ADMIRABLE IMMORALITY AND ADMIRABLE IMPERFECTION*

THE belief that moral considerations override all other considerations is a central assumption of secular, post-Enlightenment, moral theory. Recently, several widely respected philosophers have questioned this assumption of the sovereignty of the moral good. One of the more interesting recent arguments in this regard involves the attempt to tap intuitions that support the existence of the phenomena of *admirable immorality* and *admirable moral imperfection*. Bernard Williams, Susan Wolf, and Michael Slote are all, to varying degrees, sympathetically disposed toward the alleged phenomena.[1]

My purpose in taking up the issues of admirable immorality and admirable imperfection is to force further reflection on this issue of the sovereignty of the moral good. Whereas I am skeptical of some of the arguments put forward for admirable immorality and sympathetic with those put forward for admirable imperfection, I think that reflection on both alleged phenomena is important. Such reflection, it seems to me, undermines the contentfulness, and therefore the interestingness, of the thesis that morality is supreme.

I. ADMIRABLE IMMORALITY

I begin with the case for admirable immorality. Slote distinguishes between a strong thesis and a weak thesis neither of which he intends to defend (79):

> *Strong thesis:* immoral behavior *as such* is sometimes admirable.
>
> *Weak thesis:* sometimes certain nonmoral features of immoral actions are admirable, as are some features of persons which are contingently associated with the commission of immoral acts.

The *strong thesis* is that some behavior is admirable precisely because it is immoral. Whereas this thesis is not worth defending be-

* I have benefited from comments on earlier drafts by Marcia Baron, Larry Blum, Burt Louden, Ruth Anna Putnam, Amelie O. Rorty, Michael Slote, Michael Stocker, and especially Ken Winkler.

[1] See Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck," in *Moral Luck* (New York: Cambridge, 1981); Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," this JOURNAL, LXXIX, 8 (August 1982): 419–439; Michael Slote, "Admirable Immorality," in *Goods and Virtues* (New York: Oxford, 1983). Philippa Foot's work, especially, "Morality and Art" (1970) reprinted in Ted Honderich and Myles Burnyeat, eds., *Philosophy as It Is* (New York: Penguin, 1979) and "Are Moral Considerations Overriding?" in *Virtues and Vices* (Berkeley: California UP, 1978) is another serious challenge to the overridingness thesis.

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cause it is patently false, the *weak thesis* is not worth defending because it is so obviously true. The courage involved in stealing the crown jewels may well arouse our admiration, but courage has an utterly contingent relation to jewel heists. It is part of the folk psychology of courage, after all, that courage is neither necessary nor sufficient for criminality, even though in combination with certain other traits and temptations, courage might increase the probability of criminal activity.

Slote's aim is to argue for an *intermediate thesis.*

> *Intermediate thesis:* sometimes certain admirable features of persons are "intrinsically connected" with immorality. Such features cannot be understood as merely contingently related to the immorality, and therefore cannot be admired without that admiration also accruing to or carrying over to the immorality.

The strategy is to find "cases that do *not* permit such a neat separation between what we admire and what is immoral" (79)—cases in which our admiration is caused by some feature of the persons involved, where the feature in question cannot be coherently admired independently of the immorality it gives rise to. Such cases, if they exist, are cases in which the immorality is implicated in our admiration because the admired feature is "intrinsically connected" to the immorality (84).

In some such cases our admiration may be strong enough to generate the conviction that the action that is "intrinsically connected" to the admired trait is acceptable, all things considered, even though the demands of morality have not been met. By implicating our reflective admiration in the immorality in this way, such cases, if they exist, help undermine the overridingness thesis.

I'll first describe the cases Slote thinks fit the bill and then explain why I think there are no cases that satisfy the *intermediate thesis.* My criticisms of the *intermediate thesis* are not intended, as will become clear, as a defense of the overridingness thesis. I too think that thesis is problematic.

> *Case 1:* Gauguin, in deep anguish, nonetheless decides to leave his family in order to pursue his artistic project in the South Pacific. (The example of course is Bernard Williams's.)

> *Case 2:* A father who believes that it is his duty to turn in criminals, nonetheless misleads the police as to the whereabouts of his criminal son.

> *Case 3:* Churchill, single-mindedly devoted to Nazi defeat, approves the fire bombing of Dresden (contrary to the conventions of war protecting civilian targets) in order to bring Germany to its knees.

Case 4: A reformist political leader, who believes that torture for political ends is categorically wrong, nonetheless tortures the ringleader of a terrorist group in order to get information about the location of a series of time-bombs that are set to go off around the capital. (The example is Michael Walzer's.)

In order to satisfy the *intermediate thesis* three things need to be established about each case: first, that immorality has occurred, second, that there is some trait of the agents that we admire, and third, that this trait is "intrinsically connected" to the immorality.

The first problem is that it is easy to imagine complex disagreements in all four cases about the admirability of the traits and about the immorality of the action. There will be some people who will feel no admiration in any of these cases, for example, those who are incapable of admiration where they believe there is immorality. Furthermore, among those who do feel admiration there will be a variety of causes and a variety of foci. For example, there will be those who see the cases of Gauguin and the reformist as cases of moral conflict, or just plain conflict between incompatible goods, and who see the decisions as admirable because they are heroic given the binds the agents are in. And there will be those who have a certain positive feeling regarding the outcomes of the stories, but whose positive feeling has nothing to do with admiration for Gauguin or the reformist. Such people are simply glad that paintings like "D'où Venons Nous . . . Que Sommes Nous . . . Où Allons Nous?" exist and that the bombs have not gone off. But these individuals would be just as glad if Gauguin's *oeuvre* had been produced by an artist who had never married and if the terrorists had been thwarted by a leader with a less rigid sense of what was permissible in situations where evil was unavoidable.[2]

But the most important point regarding admiration is that admiration for particular character traits is invariably conditional. We admire traits, such as artistic passion, patriotism, and parental devotion on the assumption that they are not excessive, on the assumption that they are moderated by other devotions and sensitivities within the psychological economy of a whole character. This means that it is always open to us to admire some trait in the abstract—on the assumption that it occurs to the right degree in a morally and otherwise well-modulated personality—but to find its particular instantiation in some person problematic.

[2] See Bernard Williams, *op. cit.*, and Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," in *Mortal Questions* (New York: Cambridge, 1979), for illuminating discussions of the way in which the fortuitously good consequences of morally questionable acts may arouse feelings of retrospective justification.

Furthermore, even if we agree that there is something (conditionally) admirable in these cases, similar complexities will arise in trying to establish that immorality has occurred. Moral theorists of a variety of denominations will be able to save all four situations from the immorality charge. Gauguin can be defended from perspectives that count self-realization as a centrally important moral goal. Most (but not all) consequentialists will find the story of the reformist heartwarming; and many virtue theorists will be able to accommodate the father straightforwardly—he has proper sensitivities to the domain-specificity of moral rules and to the particular domain of the particular virtue. The Churchill case is slightly tougher, but the situation still is ripe for some kind of utilitarian analysis. Churchill is, after all, trying to maximize narrow, i.e., Allied, utility. Alternatively, we can imagine a defense of both Churchill and the reformist which turns on the responsibility of government leaders to do everything in their power to protect the lives of their citizens. Such a defense will be open to contract theorists as well as to certain types of consequentialists (e.g., rule and motive utilitarians) and virtue theorists. The point is that there is an almost inexhaustible number of strategies on the basis of which to defend these cases from the immorality charge.

II. INTRINSIC CONNECTIONS

Keeping in mind that all four cases will evoke multifarious intuitions regarding both admirability and immorality, let us concentrate on the Gauguin case and assume what is surely correct, namely that some, perhaps many, will see Gauguin's desertion as immoral and his passionate devotion to his art as admirable.

What needs to be done in order to establish that the case so understood satisfies the *intermediate thesis* is to show that Gauguin's passionate devotion to his art is "intrinsically connected" to his act of desertion. My view is that even if there are cases that pass the admirability and the immorality parts of the test there are no cases where the admired trait is "intrinsically connected" to the immorality—at least not on any interesting interpretation of 'intrinsic connection'.

Slote is clear that something stronger is needed than cases where we admire people for "traits whose possession makes them *more likely* to act wrongly" (79; my italics). There are three senses of 'intrinsic connection' which might capture the sort of nonprobabilistic relation he is after. First, some particular trait (or motive or belief) might be necessary for some immoral action in the sense that the action would not have been the immoral action it was if that particular trait (or motive or belief) had not entered into its production. Call this *token-necessity*. The basic idea is the familiar one that the nature of a particu-

lar action is uniquely determined by the cluster of mental events that brings it about; and that, therefore, these mental events are necessarily constitutive of what action it is. Second, some trait might be necessary for some action not only in the sense that the trait was implicated in the actual causal etiology of that action, but in the sense that no token action of that type could occur without a token of that trait figuring in its production. Call this *type-necessity*. Third, possession of some trait might be *sufficient* for immorality.

It should be obvious that the last kind of "intrinsic connection" is a nonstarter. There simply are no character traits which, according to either folk psychology or scientific psychology, are sufficient to produce some specific type of immorality, say, family desertion, nor, for that matter, immorality of any, even unspecified, type. To be sure, there may be all sorts of interesting probabilistic connections between various traits and kinds of actions—generalizations about how complex interactions among systems of character traits, talents, beliefs, desires, and all sorts of features of the external world make immorality more or less probable. And there are undoubtedly some constellations of character traits, some personalities, that dramatically increase, in the ordinary run of things, the probability that a person with that constellation of traits will engage in immorality. But admiration for any specific character trait that figures in such generalizations will always be admiration for a trait, none of whose tokens is sufficient for immorality. This means that the trait, if it is worth admiring at all, can be prized independently of whatever immorality it is causally connected to. The required sense of 'intrinsic connection' therefore cannot be sufficiency.

Token-necessity looks like a more plausible candidate explication of 'intrinsic connection' since there are obvious examples of the relation. The trouble is that there are too many examples of it. Token-necessity is ubiquitous; some form of it is true of all actual(ized) actions. Every character trait or motive or belief that is causally important in bringing about a particular action is plausibly thought of as necessarily linked to that action and as partly constitutive of the kind of action it is. Token-necessity, therefore, cannot be the kind of "intrinsic connection" we are after. After all, the required relation is supposed to enable us to distinguish the connection between Gauguin's artistic passion and his desertion from the relation between the robber's daring and his crime. But Gauguin's passion has the same kind of actual causal connection to his desertion as the robber's daring has to his brazen jewel heist in broad daylight. If we look only at the actual causal relations that obtain, it is impossible to see any grounds for maintaining that the robber's daring can be

conceived independently of his immorality, whereas Gauguin's passion cannot be conceived independently of his.

The claim therefore must be that the connection between Gauguin's passion and his immorality is one of type-necessity; i.e., that Gauguin's passion (but not the robber's daring) belongs to a kind whose members have some necessary, lawlike link to immorality. It is important to pay attention to the way the types are individuated on both the trait and action side of the equation in order to evaluate this claim. But it seems to me that no mode of individuation will yield interesting type-necessary links. In the first place it is manifestly false that artistic passion is necessary for immorality as such. So the claim must be that artistic passion (of the right kind) is necessary for some particular kind of immorality, say, family desertion. But this too is manifestly false. Maybe the claim is that artistic passion is necessary for a particular kind of family desertion. But what kind? The only kind that comes to mind is the kind where the artist leaves his family because of his artistic passion. We are led to some such banal and unlawlike generalization as: artistic passion is necessary for the kinds of immorality caused by artistic passion.

Furthermore, identical logic applies to the allegedly distinct case of daring. Daring has no necessary link to immorality as such; nor does it have necessary relations to the type "daring crime," broadly construed. It is easy to imagine some such crimes being perpetrated by cowardly religious fanatics. The only cases where type-necessity obtains is where the crimes in question are those in which daring is actually causally implicated. Again the only remotely plausible type-necessity claim is dismally uninformative.

The same sort of argument applies to the other cases. The traits of parental devotion and single-minded devotion to a political cause do not to the best of my knowledge have any interesting type-necessary connections to action. Nor can I think of any traits (outside of very general traits like rationality) that do. However, even if it could be shown that some admirable character trait had some interesting necessary connection to immorality, we would still not have a case that satisfies the *intermediate thesis* as originally formulated. The reason is this: although type-necessary connections can be stated in nonstatistical form (no action of type A without a token of trait T), the actual causal relations between the trait and action-type will be probabilistic through and through. Indeed the probabilistic causal picture will, I suspect, invariably reveal two things: first, that the trait occurs a certain percentage of the time (typically high) without the immorality; second, that it is only in combination with lots of other traits, beliefs, desires, and real-world circumstances that immorality is highly proba-

ble. But these facts mean that the trait can always be "conceptually prised" from immorality—especially if we imagine it not interacting with these other variables that make the immorality likely.

In several places Slote suggests a somewhat different understanding of "intrinsic connection"—one that links certain traits to a tendency to immorality rather than to immorality itself. At one point, in speaking of Gauguin's passionate devotion to his art, he says that "it is criterial of having a passion that incompatible impulses, concerns, desires *tend* to give way to it" (82; my italics). In another place he claims that the trait of artistic passion, unlike traits such as daring, intelligence, and physical strength, is "inconceivable apart from the *tendency* to wrongdoing" (92; my italics). This claim is best interpreted as follows: some traits, e.g., artistic passion, great parental devotion, and political ambition, are sufficient for a tendency to immorality; other traits, e.g., daring, passion for horticulture, and athletic prowess, are not sufficient for such a tendency.

I'm not completely sure what to make of this move. It seems to me that whether a particular trait is sensibly thought of as grounding a tendency to wrongdoing will depend in large part on how it is described. Nevertheless, it seems implausible to think of garden-variety artistic passion, or, for that matter, passion for philosophy or science, as grounding a tendency for wrongdoing. If there is a temptation to think this way it may originate in a sense that there are interesting probabilistic connections between these passions and immorality. But if such connections do in fact exist (which I doubt), it seems more reasonable to think of them as due to the complex way the demands of artistic, philosophical, or scientific life typically interact with real-world moral demands, than to think of these garden-variety passions as sufficient for, or partly constituted by, a tendency to wrongdoing. Furthermore, even if there is a kind of artistic passion that can be thought of as grounding a tendency to wrongdoing, e.g., passion that is partly constituted by a conscious commitment not to let morality or anything else stand in one's way, its existence will not help win the *intermediate thesis*. The reason is simple: the ascription of admirability to this kind of passion will not be easily secured, and, even if it is, the fact remains that such tendencies are neither necessary nor sufficient for the kinds of immoral action we have been imagining.

In correspondence, Slote makes two interesting points. First, he suggests that if we focus less on the connection between character traits and action and more on the morality/immorality and admirability/unadmirability of the traits themselves, we will discover traits that are considered both admirable and morally objectionable quite independently of any connections they have to action. Second, and

relatedly, he suggests that a trait can be morally objectionable even if it never in fact leads to any wrongdoing.

Neither point helps the *intermediate thesis*. Although it is true that we apply the predicate pairs moral/immoral and admirable/unadmirable to traits considered in isolation, such ascriptions are best read as based on views we have about the typical causal relations the traits have with action and over-all personal bearing. This means that the claim that some trait is both admirable and immoral always needs to be analyzed in terms of its wider causal relations. To be sure, there will be traits—perhaps artistic passion is one of them—which will be implicated with some frequency both in activities we admire and in immoral activities (according to the lights of some moral conception or other). The wily spy has an admirable trait relative to his job description, but this very same trait, if it carries over to his family life and friendships, will quite possibly end up implicated in immorality. What is doubtful, however, is that the wider causal picture will reveal any traits that are "intrinsically connected" in any interesting way both to vicious activity and to admired activity.

With regard to the second point the same sort of response applies. There are, no doubt, some traits, just as Slote maintains, which are deemed morally objectionable but which never lead to immorality for some particular person. Because traits are a kind of disposition they will enter into interesting counterfactual generalizations of the following form: If an agent has traits $t_1 \cdots t_n$ and beliefs $b_1 \cdots b_n$ and desires $d_1 \cdots d_n$ and circumstances c obtain, then the probability of immorality will be high. Trait-tokens achieve the status of being considered morally problematic when they are insufficiently tempered by other traits and when the activating conditions in the belief-desire system and in the environment are easily and commonly satisfied. But such relations are irrevocably probabilistic and therefore can't help win the *intermediate thesis*. The important point remains. There are no examples of traits that cannot be admired independently of the specific immoral episodes in which one of their tokens is implicated.[3]

[3] In correspondence Alasdair MacIntyre makes the following interesting point: "It is not vicious traits as such which connect interestingly with commendable actions as such . . . The interesting contention is that certain *social roles* cannot be adequately filled unless they are filled by people with vicious or at least dubious traits and yet we require that these roles be filled and commend—even admire—some at least of the actions of those who fill them successfully. One example to which you allude is that of the spy. The relevant thesis is that in order to be successful in any outstanding way as a spy, one must develop traits of deviousness, cunning and deception which not only would be regarded as vicious if exhibited by others in everyday life, but which have to be developed by the successful spy to the point where he or she cannot escape exhibiting them in the rest of his or her life as well as in his or her spying. . . . [I]t is of course a contingent fact that spying of a certain kind requires the development of immoral

III. ADMIRABLE IMMORALITY AND OVERRIDINGNESS

Defense of admirable immorality, then, is not the way to undermine the thesis that morality is supreme. This does not mean, however, that the overridingness thesis emerges unscathed. Our discussion thus far provides some reason to wonder independently about that thesis. First, the intuition-pumping required to engage in such reflection as we have been engaged in reminds us just how much disagreement there is about the domain of the moral and about the order of goods and obligations, especially when we confront complex cases. Even when there is agreement that moral considerations reign supreme there may not be agreement about what the moral considerations are or how they are to be weighted, and this suggests that the overridingness thesis is not particularly contentful, action-guiding, or dispute-resolving. Second, even if Slote's cases are not cases that satisfy the *intermediate thesis,* they are cases in which a person's commitment to a particular project or goal leads him to reject the demands of morality as he or his community construes them. They are cases where, at least from the subjective point of view, the action was seen as immoral but as what had to be done. What should we say about cases where some agent or some community deems an action acceptable, all things considered, but acknowledges that the demands of morality have not been met? The fact remains that whether we admire Gauguin or not, many of us understand and accept him and his action.

This problem may be even clearer if we consider Gauguin's more ordinary contemporary counterpart. Most of us understand how a married person might come to recognize that she and her husband have grown apart, despite their good intentions and the seriousness with which they took their marriage vows. And we understand how this situation might be experienced as so intolerable that she sees no choice but to inform her contented and loyal husband that she intends to leave him. My impression (based on a small sample of philosophers' reactions) is that, regardless of whether one's sympathies are Kantian, utilitarian, contractarian, or virtue-theoretical, moral philosophers understand, tolerate, and appreciate that such an action might be necessary all things considered—not simply excusable, but acceptable.[4] If this is right it is important. The reason is this: every

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traits; and it is equally a contingent fact that successful spying is required for the victory of certain just causes. But the connection between the vicious trait and the admirable action is a *systematic* one in the case of this kind of social role." MacIntyre's insight, it seems to me, is fully compatible with my line of argument, since even systematic connections are not intrinsic in Slote's sense.

[4] See Marcia Baron, "On Admirable Immorality" (forthcoming) for an interesting discussion of the excuse/justification issue. Harry Frankfurt, "What We Care About,"

contemporary moral theory will see some salient moral considerations on the side of the wife's bearing up and abiding by her vows, and almost no moral theory will assign overriding weight to her misery. But if it is true that we will nonetheless accept, tolerate, and understand her decision to leave, despite the failure to meet the demands of morality, we have some prima facie evidence that the thesis of the sovereignty of the moral good is not as gripping as has been traditionally alleged. Some might think that this is not a moral issue at all. But that thoroughly modern move, although it is compatible with preserving the thesis of the sovereignty of the moral good, does so only at the price of dramatically restricting its range of applicability and thereby undermining it as well.

IV. ADMIRABLE IMPERFECTION

Some of the problems with the thesis of the sovereignty of the moral good can be brought out more clearly by examining a different thesis than the thesis that there is admirable immorality. This thesis is put forward by Susan Wolf in "Moral Saints." Wolf's argument proceeds as follows. First, she defines a "moral saint" as a "person whose every action is as morally good as possible." Second, she argues that both Kantian and utilitarian theories project ideals of such saints, respectively the ideals of the rational and the loving saint. Third, she has us imagine the demands of a life of moral sainthood:

> . . . above all, a moral saint must have and cultivate those qualities which are apt to allow him to treat others as justly and kindly as possible. He will have the standard moral virtues to a nonstandard degree. He will be patient, considerate, even-tempered, hospitable, charitable in thought as well as deed. He will be very reluctant to make negative judgments of other people. He will be careful not to favor some people over others on the basis of properties they could not help but have (421).

Wolf thinks that for such an individual the moral virtues "are apt to crowd out the nonmoral virtues, as well as many of the interests and personal characteristics that we generally think contribute to a healthy, well-rounded, richly developed character" (421). The claim is that the ideal of moral sainthood is, upon reflection, incompatible with our ideals of desirable personal lives. We admire, indeed we aspire to, the less than morally perfect. Wolf puts it this way: "a person may be *perfectly wonderful* without being *perfectly moral.*" Call this *admirable imperfection.*

Synthese, LIII, 2 (November 1982): 257–272, also advocates the view that we can sometimes be justified, not merely excused, in subordinating moral considerations to other considerations. See especially pp. 257–259.

The important idea is not merely that the ideals of morality cannot provide a comprehensive guide to the conduct of life, but that nonmoral ideals and projects may be in conflict with—and not just additional to—our moral ideals. We admire lives constituted by traits—loving to cook, study chemistry, or to play and follow sports—which are developed for nonmoral reasons and which obstruct satisfying the ideal(s) of moral sainthood. The obstructions can be temporal or conceptual. Someone with a passion for solving problems in neuroscience will, by virtue of pursuing that passion, have less time than she otherwise would have for "doing good." Someone with a deep-seated love and concern for his children will have conceptual trouble taking seriously the demands of impersonal morality when they conflict with his particular loyalties. He will have trouble, for example, appreciating the (alleged) moral weightiness of his decision to invest in his children's education rather than in some other activity that will make the worst-off marginally better off.[5] If one thinks that every situation is ripe for the production of moral good and if one views the production of moral good as an unconditional and overriding demand, then passions for neuroscience, sports, fine wine, music, and philosophy will be more than arguably frivolous. They will be positively pernicious.[6]

It is important for analytic purposes to distinguish between two possible overridingness theses: (1) the thesis of the overridingness of the *morally ideal* and (2) the thesis of overridingness of the *morally required.* The standard way around the view that there is something morally deficient about persons who do not seek to maximize the moral good in each and every act, and the way to avoid the otherwise inevitable conflicts that would result from adherence to both overridingness theses, is to create a concept of supererogation and make the production of the morally ideal an optional rather than an overriding demand.

The very idea of supererogation is predicated on the assumption that the moral good can almost always be advanced if we pay attention and care to make the effort. Having admitted this much, the trick is to

[5] See Andrew Oldenquist, "Loyalties" this JOURNAL, LXXIV, 4 (April 1982): 173–193; and Owen Flanagan and Jonathan Adler, "Impartiality and Particularity," *Social Research*, L, 3 (Autumn 1983): 576–596.

[6] This relates to the cases mentioned earlier where some constellation of character traits makes immorality more probable. If one takes the ideal of moral sainthood seriously, then any one of a large number of nonmoral commitments will obstruct achieving moral sainthood, and any large constellation of them will effectively preclude being good. See Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," this JOURNAL, LXIII, 14 (August 1976): 453–466, for more on overvaluing morality.

provide a principled rationale for making the production of certain kinds of good optional, while at the same time acknowledging their great moral worth. It is something of a mystery what exactly this principled rationale is—or to put it another way, it is something of a mystery how the thesis of the overridingness of the morally ideal falls so easily to our realistic attitudes about persons while the thesis of the overridingness of the morally required stands so imperiously over moral life. It is hard to imagine that the distinction between the two sets of considerations is so clear that it can support such radically different statuses for the two theses.

Although this distinction between what is required and what is ideal is notoriously hard to draw (and although we do wonder about people who never do more than what is required) some form of the distinction seems necessary to block a conception of morality that is so demanding that it precludes the acquisition of goods, the development of traits and talents, and the undertaking of projects which are, from some reasonable perspective, deemed desirable.[7] The talented student of the sitar who spends several hours a day practicing is doing something admirable, as well as developing an admirable trait. Whereas he violates no moral requirements by diligently practicing, he does what is less than morally ideal. He could after all be spending his time doing what Mother Theresa does.

It seems to me irrefutable that there are many admirable traits, talents, and projects that are incompatible with a life of moral sainthood so conceived. Even Robert Merrihew Adams, a critic of Wolf's views on sainthood, is committed to this conclusion.[8] Adams argues that our actual criteria for calling someone a "saint" are not based on the moral worthiness of his every *act*, but rather on his over-all worthiness as a person (the criteria for assessing this need to be spelled out more fully than Adams has yet done); and he insists that although a saint will "commonly have time for things that do not *have* to be done . . . Saintliness is not perfectionism" (396). In speaking of Albert Schweitzer, Adams reminds us that

> . . . in the midst of his humanitarian activities in Africa, he kept a piano and spent some time playing it . . . Very likely that time could have been employed in actions that would have been morally worthier, but that fact by itself surely has no tendency to disqualify Schweitzer from sainthood, in the sense in which people are actually counted as saints (396).

[7] See Frances Myrna Kamm, "Supererogation and Obligation" this JOURNAL, LXXXII, 3 (March 1985): 118–138; and Thomas Nagel, "Living Right and Living Well," from his forthcoming book *The View from Nowhere,* for interesting discussions of supererogation and obligation.

[8] "Saints," this JOURNAL, LXXXI, 7 (July 1984): 392–401.

Adams of course is right that our actual criteria for ascribing sainthood are realistic in just the way he suggests (indeed Kantians might plausibly argue that their moral saint, like the religious and virtue-theoretical saint and unlike the utilitarian moral saint, is realistic in the sense that he has no obligation to produce moral good in every act—only to be morally worthy over all). But the fact that our actual criteria are realistic helps support the important point: namely that the models of moral perfection Wolf describes are not all that attractive as ideals of persons. Although we understand the idea of moral sainthood it does not grip us. Most of us feel neither regret nor disappointment, even upon reflection, for not achieving or even aspiring to a life in which each act is a moral contribution. Both the depth and universality of this reaction undermine the view that the morally ideal is overriding.[9]

V. REALISM AND POINTS OF VIEW

One wonders whether, once we've rejected the thesis of the overridingness of the morally ideal, we can't also reject the thesis of the overridingness of the morally required. My own view is that we can. But not because the notion it expresses of more or less worth-while goods is unimportant, rather because qua philosophical thesis it lacks content and does little action-guiding or dispute-resolving work. This is not to deny that the most weighty reasons for action, all things considered, ought to be decisive; nor is it to deny that we learn to use the word 'moral' to refer to very weighty considerations. What I question is the usefulness of a philosophical thesis that tells us that whatever is morally required is overriding, in a cultural context in which there is widespread disagreement about what morality is, and thus about what is morally required. There are two plausible and allied lines of attack here: one by way of (Nagelian) points of view, the other by a direct attack on moral realism. Wolf prefers the former strategy; I prefer the latter.

Wolf suggests that one way to read the incompatibility between the morally ideal and the personally ideal is as a conflict between two competing points of view. The moral point of view involves the recognition "that one is just one person among others equally real and deserving of the good things in life" (436). The point of view of

[9] It might be argued that these points are irrelevant to the truth of the thesis of the overridingness of the morally ideal, since that thesis (like the thesis of the overridingness of the morally required) is simply a thesis about what is right and what ought to be done and carries no implications whatsoever about affective leftovers or about how high or low we have in fact set our moral sights. My reaction to this objection is that deep-seated and widespread feelings cannot be irrelevant to our considered judgments of morality—that a reasonable moral conception should not be deeply psychologically unrealizable.

individual perfection, on the other hand, presupposes the saliency of each person's particularity—the saliency of the kind of life it would be best for each of us qua individual to live. Whereas the moral point of view comes with pressure toward impartiality, the point of view of individual perfection comes with a built-in emphasis on each person's particularity (see Flanagan and Adler, *op. cit.*).

Our actual behavior, and our realistic attitudes (I wouldn't want to call them theories), indicate that we have gone some distance toward accommodating both points of view. We reject the thesis of the overridingness of the morally ideal because it fails to allow enough room for the development of nonmoral traits and talents. And we reject models of persons which do not make some accommodation to moral demands.

Once we have accepted the idea of competing and, at some level, incommensurable points of view, and have made this first accommodation, we have effectively rejected the thesis of the overridingness of the morally ideal. Furthermore, once we are motivated by the logic of points of view, it is not clear that we can avoid rejecting the thesis of the overridingness of the morally required as well. The move to points of view, after all, is predicated on the thesis that no perspective has sovereignty purely qua point of view. This is why Wolf says that when we take up the point of view of individual perfection "and ask how much it would be good for an individual to act from the moral point of view, we do not find an obvious answer . . . at any rate . . . the answer is not 'as much as possible' " (437).

Thomas Nagel puts the same point this way:

> Human beings are subject to moral and other motivational claims of very different kinds. This is because they are complex creatures who can view the world from many perspectives—individual, relational, impersonal, ideal, etc.—and each perspective presents a different set of claims. Conflict can exist within one of these sets, and it may be hard to resolve. But when conflict exists between them, the problem is still more difficult. Conflicts between personal and impersonal claims are ubiquitous. They cannot, in my view, be resolved by subsuming either of the points of view under the other, or both under a third ("The Fragmentation of Value," in *Mortal Questions, op. cit.*, p. 134).

The problem with both versions of the overridingness thesis now emerges. It is the utter incommensurability of the demands of the morally ideal with the demands of personal perfection, which makes us reject the doctrine of the overridingness of the morally ideal. Whereas this initial incommensurability is systematic, it is entirely

possible that we will continue to meet particular conflicts even after we've lowered our sights—conflicts between what is morally required and what is required from some other point of view. The problem is that, once both points of view have been put on the same level (this does not entail that all goods are at the same level), there is no longer any a priori answer—nor any answer based on the essential nature of persons or the social world—to the question of which set of requirements, which set of claims, is overriding.[10]

There is another strategy for undermining the overridingness thesis which is related to, but somewhat more direct than, the attack by way of competing points of view. This strategy involves a direct assault on moral realism. One attraction of this tactic is that it avoids one problem that the other tactic has. Although the motivation behind the whole idea of incommensurable, competing points of view with no a priori ordering among them is anti-foundationalistic, the points of view themselves are often described as if they were fixed in metaphysical stone. There is the subjective point of view, the objective point of view, the moral point of view, the point of view of individual perfection, and so on.

An idea seriously worth entertaining is that the points of view themselves change (both structurally and substantively) over time. Indeed some may even appear and disappear. When a particular point of view has the sort of integrity and stability such that it can be clearly characterized for a particular community, this tells us that there is consensus about a picture of the world and about how to use certain words; it does not necessarily tell us that we have uncovered some deep fact about the nature of subjectivity, or objectivity, or morality, or the ideals of individual perfection. One possibility is that things such as these have no nature.

Let me flesh out this idea. The belief in the sovereignty of the good, in the supremacy of moral considerations over all others, goes best over all with a certain kind of moral realism. If (1) the 'moral' picks out a well-behaved kind—a clearly discernible set of considerations with a clearly discernible order among them, and (2) if one prominent property of members of this kind is their sovereignty, their overriding importance relative to other kinds of consideration, then the idea that

[10] Although no one point of view automatically overrides any other because it is the point of view it is, it will undoubtedly be the case that, for any particular agent, there will be a set of considerations that, ceteris paribus, are usually considered overriding for him. These may well, depending on how the particular agent is socialized and how words are used in his community, fall under what is called "the moral point of view." But there is nothing necessary about this.

morality is supreme is plausible. There have been a wide variety of attempts to establish (1) and (2)—all unworkable.

The most implausible realist views are flagrantly essentialist and hold that the moral features of reality constitute a natural kind, or, alternatively, a nonnatural (platonic) kind. Adopting Hilary Putnam's terminology, I call such views *external realist.*[11] The trouble with "external realism" in ethics is this: even if it could be shown that 'the moral' picked out a natural kind, it is hard to see how (given what we know about natural kinds) this kind would have associated with it the required property of supreme importance. This problem is easier for the platonist or intuitionist to handle. He will tell us that he who has seen "the good" also appreciates (or experiences) its overriding importance. But the intuitionist or platonist will fail utterly to convince the uninitiated that there is a nonnatural kind called "the good" with this property.

What Alasdair MacIntyre calls "the project of the Enlightenment," the project that gave rise to both utilitarianism and Kantianism, also proceeded on realist assumptions.[12] The project was to provide a theory which specified the domain of the moral and which ordered goods and obligations within that domain in a way that gave rise to a general procedure for resolving moral issues. Neither Kantianism nor utilitarianism, however, needs to be read as presupposing "external realism," although the progenitors of both theories might have conceived of their projects that way. Indeed, in retrospect, the best way to understand both these theories is as promoting alternative visions of morality, alternative conceptions of where moral weightiness attaches rather than as revealing the moral order as God or nature carved it.

This way of looking at the project of the Enlightenment does not necessarily undermine all kinds of moral realism. 'The moral' might pick out a well-behaved kind, without picking out a natural or platonic kind. It is conceivable, after all, that 'the moral' might name a recognizable part of the world, in the way, say, Cubism, sonnets, Balinese cock-fighting rituals, contemporary Catholic funeral practices, and the 1986 IRS tax code do; and that there might be clear and determinate procedures for resolving moral issues in much the same way that there are procedures for producing cubist art, writing sonnets, declaring the winner in a cock fight, having a Catholic funeral, and computing one's income tax. 'The moral' might, in effect, desig-

[11] See *Reason, Truth and History* (New York: Cambridge, 1981).
[12] See *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University Press, 1981).

nate a theory-determined segment of reality, a homogeneous form of life and thought, without naming a natural or platonic kind.

Call this weaker view *internal realism.*[13] Internal realism in ethics would make both the domain of the moral and the question of whether (and how) morality was overriding relative to a particular moral theory, or more likely, a particular set of shared social practices. The sort of internal realism that could help a relativized version of the overridingness thesis is the type where 'the moral' picks out a well-behaved *and* overriding kind [that is, where (1) and (2) are satisfied] from the point of view of the adherents of some particular moral theory or from the point of view of some particular set of shared social practices.

Does internal ethical realism, so understood, obtain today? The most honest answer is, I think, "not really," and this is bad for the view that "the moral good" is sovereign, because it suggests that there is widespread disagreement about the nature and order of moral goods. But without agreement as to what the most weighty considerations are, the thesis that the most weighty considerations should serve as decisive reasons for action lacks substance—at least any more substance than is carried by the slogan that individuals should act according to their consciences.

Reflection on either contemporary social practice or philosophical theorizing both yield this answer. Take Kantianism and utilitarianism (not because these are the only currently available moral theories but only because they are the most worked over and widely discussed). The trouble with both these theories, and it is worth emphasizing, is that they are vague. As we saw in the earlier discussion of admirable immorality, Kantians and utilitarians are able to go any number of incompatible ways in picking out the morally salient features of reality and in ordering goods and obligations.[14] There are, for example,

[13] See Putnam, *op. cit.* It is commonly, and plausibly, argued that John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1971) articulates the theory of distributive justice as seen from the liberal point of view, but certainly not from every defensible point of view. Indeed Rawls himself is willing to admit that this is the case. On such a reading, Rawls's book is an internal-realist treatise on justice. But Rawls himself is a skeptic about internal realism (of the required kind) for a "theory of good." See, e.g., p. 448. I sketch an internal realist conception of moral objectivity in "Quinean Ethics," *Ethics*, XCIII, 1 (October 1982): 56–74.

[14] Samuel Scheffler admits that this is true of consequentialist theories, in his recent defense of them: "Different consequentialist theories, of course, incorporate different principles for ranking overall states of affairs, and hence embody different conceptions of what it is best to have happen in the world" [*The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Berkeley: California UP, 1982), p. 123].

Kantian and utilitarian arguments on both sides of the abortion controversy. The basic problem is one of giving action-guiding content to the abstract slogans that mark off the respective theories, of giving values to their respective theoretical variables—duty and happiness. To be sure, the utilitarian will tell us that we should seek to maximize the greatest good over all. But what utilitarians are eternally bickering about is what the goods are and how they are ordered. Kantians, meanwhile, will insist that we should meet our categorical obligations and that we must be willing to universalize the maxims that guide our actions. What Kantians have trouble doing is spelling out in a detailed and convincing way what our categorical obligations are (remember Kant's own implausible view regarding the obligation to tell the truth); and in placing non-question-begging limits on the degree to which the maxims we universalize can be fine-grained and contextually sensitive.

This last point is important. Either we keep the maxims that guide our actions at a very general, contextually insensitive level, in which case we may be led to such oddities as not being able to tell a small lie for a terribly important purpose; or we are allowed to universalize maxims that are as fine-grained and contextually sensitive as we want, in which case we can will whatever we please without any inconsistency whatsoever. But this problem of drawing the line on the level of grain of the maxims is just the problem of deciding what features of the world are morally relevant and in what ways. It is around just these issues that the deep disagreements characteristic of contemporary moral debate revolve.

But if there is widespread disagreement, of both an intertheoretical and an intratheoretical sort, about the nature of the moral domain and about the nature and order of goods and obligations, then there is good reason to think that the overridingness thesis, the belief in the sovereignty of the moral good, is itself a less contentful, interesting, and weighty thesis than we have been led to believe. Contemporary moral theories—be they utilitarian, Kantian, contractarian, or virtue-theoretical—radically underdetermine both the picking out of the morally salient features of reality and the solutions to particular moral problems. This is not to say that traditional moral theory has not made enormous contributions by giving voice to important aspects of moral life. It is just that each theory has elevated its favorite aspect to the status of the essence of morality.

The claim here is empirical.[15] The required kind of internal moral

[15] My diagnosis of the current situation is like MacIntyre's in *After Virtue*. MacIntyre, however, unlike me [and unlike Stuart Hampshire; see his *Morality and Conflict* (Cam-

realism was no doubt operative in the past, especially within certain homogeneous religious communities. It is simply not very plausible to think that such consensus exists today, even intratheoretically. This means that neither the morally salient features of reality nor the order among them is fixed with precision by any contemporary moral theory.

Ironically, the view I am suggesting receives support from Lawrence Kohlberg's program in moral psychology, a program that sees itself as supporting Kantianism over utilitarianism, utilitarianism over contract theories, and contract theories over virtue theories. Kohlberg's program has serious and, to my mind, insurmountable problems, but he has made two observations of note.[16] First, our culture is populated by individuals with widely divergent moral conceptions. Second, a particular moral conception ("stage," in Kohlberg's theory) cannot be typed according to the content of moral decisions it gives rise to but only by certain structural, largely stylistic, features of moral discourse.

The point I want to press in conclusion is simply this. If my over-all diagnosis is correct, then we have (at least recently) been addressing issues concerning the good life without any moral theory or principle (certainly any single one) doing much work. This suggests that we have been addressing such problems without the concept of "morality" itself being of much service, despite the ubiquity of the word 'moral'. What we have been doing, sometimes well and sometimes badly, is talking about the order of goods and obligations from a wide

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bridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1983)], is very worried that lack of moral consensus fosters a kind of chaos that the social fabric cannot tolerate. MacIntyre can be read, therefore, not as asking us to return to the right external-realist moral theory but rather to create a communal internal-realist theory. Michael Sandel in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge, 1982) has similar concerns about our lack of "constitutive community," but from a more liberal perspective. The issue of how important consensus is, is itself important (although I don't think that there is any deep, atemporal answer to whether and where it is important). One thing is certain: the more a culture is in the grip of a naive external realism the less it will be able to understand and therefore tolerate lack of consensus. See also Charles Taylor's "The Diversity of Goods" in Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (New York: Cambridge, 1982), for another diagnosis which sees a wide array of incommensurable, but defensible, moral perspectives operative in our culture.

[16] See my *The Science of the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press/Bradford Books, 1984), ch. 5; "Virtue, Sex, and Gender: Some Philosophical Reflections on the Moral Psychology Debate" and "Reply to Lawrence Kohlberg," both in *Ethics*, XCII, 3 (April 1982): 499–512 and 529–532; and Flanagan and Adler, *op. cit.* See also Kohlberg, "A Reply to Owen Flanagan and Some Comments on the Puka-Goodpaster Exchange," *Ethics*, XCII, 3 (April 1982): 513–528.

variety of perspectives—talking, that is, about actual and possible worlds and visions of human flourishing therein. This seems to me to be a good way, indeed the only way, to do things. Acknowledging this much may, if we are lucky, help break the grip of the view that, when things go well, it is because the actors involved understand the true nature of morality and its supreme importance; and that, conversely, when things go badly, it is because those involved lack such understanding. That view, I think, is based on the deeply mistaken view that morality has a nature that can be revealed by moral philosophy.

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BOOK REVIEW

Impartial Reason. STEPHEN DARWALL. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983. 261 p. $22.50.

If we can't ever rely on reason to be impartial in matters of thought and action, things are in a considerable mess. But this very large mess isn't Darwall's concern. He takes it that there are some impartial standards of rationality and coherence both for thought and for action, but that these explain only *transfer* of reasons from one belief or action to others (16). Principles of "relative rationality" don't show what it is to have a reason in the first place. Yet the general topics of skepticism with regard to theoretical or practical reason are not broached, nor is any account of the authority of reason in these areas offered. Darwall's concern is rather whether *given* some accepted (and undiscussed) views of relative rationality we can ever give conclusive reasons for what ought to be done or for particular agents to do it.

He begins with a traditional question. Are reasons for action in the end always *self-centered,* or may they be impartial between different selves? He thinks that "self-centered theories of practical reason" (15) enjoy an undeserved prominence, and lack arguments to show that all reasons for action are self-centered. His first target is the claim that all action is based on desire. Desires, he points out, are not, strictly, reasons for action at all. They lack propositional structure, so are unsuitable candidates for being reasons. (This claim is perhaps controversial, but is not argued.) Only propositions such as "that A desires x" can be reasons for A's action; hence reasons for action cannot be desires, but at most "desire-based." Nor can all reasons for

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