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A Defense of the Unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint

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IN this paper, I will offer a defense of unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood as a desirable moral paradigm. I will begin with an examination of the criticisms leveled at the ideal of unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood by Susan Wolf in her article “Moral Saints,” before offering a possible response to her objection that avoids the difficulties raised and reinforces the legitimacy of unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood as a desirable model for living. Unlike other critiques, which usually respond to Wolf’s claims by pointing to some individual in the world and using him or her as a counterexample to Wolf’s charges, such as Carbonell’s, I intend to respond to Wolf’s argument by directly addressing her central criticism.

In Section I, I will explain the necessary conceptual framework for our discussion. In Section II, I will present Wolf’s critique of unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood and explain how it challenges the notion. In Section III, I will offer my response in defense of the ideal and explain how this move avoids Wolf’s objection. In Section IV, I will consider a couple of objections that might be raised in response to my defense and propose ways they might be avoided to further elucidate my proposal. Finally, in Section V, I will conclude with some remarks on why unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood remains a desirable moral paradigm.

Section I: Conceptual Framework

In what follows, you will find a discussion of the background information and foundational knowledge needed for the purposes of this article. If you are comfortable with the philosophical ins-and-outs of either of the following subsections, then feel free to pass over them. On the other hand, if you need a refresher or are interacting with these ideas for the first time, then these sections should serve as a foundation for the rest of the article’s discussion.

Primer on Kantian Ethics

Ethical theories are designed to help individuals discern the morally correct course of action in any given situation, as well as evaluate the morality

of their own actions and those of others. “Kantian Ethics” in particular refers to a specific moral theory created by Immanuel Kant in the nineteenth century. Kant’s moral theory is a deontological theory of right action, which is a philosopher’s way of saying Kant’s ethical system is primarily concerned with the very nature of actions themselves when determining whether they are morally right or wrong (Vaughn 33 – 51). This is opposed to consequentialist theories of right action, such as Utilitarianism, which are primarily concerned with the consequences that actions bring about when judging their moral merits.

Kant’s ethics says an action is right if and only if: (1) it is motivated by the “Good Will,” and (2) it passes the demands of the “Categorical Imperative” (ibid). This means that an action has to be done only because it was the right thing to do, and we must be able to rationally will that everyone else in the world would be motivated in exactly the same way as us without contradiction or without no longer desiring to be part of that world. This is best illustrated with Kant’s classic example of judging whether we can be morally justified in making a lying promise.

To think like a Kantian about the morality of lying to someone to get a loan when you know full well you have no intention of paying the loan back, we must first ask whether we could rationally will that everyone else would also start making lying promises for personal gain with no intention. What would the world look like if *everyone* began lying to get loans? If we consider this for a moment, we’ll see that if everyone was lying to get loans they could not pay back, then we would never be able to get the loan we wanted in the first place. This is because everyone would know that we all lie to get loans with no intention of paying them back, and so no one would ever trust anyone else who promises to pay back a loan. Since we cannot universalize the motivation behind lying to get a loan without contradiction, we know that it is not a morally right action.

Let’s consider a few more real-life examples to further elucidate Kantian Ethics. First, imagine Shelly is a young firefighter responding to a house fire. She and her crew members successfully clear the occupants they can find before moving them a safe distance away, fearing the house will collapse in the blaze. As Shelly tries to usher them away, the mother begins frantically screaming that her husband did not have their daughter, Lucy, like she thought. Lucy must still be in her room upstairs. Without a thought, Shelly rushes back inside, but by now the blaze has damaged the integrity of the home and fallen debris has blocked the stairs. Shelly has done her best to find another way—trying everything from cutting through the debris to moving furniture to climb past—but is unsuccessful and eventually succumbs to the smoke. Shelly passes out without finding Lucy, and she is only pulled from the home by her crew moments before the home collapses. Did Shelly do the morally correct thing?

Kantian Ethics would say yes. Although Shelly did not actually save Lucy, she was motivated by Good Will (i.e. she attempted to save Lucy because it was the right thing to do) and her intentions could pass the Categorical Imperative (i.e. a world in which everyone tries their best to save others when they can is both desirable and non-contradictory).

Second, imagine Patel is jogging alongside a river one beautiful Saturday afternoon. The placid scene of the still water and silence of the forest is suddenly interrupted by screams for help. Patel quickens his pace to the source of the noise, where he finds the mayor of his town drowning in the lake, as he has apparently flipped his boat and cannot swim. Patel sees the opportunity to gain some favors and local fame, and so he decides to jump in and save the mayor. Patel easily recovers the older gentleman and helps him to shore just as the reporters arrive, lauding him as a local hero. Patel rises triumphantly from the water and meets his interviewers absolutely beaming with pride. Do we think that Patel did the morally right thing?

Kant would say no. Patel did not do anything wrong, but Patel also did not do anything right. The “hero” was *not* motivated to save the mayor because it was the right thing to do (i.e., Good Will), but instead because of the personal benefits of fame and political favors that it would grant him. This motivation—saving someone only when it might bring benefits—cannot pass the demands of the Categorical Imperative because it would result in a world we could not rationally desire to be part of as it would mean we, ourselves, could be left without aid in our most desperate hour.

Lastly, consider Maria. She volunteers at the local animal shelter every weekend because of the great joy it brings her. She loves spending time with the animals and being able to help them, so volunteering at the shelter comes easily to her. Is Maria acting morally?

Kant would say no. Like Patel, Maria did not do anything wrong, but she was not motivated to volunteer because it was the right thing to do. Rather, she was motivated to do so because she gained some personal enjoyment from the activity. If the whole world were motivated like Maria and chose to help others if it makes them feel good, then a variety of problems would follow, involving selective assistance (i.e., helping some but not others) and a fundamentally selfish morality.

In summary, Kantian Ethics is primarily concerned with the intention behind an action and whether that intention is acting out of respect for one’s duty to the moral law (i.e., the Good Will) and whether those same intentions could be hypothetically universalized without resulting in contradiction or undesirability (i.e., Categorical Imperative).

This was a very brief and rough overview of Kantian Ethics, but I think it will suffice for our purposes here.

Primer on Moral Saints

The notion of a “moral saint” refers to “a person whose every action is as morally good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be” (Wolf 200). In other words, a “moral saint” is someone who is morally perfect. There are moral saints found in many moral theories, such as Utilitarianism, Virtue Ethics, and Kantian Ethics, meaning that there are many different types of moral saints. The notion of “moral sainthood” refers to an individual achieving the requirements of the moral ideal by accomplishing moral perfection within the context of some particular ethical framework.

This means that a “Kantian Moral Saint” is morally perfect, like any other moral saint archetype (e.g., a Utilitarian Moral Saint), but within the

context of Kantian Ethics. The motivation for the Kantian Moral Saint's actions must arise out of respect for one's duty to the moral law, or "Good Will" (Kant 55). The motivation behind the action must also be able to be made into a general rule that could be rationally universalized; this is what it means to follow the "Categorical Imperative" (56 – 57). As Susan Wolf explains, in Kantian Moral Saint, "being morally worthy consists in always acting from maxims that one could will to be universal law," and that "moral action consists in treating other persons always as ends and never as means only" (Wolf 206). Furthermore, to be a Kantian Moral Saint, the motivation for these actions must arise "not out of any pathological desire but out of reverence for the moral law as such" (Wolf 206). To put it simply, a Kantian Moral Saint must be motivated by Good Will to act according to the Categorical Imperative—they must intend to act the way they could want others to act for no reason other than because they know it is the right thing to do.

Susan Wolf uses the term "unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood" to refer to one of two possible variations of the Kantian Moral Saint that she entertains in her article. Although the topic of this paper is limited to a defense of only the unrestricted version of Kantian Moral Sainthood, understanding the distinction between "unrestricted" and "restricted" Kantian Moral Sainthood will further elucidate our discussion. To this end, I will offer a quick explanation of both.

Restricted Kantian Moral Sainthood holds that moral perfection demands the individual lives out their duty to the moral law by simply refraining from actions that would violate the demands of the Categorical Imperative, such as murder, theft, and lying, in a negative sense of their duty towards others. Under this model, the attainment of moral sainthood would not be extremely difficult. As Wolf contends, for the restricted Kantian Moral Saint, "moral perfection would be achieved simply by unerring obedience to a limited set of side-constraints," such as "do not murder," "do not steal," and "do not lie"; such obedience "hardly requires bending over backwards" (206), because many of the prohibited behaviors are those that society tends to prohibit for other reasons.

Unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood, on the other hand, provides a much more robust and challenging ideal of sainthood, because it requires not only that one refrain from those actions prohibited by duty to the moral law, but it also sees duty to the moral law as a positive requirement that demands performing certain actions, for example going out of one's way to lend assistance, volunteer, and lend a sympathetic ear (Wolf 206). Again, the restricted form of Kantian Moral Sainthood demands only negative duties (i.e., prohibitions); the unrestricted form demands both negative and positive duties (i.e., obligations). Important to note is that these positive duties towards others are *unlimited* in scope as there is always more that can be done to help others (Wolf 206). The fact that unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood places this unlimited positive requirement on the aspirant is an important fact that is relevant both to Wolf's criticism and to my later defense.

My current project, then, is interested in offering a defense on behalf of the unrestricted form of Kantian Moral Sainthood, a notion which places both positive and negative requirements on aspirants to be motivated only in ways they could rationally desire that everyone else be identically motivated.

I pose this defense against certain critics who claim we should not want to be unrestricted Kantian Moral Saints in our own lives. I will spend little to no space considering the many other interesting forms of moral sainthood, as I think unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood is a particularly robust ideal that is also well-positioned to avoid the concerns Wolf raises.

Having now sufficiently examined the conceptual framework necessary for our discussion, let us move to examine Wolf's objection to unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood.

Section II: Wolf's Objection

I will begin with a brief sketch of the overall objection in the Presentation, before moving to explain its premises more thoroughly in the Explanation.

Presentation

1. The unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint lacks a healthy, well-rounded, and richly developed character. (1)
2. The unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint lacks non-moral character traits and virtues. (2)
3. The unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint lacks an appreciation for non-moral virtues and character traits. (3)
4. Those non-moral character traits and virtues, which the unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint lacks, are good qualities that we ought to praise and pursue. (4)
5. The attainment of unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood would produce very undesirable persons. (1), (2), (3), (4)
6. Unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood does not constitute a model of personal well-being toward which it would be rational, good, or desirable for an individual to strive. (5)
7. Therefore, unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint should not be pursued by all as an ideal. (6)

Explanation

Premise (1). The charge behind (1) stems from the fact that the unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint has an unlimited positive duty towards others. He or she has a duty "not only to allow others to pursue their ends, but to take up their ends as [his or her] own," and this duty is unlimited in the degree that it may dominate the unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint's life (Wolf 206). An unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint in the fullest sense would have to be constantly seeking to fulfill his or her obligation to the moral law by helping others achieve their permissible ends. At first glance, this idea might seem like a good thing, because it suggests a world full of people seeking only to help each other. However, this would leave little to no time for the Kantian Moral Saint to do anything else. The unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint would (or may) never read a good book, learn how to dance, catch a touchdown pass, cook a five-course meal, visit a historical site, take a hike

through the woods, or fall in love as a result of his or her all-consuming moral obligations. Although none of these aforementioned activities may seem *individually* necessary for a life well-lived, as Susan Wolf cautions, “a life in which *none* of these possible aspects of character are developed may seem to be a life strangely barren” (201).

Premise (2). For the same reasons as (1), unrestricted Kantian Moral Saints will be too focused on moral concerns to acquire non-moral virtues and character traits that are seen as worthwhile to most people, for example, proficiency in an art form or trade skill, developed musical talent, success in business, a refined taste for good food or drink, or a passion for learning, because they will be strictly, or at least primarily, engaged in pursuing their moral duties all the time. This charge resembles that of (1) except that, whereas (1) seeks to point out something that an unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint will be missing in the general sense: namely, a healthy, well-rounded, and richly developed character, (2) seeks to point out something that will be missing from the life of an unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint more specifically: namely, non-moral virtues and character traits. Because the unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint must be entirely consumed by his or her duties to the moral law, he or she will be limited to pursuing only moral perfection and nothing else. He or she would be forced to always favor doing the right thing for the sake of duty over having a good sense of humor, building meaningful friendships, developing a sense of artistic taste, learning new things, expanding cultural horizons, and the like. Although these non-moral virtues and character traits cannot be said to be *individually* necessary for a full life, it is doubtful that someone would choose to live a life without any of them.

Premise (3). Wolf’s third premise attacks the rationale behind the unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint’s motivations for valuing or condemning actions. As we have discussed, Kantian Moral Saints in any sense, “restricted” or “unrestricted,” must be motivated *only because* of their duty to the moral law in order to be considered Kantian Moral Saints. Because of this requirement, even if they were ever able to justify developing any of the lacking non-moral character traits or virtues by using them to fulfill their moral duties as a result of some unusual circumstances, they would only be able to do so if their motivation for the action was derived from their respect of the moral law as such or as a result of their obligations to respect the humanity in themselves or others.

To appreciate these non-moral virtues, talents, and aspirations only within a moral context, as the unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint must do, seems to miss the importance of these aspirations entirely. To explain the problem, Susan Wolf, borrowing a criticism from Bernard Williams, argues that such a rationale seems to be “one thought too many” (Williams 214). Rather than simply appreciating the development of worthwhile non-moral virtues or the pursuit of worthwhile non-moral activities for their own sakes, unrestricted Kantian Moral Saints would only be able to appreciate them inasmuch as they are the result of their motivation to fulfill their obligations to the moral law. For example, if an unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint was able to somehow justify pursuing his musical talents for moral reasons, perhaps

to put on benefit concerts for charity, then he would only be able to appreciate that talent as a means to do moral good and not as a worthwhile end in and of itself. To live in this way seems to miss out on the point of what is worthwhile about the non-moral aspects of life, an insight that Wolf uses to strengthen her criticisms against unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood.

Premise (4). Wolf's next premise strengthens the criticisms raised so far by positing that not only does the unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint lack a well-rounded character (1), non-moral virtues and character traits (2), and an appreciation for those non-moral virtues and character traits (3), but that these aspects, which the unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint lacks, are good things that are desirable and praiseworthy traits for an individual to have in and of themselves. Such an intuition is validated by common sense and everyday experience: there are famous painters, scientists, mathematicians, musicians, politicians, and professional athletes around the world who are far from moral saints, and yet the world holds their personal achievements and contributions to society in high regard. Furthermore, individuals often pursue such ends in their own lives as intrinsically valuable. The lack of such valuable traits in and of themselves within unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood does not bode well, Wolf argues, for the desirability of the ideal, but the lack of an *appreciation* for these traits is worse still. As she explains, "the fact that the moral saint would be without qualities which we have and which, indeed, we like to have, does not itself provide reason to condemn the ideal of the moral saint. The fact that some of these qualities are good qualities, however, and that they are qualities we *ought* to like, does provide reason to discourage this ideal" (Wolf 204).

Premise (5). Susan Wolf's next premise is simply the result of a conjunction of (1), (2), (3), and (4). Based upon the description so far of the kind of lifestyle that unrestricted Kantian Moral Saints would be required to have, and the kind of lifestyle that they would have to forego, and the kind of person that unrequired Kantian Moral Saints would be required to be and not to be, Wolf believes it is obvious that such an ideal would not produce desirable individuals.

Premise (6). The author's penultimate premise follows directly from (5). Since the ideal of the unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint would produce undesirable persons, Wolf argues that it would not make sense for anyone to pursue the ideal in his or her own life.

Premise (7). The conclusion of Wolf's objection follows most directly from premise (6). Since unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood does not constitute a model of personal well-being toward which it would be rational, good, or desirable for any individual to strive, Wolf concludes that it should not be pursued by all as a personal ideal.

Section III: My Defense

Having clearly presented and explained Susan Wolf's objection to unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood as a worthwhile and desirable moral paradigm towards which to strive, I will now offer my response in defense of the ideal. The way in which my response avoids Susan Wolf's objection

and reaffirms unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood as valuable and worthy of pursuit should become clear as we go. As in the previous explanation of Wolf's objection, I will begin with a general sketch of my overall defense in the Presentation, before moving to more precisely explore each step along the way in the Explanation.

Presentation

1. Unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood is impossible for individuals to achieve. (1)
2. The hypothetical, undesirable effects of attaining unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood cannot be used as evidence against the actual effects of its pursuit in the real world. (2)
3. Approximation towards unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood produces very desirable persons. (3)
4. Unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood does constitute a model of personal well-being toward which it would be rational, good, or desirable for an individual to strive. (4)
5. Therefore, unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood can be pursued by all as an ideal. (5)

Explanation

Premise (1). If you recall, the majority, if not all, of Susan Wolf's objection to the ideal of the unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint was built upon the notion that if someone were actually to attain it, that he or she would not represent a model lifestyle that it would be rational to aspire towards. However, I believe that the ideal of the unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint, given its infinite positive nature, is entirely impossible for any human being to ever achieve. Remember that there is always more that could be done in the positive sense of one's obligation to the moral law for an aspiring unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint—unless he or she has helped to satisfy the permissible ends of every human being he or she is in a position to help, then there still remains more that they could do to help others out of respect for their positive, imperfect duties to the moral law. Furthermore, if there is more that the aspiring unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint could do, then he or she is not truly an unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint yet. Since unrestricted Kantian Moral Saints have such limitless obligations to fulfill their positive, imperfect duties towards others, and because it would be impossible for any single individual to ever complete such a daunting task, it can safely be concluded that an unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint will never exist in the fullest sense in the actual world.

To further support this claim that unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood is impossible to achieve, consider that Kant himself speaks of virtue (which he understands as duty to the moral law) in an infinite sense. He argues that "virtue is an ideal which is unattainable" (Kant 1964, 17). However, Kant argues further that despite the impossibility of attaining true virtue, "our duty is constantly to approximate to it" (Kant 1964, 71). In other words, unrestricted

Kantian Moral Sainthood—attaining virtue by perfectly and constantly fulfilling our duties to the moral law in every respect—is impossible, but we are still obligated to try our best to achieve it at all times nonetheless.

Premise (2). My second premise posits that since unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood is impossible to achieve, the hypothetical, negative consequences, which Wolf claims would result from its attainment, cannot and should not be used as evidence against its legitimacy as a worthwhile and desirable ideal in the real world. Because the negative consequences of attaining true, unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood will never be actualized in the real world as a result of human limitation, these hypothetical consequences are irrelevant for assessment of the effects that pursuing the ideal would have in the real world.

Premise (3). Given that unrestricted Kantian Moral Saints cannot ever exist in the fullest sense, one must examine in what form they can exist, as individuals aspiring to or approximating towards unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood, in order to judge whether unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood stands up as a worthwhile personal ideal. Of course judging whether an individual is actually aspiring towards unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood at any given moment may well be impossible, as to do so would require knowledge of that individual's motivations to see whether he or she is acting strictly out of duty towards the moral law. However, it is easy to imagine what the lifestyle of someone approximating toward unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood would look like, even if his or her motivations remain a mystery, and so we must set the question of motivation aside for a moment to examine the kind of lifestyle an aspiring unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint would live in order to judge its desirability.

Those aspiring to unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood would be the kind of individuals who always try their best to treat others as they would like to be treated, not because the threat of eternal damnation or the promise of eternal bliss hangs in the balance, but simply because treating people with kindness and respect is the right thing to do. These individuals would attempt wholeheartedly to act always in such a way that they would will for their actions to become universal law. Approximating unrestricted Kantian Moral Saints would endeavor to never treat another human being merely as a means, but always as an end only. They would try to always live in such a way that respects the humanity both within themselves and also within others at all times and in all circumstances regardless of their relationship with that individual or their attitude that day.

It is important to note that approximating unrestricted Kantian Moral Saints would not be perfect. They would try their hardest to be perfect, and they would fully believe against all odds that perfection is possible, but given their human limitations they would undoubtedly fall short. This means that they would avoid the concerns raised by Wolf that the ideal of unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood would produce moral fanatics who lack a healthy, well-rounded, and richly developed character, because, despite the aspiring unrestricted Kantian Moral Saints' best efforts, they cannot escape their human nature, which will lead them to strive for and appreciate other non-moral pursuits for their own sakes, such as physical, intellectual,

interpersonal, social, political, or creative excellence, alongside of or in spite of their pursuit of their moral duties. This all too human failure—from the perspective of perfect, unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood—will result in people with a much more balanced and well-developed non-moral character who simultaneously maintain the most praiseworthy of moral goals.

It is important, also, to understand that although aspiring unrestricted Kantian Moral Saints would realize their own faults and limitations, they would not use them as an excuse to try anything but their hardest to be their best. They would pursue moral perfection unequivocally despite its impossibility and despite their own failures to achieve it in the past. They would work to become morally better every day, and they would never be satisfied with their current level of moral goodness, because the approximating unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint knows that there is always more that can be done both to improve themselves morally and to help others.

Given this picture of the aspiring unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint, I think many would agree that, despite the theoretical negative consequences that Wolf claims would result from achieving this ideal, the actual consequences of those approximating towards it in the real world are extremely beneficial and desirable nonetheless. No one could object to a world full of people consistently trying their best to be morally perfect, despite the impossibility of such a venture, alongside their other pursuits. If my description of the aspiring unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint is reasonable, then it follows that they represent a personal ideal that we could rationally encourage everyone to pursue.

Premise (4). This next premise follows from the previous premises. Just as with Wolf's objection, where theoretically undesirable results were enough to dismiss unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood as a theoretically worthwhile ideal, in my defense the desirable results of aspirants to the ideal in the real world are enough to reinforce unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood against any theoretical objections. In this way, unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood can once again be a moral paradigm that it is rational, good, and desirable to strive towards.

Premise (5). The conclusion of my defense follows most directly from premise (4). Since unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood is desirable to strive towards in the real world, as it produces desirable persons when approximated towards, but never reached, then it follows that this ideal is one that can be encouraged in the real world.

Section IV: Evaluating My Defense

Having clearly presented and explained my response to Wolf's objection in defense of the unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint as a worthwhile ideal, I will now examine a few objections that may be raised in response to my defense and offer responses to them to further strengthen my claims before concluding.

Kantian Consequentialism Objection

This first objection leveled at my defense's evaluation is the worthiness of a Kantian ideal based on the results that it produces within individuals and society. The objection claims that it seems to miss the entire point of Kant's philosophy—which cares nothing for results and only for intentions—to evaluate a Kantian moral ideology based upon its consequences, and to this objection I must submit. It is an unfortunate necessity that we must judge a Kantian ideal focused entirely on motivation and intention solely by the results that it produces, but I fear that there is no other way that evaluation could even take place. It would be impossible to objectively measure and evaluate the quality of an aspiring unrestricted Kantian Moral Saint's will in the actual world, because to do so would require perfect knowledge of the mind of another. Until the impossibility of such a venture changes, judging the desirability of unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood by looking to the kind of lifestyle it promotes and individuals it produces are our only options.

Another possible response to this objection is to point out that evaluating the worth of a personal ideal within a moral theory is not necessarily the same as evaluating the worth of that moral theory itself. Simply because Kant's moral theory does not value consequences is not sufficient reason to conclude that the value of living like a Kantian must also be judged without giving any weight to consequences. Judgments about the philosophical content of a theory and its actual results in the real world can be two very different types of judgments, and in this way it is not only necessary but worthwhile to judge a Kantian moral ideal based upon its consequences.

At any rate, this objection does little to damage the strength of my evaluation of the ideal—or of Wolf's evaluation for that matter—because the desirability of the persons the ideal produces is the only benchmark by which we can judge its merit.

Delusions of Grandeur Objection

This second objection is leveled against premise (3). It questions the desirability of persons living with the false belief that they can achieve unrestricted Kantian moral perfection. Recall that aspiring unrestricted Kantian Moral Saints must believe wholeheartedly that they can achieve the impossible requirements of the ideal, despite knowing this fact to be false, or else they will not be able to legitimately give their fullest effort towards pursuing the requirements of the ideal. This objection criticizes that fact and questions whether the ideal can remain valuable, regardless of its moral benefits, if it will undoubtedly produce individuals with false beliefs who are also fully aware of the beliefs' falsity.

In order to respond to this objection, I will first agree that having this false belief is necessary for aspiring unrestricted Kantian Moral Saints, but I will then argue that the ideal remains valuable despite this fact. Although the belief that one can achieve unrestricted Kantian moral perfection is obviously false, it can be used by individuals as motivation to try their hardest despite their inevitable failure, and that ability to motivate is what makes

the belief valuable despite its falsity. This distinction between the truth of a belief and its motivational benefits is one that is well known in epistemology. As Richard Feldman has argued, “there can be cases in which believing a proposition is beneficial, and thus perhaps prudentially rational or justified, but not epistemically rational,” and, furthermore, “perhaps some beliefs are morally justified when they add moral value to the world. But this has nothing much to do with epistemic rationality or justification” (Conee and Feldman 112). The epistemically unjustified belief that moral perfection can be achieved required of aspiring unrestricted Kantian Moral Saints, then, remains justified and valuable because of its practical and moral benefits, despite its obvious falsity. In this way, the objection can be avoided.

Section V: Conclusion

Having clearly presented and explained both Wolf’s criticism and my defense of unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood, and having responded to some objections to my defense, I believe that the ideal of unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood remains a worthwhile personal paradigm towards which it is desirable for people to strive. Despite the hypothetical negative consequences that Susan Wolf claims would result from its achievement, the ideal can safely be encouraged, because those negative consequences will never be realized. Furthermore, as individuals are trying their best to achieve the impossible requirements of the ideal without letting failure discourage them, they are also bringing out the best within themselves morally and producing a very valuable, constantly self-improving moral character.

Although Wolf was at first concerned that the ideal of unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood would produce undesirable moral fanatics consumed by their insatiable need to be morally perfect, I believe that my response has shown how in reality pursuing the ideal can only produce aspiring moral exemplars who take the call to moral perfection very seriously but, as a result of human limitations, cannot be overtaken by to an unhealthy extent. These individuals are far from perfect to be sure, but they would be a welcome improvement to the current state of affairs. Considering that there is no harm in trying to better ourselves morally by aspiring, but never achieving, unrestricted Kantian Moral Sainthood, I do not see how one could argue that we should not all attempt to do just that.



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