains a general appeal. Like Bernard Williams, she says the problem arises because, according to moral theories, non-moral values are subsumed by moral ones; other values are only worthwhile insofar as they contribute to moral values (Williams 1981). As discussed earlier, Wolf says non-moral values are independently desirable, and we have justifiable non-moral reasons for our motivations and actions.[6] Therefore, we ought to give up the idea that it is always better to be morally better (Williams 1981). However, I read Wolf as over-emphasising non-moral values, to the point that they have a monopoly on what is defined as enjoyable, and constitutive of a well-rounded life. She says moral saints lack the ability to live well-rounded lives, to "enjoy the enjoyable in life" (Wolf 1982; 424). As she discusses in more recent work, such as her article 'Loving Attention: Lessons in Love From The Philadelphia Story', in her anthology *Understanding Love*, it is any "unconditional" commitment to morality that poses a problem for our relationships, or, indeed, any project we might have.

Yet, what reason does she have to say that reading a book alone is more enjoyable than reading it to another, or that fidelity and honesty makes one an uninteresting spouse? *S* might live a life dedicated to the welfare of others, where they travel the world housing the homeless, teaching children to read, and telling jokes while treating the infirm. Wolf appeals to intuition by stating that these lives are barren because they are lacking in non-moral value, but the opposite intuition is equally available, that is to say, a life with less non-moral values but overflowing with moral values, is far from barren. Indeed, it is flourishing. While I wish to avoid swapping intuitions, I must address Wolf's claim here. Firstly, if these lives are barren, then Wolf is presented with the challenge of how she can define the scope of moral and non-moral values

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6   For instance, David Sobel (2007; 16) thinks that dedicating time to projects is not a moral consideration but belongs to a different realm of our lives. Alternatively, one might deny that there is any realm of life that is beyond the moral.

with her intuitionism. For example, it might be the case, according to her reasoning, that what I deem to be a well-rounded moral life is barren of personal interests, but a well-rounded immoral life with a surplus of non-moral values is flourishing. This conclusion seems repugnant as Wolf is conceding too much to non-moral values. Secondly, the *S* life I just described above seems objectively exciting and flourishing: travelling, exploring, meeting new people, and pushing oneself to their intellectual and physical limits, perhaps even saving lives. This is far from barren. Indeed, it sounds healthy, well-rounded, and engenders a richly developed character that is always striving to find new ways to live a better life. Potentially, this life is more appealing than one where an agent drinks, fornicates, gambles, plays the oboe, and counts blades of grass to their heart's content. Unless Wolf can provide a more definitive scope of non-moral values, then we cannot appeal to them as the arbiters for what constitutes a well-rounded life. Of course, we cannot deny that the life of *S* also involves great sacrifice and difficulties. Travel is of course only one rare side-effect of sharing abject poverty. I am not denying the difficulty of the moral life, I am only claiming that we should not suppose that Wolf's non-moral values trump moral values. My claim is less ambitious than Wolf's, because I am not committed to her strict definition of what constitutes an enjoyable or good life. The example of *S* living an exciting and moral life shows that: (1) at the least, non-moral values are not always better than moral values, so we should not deter people from choosing to favour the moral options; and (2) the possibility that moral values can trump non-moral values, remains. Thus, Wolf is mistaken to presume her characterization of a well-rounded and richly developed life is the correct one, because she arbitrarily distinguishes between what is a moral value, and what is not. If it is not arbitrary, then she does not provide enough explanation or criteria for it.

Not only has Wolf argued against an insufficient account of *S* and proposed a narrow definition of what constitutes an appealing, well-rounded life, but many of the attributes that Wolf claims are not applicable to *S*, might actually contribute to sainthood. For instance, *S'* being aware that they can dedicate n more hours in a day to feeding the hungry at the shelter does not necessarily make them a fanatic. *S* is simply more aware that the cost of losing a few hours of sleep, not reading that novel for a day, and missing happy-hour, is insignificant compared with saving lives. Even if we are to rank moral virtues with non-moral virtues, it might be the case that being someone who can sleep less, drink less, and build an orphanage,

is actually more fascinating than being someone who can play the oboe and count blades of grass exceptionally well; so the moral values might overcome the non-moral. This realistic attitude of *S*, that there is injustice and poverty in the world that needs addressing, is not only a moral value, but a nonmoral value as well. Wolf argues that "a person may be perfectly wonderful without being perfectly moral" (Wolf 1982; 436). Of course, but the realism of *S*, and the amazing things they achieve, makes them more well-rounded, and more interesting than Wolf's self-indulgent pessimist who tells existential jokes and enjoys Marx Brothers films (Wolf 1982; 422). One might be perfectly wonderful while being perfectly moral. Wolf holds firm however, that these non-moral traits possessed by scholars, athletes, and artists, "cannot be superimposed upon the ideal of a moral saint" (Wolf 1982; 422). Apparently, the tenacity of *S* in the face of stark reality makes them admirable, but not as "cool" as Paul Newman! (Wolf 1982; 423). I concede that it is conceivable that there may be non-moral values that a moral saint cannot ever possess. However, Wolf has not argued successfully for why it is cooler to be well-rested, play the oboe, and behave like Paul Newman, than it is to save a life or stand firm in the face of coercion. I suggest that *S* satisfies the conditions for moral sainthood, and also serves as an "unequivocally compelling personal ideal". This leaves us wondering why any of us would want to prioritise non-moral traits, especially where the moral and non-moral traits are measurably equal, except as a kind of ad hoc demandingness objection to the demands of morality, i.e. as an argument against adhering to the given moral theory on account that the moral demands require too much of the subject.[7]

The life of a moral saint does not entail all the costs Wolf claims it does; it does not prevent the cultivation of many non-moral values, and it may even contribute to them. Therefore, Wolf's claim that one should not want to be a moral saint is not compelling.

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7   Drawing upon Matthew Braddock (2013; 170) I contend that the so-called 'demandingness objection' is better characterized as a genus of objections. In earlier work I specifically refer to a demandingness objection like Wolf's, that moral values overwhelm non-moral or amoral values, as *the demandingness objection from confusion of the spheres* (the name is inspired by Genia Schönbaumsfeld (2007; 35) drawing upon arguments made by Søren Kierkegaard under the nom de plume of Johannes Climacus in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments* (1846)). The definition is:

> Moral view *V* is too demanding as it mistakenly demands too much from the non-moral or amoral sphere of human existence.

In other words, when we entreat for less demanding moral duties, it is because we feel that bearing the required cost demands too much from the non-moral or amoral realms of our lives. See David Sobel (2007) for arguments that demandingness objections are impotent, Brian McElwee (2016) for counter-arguments in their favour, and Tim Mulgan (2009; 201-202) for an argument that meeting the demands of morality would infringe upon the Basic Liberty Intuition; that people should be able to decide for themselves whether or not they ought to φ.

2.3 *Moral Saints Are Exemplars*

Wolf's argument contained two claims; that we should not want *to be* a moral saint, and that we should not even want to be around moral saints. Perhaps we can concede that moral sainthood is not something we would wish upon ourselves because it is not a universal personal ideal. Yet it may be a desirable social ideal. Moral saints enhance *moral conceivability* by envisioning new ideas and behaviours that aid in gauging what is morally required, and *moral actionability* by demonstrating what is morally possible. I wish to revivify the notion of the moral saint as moral exemplar, both necromancing sainthood as a philosophical issue, and to revive its application to applied philosophy. Virtue theorist Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski claims that a comprehensive moral theory can be constructed by identifying "moral exemplars" and investigating their psychological constitution (Zagzebski 2017).[8] In her *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, exemplars are identified through the emotion of admiration. They are persons whom, upon reflection, we admire. They are persons who, when we are asked how we ought to behave, we point to and say: "like that". Zagzebski uses the Direct Reference Theory of semantics developed by Hilary Putnam and Saul Kripke to show that a moral theory can be built upon non-conceptual foundations. According to Direct Reference Theory, knowing the meaning of a word that picks out an object does not necessitate an adequate description of the object being referred to (unlike in Descriptivism) (Zagzebski 2017; 196). Appealing to this theory, Zagzebski claims that we identify the morally exemplary, and moral exemplars, directly through the pre-theoretical emotion of admiration (Zagzebski 2017; 25-26).[9] By applying Exemplarist Moral Theory to moral saints, we can understand that saints are not the kind of people one should want to avoid, but the kinds of people one admires. We admire them because they can do things most agents cannot; they can prioritize moral values over non-moral values - the very thing Wolf finds so off-putting. This admiration is important because Exemplarist Moral Theory shows us that moral saints can motivate other agents to become better. Indeed, Zagzebski claims that defining moral terms in reference to exemplars, "can serve as a psychological force to motivate

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8   Zagzebski is not the first philosopher to discuss exemplars, however her theory provides a helpful, analytic approach. See also Aquinas (1975, 2012), Bowman (1975), Shanley (2008), and Doolan (2011), for other accounts.

9   Interestingly, Zagzebski (2017; 11) herself notes that her account of morality runs against Wolf's claims.

persons to act on their duty" (Zagzebski 2017; 25-26). Even if, sometimes, one might not enjoy having moral saints around because they bore us, or make us feel guilty, at other times one finds them inspirational. Certainly, if one was trapped in a burning building, one would be elated that they were saved by a heroic moral saint, regardless of whether she was R motivated or L motivated, boring, or even the world's worst oboist. Nearby witnesses may also feel like they can do morally more in their own lives too. Maybe they can be braver when others are in need in the future. Consider a simple example:

> You are sitting in a carriage on the J train when an amputee comes along asking for a donation. Sadly, this is a common occurrence, so you might reflexively let them pass you by without a thought, or a donation. This may be perfectly justifiable; you may need the 10 dollars in your pocket for food, or perhaps oboe lessons. The next evening a similar incident occurs, but this time a woman next to you donates 20 dollars. This primes you to donate your 10 dollars, perhaps from admiration, perhaps from shame or guilt, perhaps from unreflective reflex. The presence of this person, who is in this context behaving in a saintlier manner than you, has helped you become a better person, morally speaking.

Maybe this example is quaint, but not uncommon. We need not delve into psychological studies and explanations to posit that one person behaving morally can inspire us to behave better. Aside from becoming a worse oboist, there is little lost by the donation in the above example. In such an instance, it does not matter whether the woman next to you is a bore and her life is far from flourishing - indeed you may never even share a word with her - you were a little more moral than you might have been that day. At least, admiration of a moral saint did no harm, and it probably engendered some good.

Exemplarist Moral Theory encounters criticisms that pertain to my claim that moral saints are exemplars and moral visionaries. Let us consider three counter-arguments against the value of moral exemplars from the literature that may be applicable to moral saints: i. evil exemplars; ii. moral saints are too noble; and iii. the perfect is the enemy of the good.

To begin, Alkis Kotsonis in 'Moral Exemplarism as a Powerful Indoctrinating Tool' (2021) argues that there are *evil exemplars*: evil agents that can manipulate the non-virtuous into admiring and emulating them and their ideals. He calls this the 'Achilles heel' of the moral

theory of exemplarism. Of course, any moral theory is open to abuse, and non-moral agents can mislead those in search of moral guidance. Kotsonis is also underestimating the ability of people to assess the moral ideals and values being encouraged by an exemplar. A lack of a safeguard against manipulation of exemplarism, however warranted, is not sufficient reason to reject all moral saints. Regardless, Kotsonis still believes that moral exemplarism is still of great value when used as an approach meant to complement moral theories, he simply rejects it as a standalone moral theory. Unlike Zagzebski, I am not advocating it as a standalone moral theory, but am advocating moral saints as moral visionaries and guides.

The second critique of moral saints and exemplars is that *moral saints are too noble*. Croce and Vaccarezza (2017) claim that some morals exemplars would not be admired and imitated by others precisely because they appear too virtuous and too distant from our everyday experience. Not only would such exemplars distract from simple moral achievements, but we might be led astray by vainly trying to emulate them. As Thomas, Archer, and Engelen (2019) unambiguously put it: "admiring moral exemplars can ruin your life". They claim that imagining oneself in the role of the exemplar may undermine one's ability to respond appropriately to ethical challenges, because we are not constituted as robustly as the exemplars. Croce and Vaccarezza (2017) argue that there is a distinction between the more realistic 'moral heroes' and unrealistic moral saints, and that we should look to heroes for guidance, but not the unparalleled saints.

I have two responses. Firstly: heroes and saints may differ in the feasibility of imitability of their exemplary traits, but this does not entail we should not wish that saints do not exist, nor that we should not wish to be like them. Saints may the measure by which we can determine what is feasibly imitable or not. Admiring a moral exemplar is not the same as 'imagining oneself in the exemplary role' of a saint. One might, for example, admire and seek to emulate Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, without thinking they are cut from the same cloth. Additionally, Niels van de Ven, Alfred Archer, and Bart Engelen (2019) have argued, based on three studies, that admiring a moral role model has been found to inspire people to become better persons themselves. Secondly, even if the moral hero is a superior moral exemplar, this does not undermine moral exemplars, nor even moral saints, it merely says there is a superior kind of person out there to

both whom we should wish to be or know. For these reasons, I think the argument is misdirected.

Relatedly, the third counter-argument is that *the perfect is the enemy of the good.* Immanuel Kant seems to think we should not use moral saints for inspiration as their virtuousness disables our own motivation. In "The Doctrine of the Method of Pure Practical Reason" in the *Critique of Practical Reason* he sternly says (Immanuel Kant 1997, trans. Gregor; 127-128):

> But I do wish that educators would spare their pupils examples of so-called noble (supermeritorious) actions[...] and would expose them all only to duty and to the worth that a human being can and must give himself in his own eyes by consciousness of not having transgressed it; for, whatever runs up into empty wishes and longings for inaccessible perfection produces mere heroes of romance who while they pride themselves on their feeling for extravagant greatness, release themselves in return from the observance of common and everyday obligation, which then seems to them insignificant and petty.

Kant of course has in mind here the cultivation of deontic duties, R motivation, but the argument applies more generally. He says that if we present children with examples of moral saints and moral perfection, then these lofty ideals will distort their reasoning. Perhaps they will neglect simple moral achievements and behaviour for ideals that are unattainable, thereby resulting in lower net goodness in the world (a strange Consequentio-Kantian motivation). And maybe they will make their own lives miserable without succeeding in improving others'. Moral sainthood, it would seem, is unrealistic, perhaps inaccessible, so to teach others to be like *S* or to aspire to be like them, distracts one from cultivating practical moral and non-moral duties. Summa summarum: the perfect is the enemy of the good.

2.4 Moral Saint, Meet Real Saint

These considerations do not provide enough counterweight to decide against the case for moral saints as exemplars. In the spirit of exemplarism, let us consider a case study. G. K. Chesterton wrote a commendable biography on a timeless moral exemplar, St. Francis of Assisi, who lived a flourishing life, envisioned new moral insights, and encouraged

the morally mundane to improve their quotidian behaviour and explore new ways of achieving the good.[10] These benefits far outweigh any of Wolf's, Kotsonis', van de Ven's, Thomas', Archer's and Engeln's, Croce's and Vaccarezza's, and Kant's qualms. We do not here have the room to do justice to Francis' life or Chesterton's retelling. However, in brief, in the first phase of his life, Francis was an adventurer who was universally admired for his charm, ability to inspire, and was beloved by all. His cup overflowed with non-moral values, so to speak. Then one day, following a vision, he gave away his fortune and committed himself to living a life of extreme poverty and service to the poor. Incidentally, in doing so he was quite rude to his father and very liberal with his father's property. Consequently, Francis was considered by many to be mad because he saw the world differently, and lived his life differently, to his contemporaries. Francis is an ideal candidate for a so-called moral fetishist: he *loved* 'sister poverty'. Yet not only would Francis have been a pleasure to have in one's life (as evidenced by contemporary praise and the sheer number of people who flocked to him and followed his path, even to this day) but his novel perspective and obsession with the moral allowed him to inspire others as an exemplar. Francis did not think that the perfect was the enemy of the good, but that the good was the pathway to the perfect. We would be better not to think of him being a fetishist because his moral urges aligned with said moral values, rather his fetish-like obsession with morality is the reason why people admire him. Indeed, the fact that Francis had these moral urges would be exactly why, on an Aristotelean virtue ethics account for instance, he is considered a moral person. He is virtuous because his desires align with the good, in the Aristotelean sense. Francis was, as Carbonell (who defends moral saints) would argue, an interesting person that one would like to know; not despite his moral obsession, but because of it![11]

I have chosen Francis as an archetype of an exemplar because he was saintly and inspired others to be saintly. Additionally, he opened peoples' eyes to new ways of doing good, to moral understanding and behaviours that theretofore had remained hidden. Francis was a troubadour: performers in the Provençal romantic tradition and adept at gymnastics. This

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10   History is replete with other examples, from the positive case of William Wilberforce to the negative case of a lack of exemplars, such as in the murder of Kitty Genovese in Queens in 1964.

11   Carbonell (2009) argues that by adding moral saints as plausible entities into the 'moral mix', that it raises the moral stakes for the rest of us.

manner of somersaulting and standing on his hands and seeing the world upside-down never left Francis (Chesterton 1987; 48-49):

> Francis, at the time or somewhere about the time when he disappeared into the prison or the dark cavern, underwent a reversal of a certain psychological kind ...The man who went into the cave was not the man who came out again...He looked at the world as differently from other men as if he had come out of that dark hole walking on his hands.

Francis went into his cave seeing the world like you and I, but fortunately for us he came out walking on his hands with a new perspective that challenged ordinary moral thinking, that rejected the priority of the non-moral. Francis' reversal of what we should value and how we ought to act is inspirational. So inspirational in fact, that an entire generation redirected their moral energies. Saints and exemplars see the world differently, and we would be foolish to dismiss this distinct moral outlook.

Chesterton was known as 'The Prince of Paradox', the reasons for which are apparent in this passage from *St. Francis of Assisi* that perfectly captures how saints can revolutionise moral thinking and moral action (Chesterton 1987; 51-52):

> If a man saw the world upside down, with all the trees and towers hanging head downwards as in a pool, one effect would be to emphasise the idea of dependence. There is a Latin and literal connection; for the very word dependence only means hanging. If St. Francis had seen, in one of his strange dreams, the town of Assisi upside down, it need not have differed in a single detail from itself except in being entirely the other way round. But the point is this: that whereas to the normal eye the large masonry of its walls or the massive foundations of its watchtowers and its high citadel would make it seem safer and more permanent, the moment it was turned over the very same weight would make it seem more helpless and more in peril. It is but a symbol; but it happens to fit the psychological fact. St. Francis might love his little town as much as before, or more than before; but the nature of the love would be altered even in being increased. He might see and love every tile on the steep roofs or every bird on the battlements; but he would see them all in a new and divine light of eternal danger and dependence. Instead of being merely proud of his strong city because it could not be moved, he would be thankful to God Almighty that it had not been dropped; he would

be thankful to God for not dropping the whole cosmos like a vast crystal to be shattered into falling stars.

This passage shows us that people, like societies, can become stuck in habitual ways of moralising that immobilizes moral progress or adaptivity. Sometimes we need moral saints and exemplars, to dig the dirt out from under our tyres and lay down some sturdy planks, in order to continue along our path or change directions, so to speak. Saints help us do this, they can look in at us from the outside, demonstrating not only that there is an outside, but that we can step out there with them: we can confess to infidelity, we can reduce consumption and prioritise creation, we can realise the true scope of our moral duties, we can even forgive the unforgivable. One might be grateful if someone today would come along and open all our eyes to the threat that we are awfully close to dropping the whole cosmos, or at least our planet Earth, like a vast crystal. At the very least, the thought of New York City balancing upon the spire of the Empire State Building may be anxiety-inducing enough to open our hearts and minds to new moral paradigms.

Wolf is concerned because these saints are strange, make us uncomfortable, and are boring, yet the excerpt above conveys a very different, and very exciting, story; a story about a man who was strange, did make others uncomfortable, and was also incomparably electrifying. It is interesting to note that not only did Francis inspire others (the charitable order of his namesake lives on to this day) but for Francis moral interests *just were* more exciting and compelling than non-moral interests. Why should he want to continue playing the lyre (or proto-oboe perhaps?) when he could chase a beggar through the streets of Assisi to hand him everything he had in his pockets, or travel to Egypt to broker a peace between crusader and jihadi? There are contemporary movements that in fact do value such moral visionaries and creative moral thinking, by discussing an individual's quantitative and qualitative ethical duties as revealed by saints and then strive to do the same. Effective Altruism is just one example. In 'Mountains Beyond Mountains' Tracy Kidder provides an example of a more contemporary, real-life moral saint: Paul Farmer, a doctor who dedicated his life to aiding the sick in Haiti (Kidder 2003). She explains in detail how Farmer lives a life that is morally exemplary, yet still personally satisfying. The non-moral is crowded out by the moral in Farmer's life, but that is exactly how Farmer would have it! Not only that, but this is precisely why Farmer is a memorable person. By adopting lives of sacri-

fice, moral saints – even those who fail to become such – not only inspire others, but also demonstrate what is, and what is not, morally possible. What we expect of ourselves and others depends on our justified beliefs about what is plausible, and moral visionaries can push these boundaries by showing us how we can be better by their success.[12] For instance, if an agent initially thought a moral feat was too demanding or costly, but a moral saint demonstrated that this was not the case, then exposure to this knowledge changes the justified beliefs of what is morally possible, and plausibly demanded of the agent (Singer 1972; Unger 1996). Moral saints are moral exemplars who, even if we would not wish to be one ourselves, we would want in our societies, to push the limits of moral thinking, and moral action. Perhaps a few would-be-saints will fall along the wayside or even be counter-productive; perhaps many good lives will be lost to boorishness, a lack of flourishing, and whatever exactly is the opposite of Wolf's 'well-roundedness'. And yet, maybe many people, who are already living cultivated, flourishing and joyful lives, will be inspired to assign a little more weight to moral values, and take some tentative steps in the direction of a more altruistic life. We might yet see many people discard roundedness for squareness, and declare in the words of Huey Lewis: 'It's hip to be square'.

3   Conclusion

We have seen that Wolf's arguments against moral sainthood are not compelling. Her definition of moral sainthood is ambiguous between two kinds, and it oversimplifies the idea of moral agents. Either the distinction between loving saints and rational saints holds, in which case Wolf's thesis is lacking in specificity, or there is no distinction, only saints, which undermines her definition. Wolf's argument that we should not want to be, or know, moral saints, is also unconvincing. She assigns too much weight to non-moral values, and neglects the role of moral values, in defining what constitutes a good life. Finally, I suggest Wolf ought to consider the role of moral saints as exemplars and visionaries who inspire other moral agents to be better, and trail-blaze new ways of understand-

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12   By way of evidence, Kwame Anthony Appiah's *The Honor Code* (2010) explores the concept of honour, and thereby analyzes how new moral concepts, and new perspectives on existing moral concepts, can spur change in a society, such as by demonstrating new moral possibilities.

ing moral intuitions, enacting moral theories and norms, and making the world a better place.[13]

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