

The Obligatory Good Life

Kate Paape

In her paper *Moral Saints*, Susan Wolf proposes a counter argument to Peter's Singer's argument that we have a moral obligation to be the most effective we can be in our moral actions. This includes giving up our indulgences, giving away all our money, and dedicating our lives to effective causes. Wolf lists several other attributes that make up a well-rounded, good life such as astronomy, art, culinary arts, or sports. These are all skills that are cultivated and celebrated despite their apparent uselessness in the pursuit of moral perfection. Wolf advocates for something she calls individual perfection which includes engaging with all the things that make up a full human life—not just morality. She ends the paper by quoting Moore's open question argument and suggesting that we ought to trust our intuitions rather than follow a normative theory to guide our lives. This is quite the opposite of the moral saint who would proceed with cold calculated evaluations on how to make their next action the most effective. I believe a balance must exist here; normative theories are supposed to be action-guiding. After all, that's a large part of why we study moral philosophy—we want to know how to be moral and live the best life. Still, we want to experience the other ways to live a good, fulfilling life as well.

My suggestion is that both philosophers got something right, but neither one has a full picture of what we ought to do. I will provide an altered version of Wolf's argument, suggesting that there is more to a good life besides being moral, but I will include the obligations and expectations to live as effectively as possible as Singer suggests.

If Wolf is correct in arguing that there is more to a good life than acting moral, then we should act to fulfill these other qualities to their fullest potential. If a person has an obligation to be the most moral as they can possibly be, then I would infer that for any attribute, positive

personality trait, career, or talent, a person has the obligation to be the best at that thing. For instance, Beethoven did not have an obligation to be a mediocre composer, but he had an obligation to be the best possible composer he could be. On the individual level, this includes fulfilling all of one's interests, desires, obligations and using their life productively.

Wolf, however, does not argue in her paper that we have an obligation to live according to our fullest potential, she simply believes that we ought to engage with all facets of a human life and moral sainthood restricts access to many of the great things that make up a good life. However, such a view seems too easy and does not give us a guide on how to act. To insist that we can do whatever we feel like doing to the extent that it fulfils our desires and creates a rich life is not an action-guiding theory and it fails to address the potential and moral obligations that we do seem to have. By potential, I just mean our potential we ought to live up to in whatever it is we do.

Some may find this to be a rigid normative theory, being unrealistic to expect every person to be in constant pursuit of their highest potential, rather than enjoying the simple pleasures of life. While I sympathize with this concern, I think it is intuitive to try to be the best at whatever it is we are doing. This is why we have schools, institutions, self-help books, teachers and intrinsic motivation. I think it is a natural impulse to strive toward something greater than oneself, and achievements that can be completed easily are much less gratifying than those that take years of hard work and cultivated skill to accomplish. While simple pleasures are often important and valuable, there is more to life than desire satisfaction.

However, I would like to step out of the individual, and consider the concept of obligation from the perspective of humanity. Through time, humanity has developed technology, created art, considered different worldviews, and—though some may object—has and continues

to improve over time. This can only happen when individual humans work together to continue to better the world and make it a vibrant, robust dwelling place and continue to challenge ideas that eventually move us forward in every field. Thus, we have an obligation to have not only the most productive individual life, but also an obligation towards advancing humanity and creating a good life not only for existing humans, but also for people of the future.

Additionally, without furthering the potential of humanity in all domains of life, there is nothing to live for. Suddenly the quantity of lives saved matters more than their quality of life. We might have saved a few people from malaria, but if we removed all arts from schools as a consequence, then those people may never know what it's like to see a live concert or visit a museum or experience other aspects of life that are not useful in the preservation of the physical body. At some point, without the other nonmoral qualities that make life meaningful, the question of why we should want to live becomes just as important as should we live. Art, religion, philosophy, language, astronomy, and history are all areas that signify our humanness, and without them there is little point in living at all. Additionally, if they are halted, our progress in these subjects will lag behind progress in science and other areas, and the arts will no longer affect and respond to culture in the way they otherwise must.

My argument more formally stated is as follows:

Argument:

1. Humanity has an obligation to act in accordance with its fullest potential
2. This includes both morality and all other acts that may be considered nonmoral
3. Without striving for the highest potential in all domains, we will likely be fighting for lower human needs without reaching higher consciousness, in which there is no point in living
4. Thus, as an individual we must devote our lives to actions that will produce the most impact in contributing to reaching humanity's highest potential

Objection: A follower of Peter Singer might reply to my thesis that a halt in the arts and all areas that are meaningful is neither necessary nor aspirational. Rather, the idea is that after you pay for your necessities, you give away all your extra money, and if everyone did that, we could end world hunger in a couple years. From a utilitarian perspective, we ought to do this to increase the well-being of all humanity rather than focus on the highest pleasures for those at the top. Once we solve world hunger and elevate the poorest countries to a livable state, then we can all appreciate the other pleasures of life and partake in the level of morality we are currently at now. We simply need to get everyone on board with this for a short duration, and then we can carry on as before.

Reply: The problem is that there will always be a looming catastrophe or problems in the world that require attention. It is human nature to create problems, and this has always been the case. After we solve world hunger, we will want to solve homelessness, diseases, or researching AI safety. To say that all our problems that are in need of attention will be solved in the conceivable future is grossly unrealistic, and probably always will be. The reason why we also should put money toward other areas is because they give us relief from the problems that unfortunately plague our world and give us something to be excited about. If we are constantly in disaster-fighting mode, we will fail to progress in areas that increase the quality of life for future generations and those currently living.

A Utilitarian might continue to raise the bar up for what constitutes an acceptable level of well-being because this definition will continue to shift—likely upwards—to be on par with everyone else in the world. Because of this, I believe we have an obligation to fulfill the potential of all domains of humanity so we are always moving forward, rather than remaining stagnant trying to put out the fires that will always ignite in different forms anyway. For clarity, I see

nothing wrong with moral saints; in fact, I think there should be more of them. But I certainly don't believe it is an ideal to strive for because we need all kinds of people to do a variety of things that will improve the world and continue to make it a wonderful place in all domains.