

It Ain't Necessarilly So

To get into heaven

Don't snap for a seven

Live clean and don't have no fault!

O, I take this gospel

Whenever it's poss'ble

But with a little grain of salt!

(from Porgy and Bess, Aretha Franklin version)

Note: This is a 3000 word version of what will hopefully be a paper. PLEASE DO NOT CITE OR QUOTE without permission. I usually give a talk from my head first and write a draft later, so please forgive the roughness of this. My CHIMeta talk will be a 30 minute extemporaneous presentation of this line of thought. Great thanks to anyone reading through this and my apologies for not having more at this point).

There is a venerable view according to which virtue is the route to the good life. A somewhat less venerable but still very respectable view holds that *moral* virtue is the route to the good life. Some philosophers – Hursthouse is a central example – think the good life is the moral life with a modicum of good luck added. Hursthouse compares being morally virtuous to having healthy habits and the good life to physical health; one occasionally hears of a 100 years old woman from France who smoked all her life, but the best policy for a person who wants to be healthy is to follow the scientifically-backed advice on the subject. Similarly, Hursthouse, says,

one may occasionally meet a happy wicked person, but the best policy for reaching *eudaemonia* is being virtuous.

I do not know how many genuinely wicked – as in, the opposite of virtuous - people are happy or can be said to flourish, and, for the sake of the argument, am willing to assume that such flourishing villains are as rare as the smoking centenarian. I will assume – which seems empirically plausible – that serial killers have emotionally wretched lives, that the lives of most common criminals are nothing to write home about (or to wish upon one's children, or to recount with nostalgia when one is old). I will assume, more controversially but I think with some plausibility, that businesspeople and politicians who are corrupt to the bone are not flourishing either. But the topic of my talk is not these people, but all-too-human humans whom we would be disinclined to offer as examples of wickedness or moral vice but who are not known as moral paragons either – the category to which most of us philosophers belong. I would like to shift the burden of proof onto those who agree with the neo-Aristotelian position to the point of believing that people like that – everyhumans – always have overwhelming reason(s) to become more virtuous to the extent that they seek a good life, in the same way that they have reasons to exercise more to the extent that they seek physical health. Sometimes, I will argue, a morally ordinary life is made better than it would otherwise have been through the occasional mild-to-moderate wrongdoing, and this is a common enough occurrence that a disposition that does not allow any such wrongdoing can therefore be harmful to the quality of our lives.

I will, as I have said above, grant to the Neo-Aristotelian that severe wrongdoing or a downright bad character is “bad for you”, possibly barring a few outliers on the model of the smoking centenarian. I will also grant them, just for the sake of the argument, that morality does *not* require, for example, a radical life of effective altruism accompanied by veganism, nor does it require that we avoid CHillMeta because flying in airplanes is bad for the environment, etc, but is mostly compatible with a mostly ordinary first world, broadly middle class life. In a similar vein I will not discuss such situations as war, genocide, being a slave or being utterly destitute.

Another thing I will *not* do is argue that it is ever rational to be immoral: I will argue in defense of the narrower view that if your purpose is to flourish, morality is not always the royal road there. If this narrow view is correct, it is still possible that one always has an overwhelming reason to be moral – sometimes *at the expense* of one’s flourishing. I will not be an anti-Kantian here, just an anti-neo-Aristotelian.

Susan Wolf has argued in a great and influential article that being morally perfect does not make for a good life – not for most of us, anyway. I want to argue for a similar view, sometimes in similar ways, but my proposed view is different in two ways from Wolf’s – it is weaker in one way but stronger in another. First, I am not committed to the picture Wolf draws of the morally perfect person as boring and bland, as I will argue it is far from being obviously correct. For one, today’s world provides more interesting tasks for the morally perfect person than collecting money for charity, which admittedly does sound boring: one can, for example, run a civil rights movement, fight organized crime, help troubled youth get a

better life, topple a dictator, or save people from genocidal regimes, and people write books about the interesting lives of people who do these things. The idea that a moral saint will bend over backwards not to be offensive or insulting to anyone also strikes me as dubious; even Christianity, the source of the idea of turning the other cheek, presents us with the image of Jesus himself upsetting the tables of the moneylenders at the temple, presumably upsetting the lenders and their clients in the process. It is hard for me to imagine being morally perfect without offending people at least here and there, while blandness is often at the service of oppression or complicity. I used to say that Wolf has a caricature of the morally perfect person, but I suspect she occasionally slips into a picture of a churchgoing type who has less to do with moral perfection than a good caricature has with its object, as is seen in the fact that Wolf imagines the saint as potentially enjoying “Father Knows Best”. “Father Knows Best” is a sexist show and I am sure Wolf would agree that no morally perfect person would enjoy a sexist show – but her suburbanite (*Flanders*, as my students like to call him, inspired by Homer Simpson’s smug, churchgoing neighbor) would probably enjoy it. At any rate, I think the moral life is probably not a life of boredom nor of blandness nor even of what we call “being nice”.

But I would like to argue that life can also benefit from straying from morality, not merely from straying from the *Flanders* way.

Second, there is way in which my thesis is stronger than Wolf’s: Wolf’s saint is defined by her as someone who always takes the morally best course of action, and it is relatively easy to hold the view that such a life includes supererogatory actions, and to grant that a life of

supererogatory action is not for everyone. Perhaps for some people, or even for most people, life is best when one does not always take the available supererogatory course of action, or the *best* supererogatory course of action. As I mentioned earlier, one can grant Wolf (and Bernard Williams) that the kind of life that some regard as required by utilitarianism is too “demanding” for some or most or even all people. That is a plausible way to think of “not being a saint” as good for some people. I would like to argue for the goodness of “not being a saint” for a stronger sense (albeit a recognizable one in English) of “not being a saint”. I would like to argue that sometimes the quality of one’s life benefits not only from forgoing supererogatory or heroic courses of action but from actually *doing wrong*, albeit not doing the worst kind of wrong nor following a daily regiment of doing wrong.

My target, or the person to whom I would like to shift the burden of proof, is anyone who denies, for example, that the quality of one’s life can be improved by occasionally doing such things as fraudulently “calling in sick” because it is the only plausible way to miss a night working at Walmart, or, if one is wealthier, a boring and pointless administrative meeting, so that one can have a glorious day with a child on her birthday, or on the first day in a while in which she is not mad at one, or even to participate in an event (say, watch a game) that you are reasonably (and literally) likely tell your grandchildren about. On the darker end of the spectrum of wrongs I discuss, consider the person stuck in a soul-killing marriage with a partner who hasn’t done anything particularly wrong but who was very ill-chosen, and whether the life of such a person cannot be improved by having a romantic relationship with another person

that requires cheating on her spouse. Consider the very good second marriage that can emerge from such an illicit relationship. Not that I'm claiming to know any cases, but....

At this point in my discussion, two reactions usually emerge. First, we often have the gut-level reaction that prompts the suggestion that surely, there is *always* some way you can find to be with the child or attend the event without telling a lie, or a way to find your way into a good second marriage without first cheating on your spouse. However, it is unfair to react to trolley cases by asking the speaker if she can be sure there is no tree by the tracks that can be felled in order to stop the train. Sometimes, a person, or at least a person who is not a genius, cannot find a way to get out of the meeting without lying or getting fired, and sometimes the romance that can redeem a person's life insists on appearing in such circumstances that it's either an illicit beginning or none at all.

A second reaction involves a serious objection. Would it not be better, in such examples as these, if it were possible to benefit one's life in the described way without doing anything wrong? Wouldn't it be a better life if it didn't come at the cost of lying, say?

This thought is far from ad hoc. I recall that left-winged people in Israel used to maintain one damage Israel's occupation of certain territories is doing to Israel is the damage of making it an immoral place, or of making it harder for its Jewish citizens not to be immoral people. Agree or not with the specific example, the assumption – that twisting an agent's arm into being

immoral is a way of doing her damage, and hence that being immoral is regrettable for an agent – is not an unusual assumption.

I will grant the people in question that other things being equal, it's better if one is not immoral - enjoying your kid's birthday is better without having had to lie and so on. However, things are often far from equal. Perhaps, other things being equal, a life with an extra \$100,000 per annum will be better for one than a life at one's current salary, or, perhaps, other things being equal, a life with a live-in partner is better than a life with a long distance romantic relationship – and yet, all things considered, it is better for the person in question to be a philosopher and not a lawyer, even given that the job market will force her into a few years of long distance and the extra \$100,000 will never materialize. In a similar vein, it is best to have a great time with the child without having to lie, but it can still be true that if the available choices are an illicit day off with your child, no day off with your child at all, or unemployment, the illicit day is best.

So far, I have been mentioning cases in which a basic good – but one that goes well beyond survival - can be obtained through immoral action. I will mention a case or two more and argue such cases are common enough that for many people, at least, having a sort of character that is incompatible with ever acting in this kind of way would be detrimental to eudaemonia. I think it's hard to find a way that isn't ad hoc to claim that refraining from the bad action is always supererogatory in these cases.

I will also discuss a second type of cases, in a more Wolf-like vein. These cases involve actions of which no particular one is essential to providing a basic good but of which a good smattering “adds spice” to life and the absence of that smattering can result in terrible dullness. For example, Bertie Wooster recounts with great nostalgia how he and his friends back in good old Oxford used to steal helmets from policemen just to see if they can get away with it. A more contemporary pair of people I know who like to talk about their days in college still smile, their face lighting up, when they reminisce about having made cruel fun of a European teacher’s accent behind his back, which they inevitably proceed to do again when they reminisce. This kind of backwards looking contentment is supposed to be a mark of a life well-lived!. One could, and should, note that stealing a helmet from a cop is not stealing bread from the poor and that making fun of a European accent is not like mocking a member of an oppressed group, but neither strikes me as something a morally perfect person will do. Also in a Wolf-like vein, any crowd of philosophers include people who feel truly guilty for but cannot bring themselves to genuinely regret having occasionally taken a rare opportunity to make witty comments of great aesthetic merit – with the price of having hurt someone’s feelings. Again, I’m not talking about racist or sexist or homophobic comments, and yet, one does not need to agree with Wolf that a moral saint is never witty in order to agree that some kinds of sarcasm can be mean to the point that it is wrong to make them, and that life for some of us would be much more dull if our character was incompatible with doing such things here and there. Some such things seem to add flavor to life because of some pro-tanto wrong-making features they have. More often they add flavor to life because of morally neutral features they have, but in spite of some morally dubious ones.

A Hurthouse fan might at this point pose the question of why, if all of the above is true, we tell our children to be honest, charitable and so on rather than tell them to merely be mostly charitable or generally honest. I'm returning to Hursthouse here because she provides a memorable argument as to virtue being good for its possessor based on this fact – the fact that parents tell their children to be virtuous. The idea is that a parent tends to teach her child with an eye not to the parent's own benefit nor to the benefit of society at large but rather to the child's benefit. If parents tell their children to be virtuous the way they tell them to eat vegetables, perhaps that is a sign that virtue is regarded by them as good for the child, like eating her vegetables would be.

This is a powerful argument, but two things still make me doubt that it ultimately works. Well, two and a half. As the "half", I need to mention that I have heard parents – especially where I came from but also in America – tell their children to be good people but not to be "too good", because "sometimes you have to be a little selfish" or "nice guys finish last".

Many parents are very inconsistent in what they say. Parents tell their children, often through stories and poems, to always be honest and always be true. However, quite often not a very long time has to pass before they also tell the (sometimes confused) child such things as "tell them dad isn't home" or "tell them you weren't feeling well". Parents tell their children to be charitable and self-sacrificing, and yet, even very wealthy parents would quite often yell at a child who returns from pre-school having given away his coat to a less fortunate child (or, in places where kids are still allowed to walk a block by themselves, got his cloths dirty while

trying to help a poor stranger). If the child of natural virtue says something along the lines of “but you said it’s good to help the poor”, the parent might perhaps soften up, but she will still say something like “It’s complicated. You’ll understand it when you grow up. Don’t do it again, OK?”. Most of us get somewhat confusing messages that way when we are children. Perhaps we would be better people if it were not the case!

Furthermore, the fact that parents tell their children “be good” or “be virtuous” does not imply that, given a proverbial button to press that would make the child a morally perfect person, they would confidently press it. Ordinary parental lecturing takes place within a context, a context in which everyone knows that children will not in fact do what their parents tell them to do but, *at best*, will follow an average between the behavior the parents preach and the behavior the parents display. “Do as I say, not as I do” is not usually something that happens. Almost by definition, the average mother or father does not display, demonstrate, or model perfect virtue. As children imitate more than they obey, the preaching parent is not really in “danger” of creating a saint. Imagine what a lot of parents will do if they had that button, and thus faced the prospect of having their child become Nelson Mandela. Some would be delighted, but many would be downright scared, or just worry that they will have too little to talk with him about.

I have said that my intention is not to argue against metaethical views such as “morality trumps other oughts” or other views beyond eudaemonism, but I also intend to raise a methodological worry that can crop up in various meta-ethical contexts. Discussions in defense of neo-

Aristotelianism tend to pose the “wicked” as a contrast to the virtuous. Even though Hursthouse holds that ethicists and metaethicists place too much emphasis on a purported need to convince wicked people to act morally, and proposes teaching in a parental context as a more productive situation to discuss, wickedness is still the only alternative to virtue that she discusses. What isn’t discussed is the condition of being morally average, or being between semi-virtuous and semi-wicked. Empirical studies show that that some category like that, almost absent from philosophical discussion, is pretty salient to non-philosophers: many people who are not philosophers say that they want to be no worse than their neighbors, average or decent people, and don’t aspire to be saints or excellent people. Hursthouse does not consider the question of whether being her version of the *phronimos* is almost always better than being a morally average person, perhaps with some better-than-average nonmoral virtues or skills.

While the dramatic, fascinating figure of the *amoralist* or the *psychopath* has been a regular presence in metaethical discussion, not much discussion (the work of Svavarsdottir being one notable exception) has been devoted to the person who is significantly susceptible to moral motivation but only to an extent that allows him or her to commit the occasional morally wrong action, without the mediation of an impulse-control problem or a cognitive limitation. Such people are – if one is to trust their confessions and other appearances – all around us, and their real, apparent, or hypothetical existence should be taken into account in many discussions in which the amoralist is mentioned and discussed as only amorality can separate us from

perfect adherence to duty. The question “why be moral” means a lot more than “why not be amoral”. “Why not be semi-moral” is more urgent for many.