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Susan Wolf on moral perfection and the good life: a critical analysis

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Introduction

Moral theories are usually divided into three approaches: consequentialist, deontological, and virtue ethics. The common representation of consequentialist ethics is utilitarianism and the deontological approach most often refers to Kantianism. In general, these two theories have been the leading ethical theories for the last couple of centuries. To put it very simply, the concern of utilitarians is happiness and utility and the concern of Kantians is the moral law. In addition to these two theories, virtue ethics has made a comeback in recent times. Virtue ethics is usually associated with Aristotle and his teachings. As the name of the theory itself implies, the main concern of virtue ethicists lies in the virtues. The virtues can be understood as the powers of a human being to reach their full flourishing. The approach of virtue ethics takes into account the entire essence of a human being – it is oriented towards the wholeness.

Although the three approaches have immense differences in their main clauses, their aim is broadly still the same: it is to clarify the groundings of morality. This aim of a theoretical kind consists of answering the question on the essence of morality. The general aim of these distinct approaches is the same, but their views on the essence of morality differ. Related to this theoretical kind of aim, the practical aim of moral theories is to show to the individuals as well as to the societies as a whole what it takes to live morally. The moral life is believed to lead to the good one, but the good life must not be understood in terms of happy life as is usual for common sense. Rather, the good life can be understood in terms of the right way of living. The principle-based moral theories appoint the principles that one needs to follow in order to reach the good life, but they understand the good life in different ways.

Recently, parallel to the revival of virtue ethics, utilitarianism and Kantianism have been questioned. One point of critique of the latter theories is concerned with their practical aim: do their teachings really have a practical role to play in our lives? Susan Wolf is one of the contemporary philosophers, who has indicated some problems with these two traditional approaches. Her most famous writing that questions the relationship between theory and practice is the article “Moral Saints”, published in 1982. Moral saints are the moral agents who live in perfect accord with the principle-based moral theories. With the characterization of the moral saint Wolf wants to show that the utmost moral, on the one, and the good life according to common understanding, on the other hand, might not be

compatible. Her article was rather sensational in the time written, and the discussion still continues.

In her article Wolf brings out two areas of concern. One area of concern is the relationship between the prescriptions of principle-based moral theories¹ and their accordance with real life. In short, the problem can be seen as an incompatibility between the ideals of theory and the ideals of practice. One can question whether moral theories demand more of us than really is good for us? Is the ideal way of living according to moral theories not the life that we would want to pursue, even if we were living in perfect accordance with morality according to our standards? In other words, it might not always be 'better to be morally better' (Wolf 1982: 438). Ethics belongs to the sphere of practical philosophy but paradoxically the theories of ethics may turn out to be not that practical after all.

For Wolf, the main difficulty appears to be the way moral theories like Kantianism and utilitarianism overemphasize the role of morality: they issue from one leading principle and one kind of leading values. Morality becomes dominating in the lives lived according to these moral theories. The characterization of moral saints is not attractive. Instead of being tempting, they look rather dull and unappealing. According to Wolf, the lives that moral saints live are devoted to morality to a degree so extreme that aspects standing outside of the moral sphere are excluded in the end. It is hard to see how our lives could benefit from such an extreme degree of morality. A life can be a good one and an individual can be praiseworthy also when morality does not single-handedly dominate. As Wolf writes: "a person may be perfectly wonderful without being perfectly moral" (1982: 436).

There is another set of questions closely related to the previous ones. This is not so much about the outcome of living according to the moral theories, but more about the possibility of capturing all the facets of the good life inside a single theory. If moral theories try to clarify the groundings of morality and thus reach the essence of the good life, then maybe the task that they take up is a bit too ambitious? Is it possible to comprehend the essence of the good life just from one – in the case of moral theories from the moral – perspective? As vigorously as moral theories would try to avoid it, they would still always look at life from the moral point of view and thus appoint the dominating role to morality.

¹ Here and further on with the general term 'moral theories' I refer to the theories that Wolf criticizes – Kantianism and utilitarianism. That is, the theories that put down a leading principle that we should follow.

Wolf claims that exaggerating the scope of moral theories is a common mistake. A theory that issues from one leading principle, however comprehensive it may be, always takes a look at any given phenomena from a limited perspective. According to Wolf, it is usual among moral theorists to try to capture the values and ideals in one single system. But there is also another possibility. Instead of looking for a single comprehensive system, one can include different viewpoints. Somehow, when ideals and the good life are in question, moral theorists tend to stick to only one system and a single point of view. But in life, there are several aspects that are important to us that are not in contrast with morality, but might not just belong to the moral sphere. These joys and sorrows of our life are non-, not immoral and can well be part of the good life. Affirming a moral theory must not necessarily involve accepting solely one point of view and one ideal.

The problem that I am mainly interested in arises in this second area of concerns. It is concerned with the idealization of one viewpoint and thus also with the idealization of one aspect in our lives. It seems that if we follow the ideals of moral theories, we end up with the maximization of morality. According to Kantianism and utilitarianism, morality should play a dominant role in our lives. But if this life constructed by moral theories seems strangely barren and unjustified, then the maximization of morality as a means for reaching the good life in the so-called real world becomes questionable as well. It is questionable whether one single principle promoting one single set of values can lead us to the life that is good for us.

Can it be that instead of maximizing a certain aspect we should try to look for a balance between different aspects that belong to different spheres of our lives? The claim might not sound striking, but if we look at the balance that we are seeking as a maximum itself, several philosophically interesting questions arise. First, what kinds of aspects are balanced in this maximum: do they still belong to the same hierarchical – i.e. moral – system? If we recall Wolf's concerns about the possibility of capturing the essence of a good life inside one comprehensive theory, then it looks doubtful. Second, there is a question of the viewpoints that are important when talking about the good life. If we accept Wolf's claim and take into account different points of view and aspects in our search for the good life, then what kind of viewpoints and aspects are we talking about? Wolf claims that also having a meaning is important for the good life, but how should we capture this meaningfulness and how should we decide whether a certain life is a meaningful one?

What provides us with the objective dimension in our evaluation? Finally, there is a challenge concerning the role of morality and moral values in the good life: are moral values still leading but balanced with other kind of values that keep them from dominating our lives?

These questions are important as we are pursuing the clarification of what it takes to live well. In addition, these questions are interesting given the contemporary debate in moral philosophy. The classical moral theories are being questioned and with that it can also be said that the groundings of morality are at least partly shaken. If it were possible to bring moral theories and their ideals closer to common view and common morality, then maybe the groundings of everyday morality would also become more solid. By strengthening the theories and their acceptance, we also strengthen the practical implications of them. All in all, if we still admit that one aim of moral theories is to help us to live good, then bringing moral theories closer to the so-called real world will only help them to achieve their aim.

In a nutshell, the general problem of my thesis is concerned with the role of morality in life. If we agree with Wolf about principle-based moral theories leading us to the ideals that are not our ideals, then can moral values keep their position as the most important ones in the hierarchy of values? Maybe we can reach the good life when we look for a balance between different aspects of our lives as a maximum instead of maximizing one single principle and one set of values in our lives. When the latter holds, is there a hierarchy of values in the first place? In order to find answers to these questions, I will take the following steps.

In the first chapter of my thesis I will give an overview of the concept of the moral saint by Wolf. There, my main aim is to explain why, according to Wolf, the character of moral saints is not the one we would want to have and their life not the one we would want to live. I will bring out the pros and cons of being a moral saint and explain the shortcomings of their lives. Also, I will find out whether Wolf gives an indication of what the good life could look like in her view.

In the second chapter, I will turn to the critics of Wolf. I will consider the arguments stated by Vanessa Carbonell and Robert M. Adams. I will defend Wolf against their critique and if not vindicate then at least show how this critique misses the point that Wolf wants to make in her article. In addition to accepting Wolf's ideas, I will also go further and start

looking at the questions that Wolf leaves explicitly unanswered. How could the good life be possibly captured? What kind of theory – if any – could adequately provide us with the clarification of the essence of the good life? Can it be that the good life is about finding the balance as a maximum, not maximizing a certain aspect?

In the final chapter of my thesis I will test the last hypothesis by responding to the questions stated earlier. First, if we accept Wolf's claims concerning the character and life of the moral saint, then what kind of approach should we take to the good life: is this approach compatible with relativism or pluralism? Furthermore, do the aspects balanced in good life still belong to the same hierarchical system? Finally, what is the role of moral values in the concept of the good life? I believe that adequate answers to these questions take us a step closer to the clarification of the good life as well as to the explanation of the role of morality in it.

I would like to thank my supervisor prof. Margit Sutrop for encouraging me to study further Susan Wolf's interesting and down-to-earth approach to the good life written in an utmost enjoyable and fascinating style. The conversations with my supervisor were thought provoking and helped me to grasp the bigger picture of the problems asserted by Wolf.

1. Susan Wolf: moral saints and the good life

Wolf focuses in her article “Moral Saints” (1982) on two basic questions: what kind of people we would like to be and what kind of lives we would want to live? One of her aims is to show that despite of the outlook of popular normative moral theories, in real life we seem to care about many non-moral aspects in addition to the moral ones. As Wolf writes: “moral perfection, in the sense of moral saintliness, does not constitute a model of personal well-being toward which it would be particularly rational or good or desirable for a human being to strive” (1982: 419). According to Wolf, the life of moral saints is dominated by morality. But the life dominated solely by morality might not be the life we prefer or desire to live – the life that we value the highest.

In this chapter, I will examine Wolf’s characterization of moral saints and show what Wolf understands by good life, when this is not the life dedicated to morality. I will find out why it is, according to Wolf, that a life can be perfectly wonderful without being perfectly moral. In order to examine Wolf’s moral saints thoroughly, I will take the following three steps. First, I will introduce a person whom Wolf would call a moral saint. I will bring out the pros and cons of being a moral saint as well as refer to the main reasons why according to Wolf the life of a moral saint is not the life we would want to live. Secondly, I will find out what is missing in the life of a moral saint according to this picture. I will introduce the oppositions between moral and non-moral interests, values, and reasons. Also, I will distinguish between different points of view that one can take in order to examine the good life. In these oppositions, I will use some thoughts brought out earlier as the cons of being a moral saint, but I will also put these oppositions into a wider context of ethical theories. Finally, I will turn to the question concerning the good life. I will study further what does it mean to live a well-rounded life according to Wolf and what is the category of meaningfulness that she adds to our evaluation.

1.1 The life of moral saints

The concept of the moral saint largely speaks for itself. Moral saints fulfil the conditions of sainthood from the moral perspective: they live a morally perfect or a perfectly moral life. In this section I will clarify the essence of moral saints in more detail. I will first explain what kind of character and what kind of life in general Wolf has in mind, when writing about moral saints. Further on, in the following subsections, I will

divide their character traits and different aspects of their life in two, according to their attractiveness to us.

First of all, Wolf emphasizes that a moral saint's actions are always compatible with morality. Wolf introduces us to a moral saint who is "a person whose every action is as morally good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be" (1982: 419). There is a difference whether one's actions are in accordance with morality or one's actions are as good as possible. In the case of moral saints, it seems that mere compatibility is not enough. It looks like moral saints must always act in accordance with morality until reaching or even surpassing its limits.

One can question Wolf's understanding that principle-based moral theories incite everyone to be moral saints. Indeed, these theories do not claim that everyone should be as morally worthy as she can in terms of devoting all the life to morality: neither Kantians nor utilitarians claim that our lives should be filled only with morality. Rather, it is that in our decision making processes and actions we should first of all take into consideration the principles provided by the theories. These principles lead us to the life that is good to live. Also, there can be a difference between lives that are lived morally perfect or perfectly moral: one can live a morally perfect life without being only occupied with moral issues. Wolf seems to equate the two although her critique goes mainly against the perfectly moral life – i.e. the life that is filled solely with morality.

Although Wolf may go too extreme with her claims about the ideals of traditional moral theories, her critique still casts a shadow to these theories. Even if principle-based moral theories do not explicitly claim that we have to live a life filled with morality alone, they also do not explicitly set limits to how far it is good to be moral – until how far should one go in following the principles. If the principles lead us to the good life, why should we not maximize them? Principle-based moral theories do not claim that we should maximize the principles, but they also do not claim the opposite nor set any explicit limits². Even if the picture of moral saints provided by Wolf is over-exaggerated, the question concerning the maximizing the moral principles is relevant.

² They may decline from doing so because in this case their general approach and basing upon principles may turn out to be questionable. The problem is that in this case, the principles might lose their supremacy, because they might not single-handedly lead to the right way of living anymore.

The question concerning the maximizing of morality and moral principles can be understood in terms of supererogation. In other words, the question is about what can morality demand from us, on the one hand, and from what point on can our actions be considered as going beyond its limits, on the other? If we are about to be perfectly moral, should the supererogatory acts also belong to our everyday reality? Wolf does not say that explicitly. But if we think about moral saints as persons who are ‘as morally worthy as can be’, it seems to imply that supererogatory acts belong to the life of a moral saint – at least partly, if not fully. First of all, there is a question whether supererogation is something that morality demands from all of us – is this what we should strive for? Even if principle-based moral theories have not claimed that everyone should be a moral saint, following the moral principles seems to lead to this outcome. If one is acting moral, then one follows the principles and since there is no certain limit, it seems that one can easily end up with maximizing the principles and morality. Second of all, there is a question how to distinguish between morally right and morally supererogatory acts? Can one say that there is a line, which designates the acts that go beyond moral sphere?

The answers to the latter questions depend upon how we understand the concept of supererogation. As David Heyd (2011) points out in his compendious article about supererogation in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, nowadays there are several ways that one can understand the concept of supererogation. But more or less everyone agrees that supererogatory actions are the ones that are morally good, but might not be strictly required. J. O. Urmson (1958) was the first philosopher to articulate the problem of the demands of morality: what rules should be included in the moral code and be mandatory to follow by everybody? According to Urmson the moral code “should distinguish between basic rules, summarily set forth in simple rules and binding on all, and the higher flights of morality of which saintliness and heroism are outstanding examples” (*ibid*: 211).

In the context of moral saints, there is a tension concerning the supererogatory acts. If we should maximize morality in terms of following the moral principles to the utmost limit as moral saints do, is there really an upper limit of morality for us? Wolf seems to argue that in the case of moral saints, there is no upper limit – moral saints even sacrifice their “other interests for the interest in morality” (Wolf 1982: 424). We can explain this claim by referring to the absence of the explicit limit of following the moral principles. Wolf claims that if we want people to live lives that are not dominated by morality in a sense of being

filled with morality, “then any plausible moral theory must make use of some conception of supererogation” (1982: 438). Thus, if moral theories were to accept Wolf’s critique and understand that their ideal characters – moral saints – might not be the ideal characters for actual people, then there should be some actions that in a certain situation are considered to cross the upper line of what morality demands of us. These actions are morally good, but not mandatory. If the ideal characters of moral theories do not recognize the upper limit, then ideally we as well should not recognize it. In the case of moral sainthood, one devotes to morality without further questions.

But solely acting according to the moral principles does not seem to be enough for being moral. Being moral also implies that one understands the importance of morality and goodness in play. Relevant are not merely the actions of moral saints, their thoughts and intentions should be moral ones as well. Wolf describes moral saints as “patient, considerate, even-tempered, hospitable, charitable in thought as well as in deed” (1982: 421). Moral saint’s thoughts and actions have to be in accordance with one another. This is analogical to the way we understand virtues. In some general way virtues are always beneficial (Foot 1997: 164). Aristotle, in his *I Book of Nicomachean Ethics*, describes virtues as belonging to the virtuous activity. Indeed, in order to be beneficial, virtues must be acted out, not merely be possessed. But virtues are not only external behaviour, but also the inner disposition – inner quality. Virtue is a character trait that can be understood in terms of a strong disposition to be and act in a certain way (Hursthouse 2012). Virtues must ‘engage the will’ (Foot 1997: 169). Moral saint’s thoughts as well as actions need to be in accordance with morality – they are good in thought and deed. This can also be seen as the essence of being moral without applying any certain moral theory yet.³

Furthermore, ignorance as such is absent in moral saint’s life. It can be understood in the way moral saint needs to realize and understand the importance of morality and goodness – ignorance towards morally important aspects of life contravenes the moral grain. One

³ Wolf seems to be inclined towards virtue ethics rather than principle-based moral theories. She does not look at moral saints in the light of virtue ethics. One reason for this can be that virtues seem to form the essential part of being moral: we do not take a person who acts according to principles, but does that without any understanding of what the principles stand for or why one’s actions are good, to be morally worthy. Basically any approach to morality must take use of the virtues at least to some extent. Another reason why Wolf is more in approval of virtue ethics can be that in the case of virtues, we are already talking about the middle-way between two extremes. It is harder to interpret virtue ethics in terms of maximizing the morality as one aspect of our lives because virtue ethics emphasizes the role of the wholeness. In this sense virtue ethics is more compatible with Wolf’s views than principle-based moral theories. In addition, as we will see later, Wolf also emphasizes the well-roundedness as one feature of the good life.

certainly cannot be ignorant towards moral principles. Also, Wolf claims that the life of a moral saint needs to be “dominated by the commitment of improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole” (1982: 420). A moral saint cannot be ignorant towards other people – other persons must belong to their sphere of concern. Indeed, when thinking about a life dominated by morality, taking care of the well-being of others seems to constitute an essential part of it. It is generally agreed that morality is about what one can do for others, not merely what one can do for oneself.

In addition, Wolf specifies the essence of being moral according to utilitarianism and Kantianism. For utilitarians, morality is about the general happiness. According to J. S. Mill, the highest pleasure and thus also the ultimate end is happiness, as he states in the Greatest Happiness Principle: „actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness“ (U, II, 2). Acting morally is acting in a way that produces more happiness. A utilitarian moral saint should always perform actions that promote happiness – that is roughly the actions that are pleasurable. If one is as morally worthy as can be, then one needs to produce as much happiness as possible. That is, produce as much pleasure as possible. This is the saint that we can call a loving one.

The Loving Saint by Wolf carries out these utilitarian criterions. The Loving Saint’s own happiness depends upon the happiness of others – she devotes herself to others gladly and with an open heart (Wolf 1982: 420). She is motivated by the amount of happiness that she produces in the world – through the latter she makes the world a more moral and a better place in which to live. The Loving Saint loves and helps others, because this is what she understands to be morally the best: the happier the others, the happier the saint. Altogether, the larger amount of happiness produced, the better. The Loving Saint should be the ideal of utilitarian moral theory. She should be posed as a role model for others to aspire to. The Loving Saint is the “saint out of love” (*ibid*).

Alternatively, one can be a moral saint also according to Kantian point of view. Put simply, what constitutes morality for Kantians is a set of principles that are universal and that need to be acted upon. One needs to be ready to make the claims of morality to others and to oneself. Christine Korsgaard (1996: 19–20), a well-known contemporary Kantian, describes Kantian understanding of moral law as being the law of an agent’s own will. According to Korsgaard, moral claims have a normative force upon moral agents because a

moral agent is capable of reflecting her own actions self-consciously. This, together with moral law as a law of agent's own will, gives a moral agent an authority over herself. Our actions are truly good as long as we carry them out because of the duty we feel. According to Kantians, reasoning and the duty to obey the law is most important, not just the good will, love, or general happiness. As I. Kant writes:

It is a very beautiful thing to do good to men from love to them and from sympathetic good will, or to be just from love of order; but this is not yet the true moral maxim of our conduct which is suitable to our position amongst rational beings as men. (2013 [1788]: 183)

In terms of Wolf (1982: 420), this is the description of a rational saint. The Rational Saint sacrifices her own interests and her own happiness in the name of others, meanwhile being aware of the sacrifice. The set of principles needs to be acted upon. Although the Rational Saint is aware of the sacrifice she takes, she still acts upon the principles – the principles have become the laws of her own will. The Rational Saint is motivated by the moral law and by the duty to execute and fulfil it – this is how she reasons her way to morality. Acting according to and taking the moral law as one's own is something to which Kantians appeal. The Rational Saint described by Wolf fulfils the requirements of Kantians: she reflects upon her own actions and enforces the moral law upon herself as the law of her own will. The Rational Saint is doing the latter two to the utmost level and is thus, according to Kantians, as morally worthy as can be. The Rational Saint is the 'saint out of duty' (*ibid*).

All in all, even though the two types of saints have distinct reasoning and motives for devoting themselves to morality, it is important that they both are moral saints. In their descriptions, what is dominating is not the perspective from which they understand morality, but the fact that they try to be as morally worthy as they can by following the principles: "the shared content of what these individuals are motivated to be – namely as morally good as possible – would play a dominant role in the determination of their characters" (Wolf 1982: 420). Regardless of which moral theory one supports, the core character of a moral saint remains the same. Moral saints represent both Kantian and utilitarian moral theories: they represent an ideal of how one should live when a single principle can lead one to the good life. Both the Rational and the Loving Saint are moral ones and their lives are perfectly moral either by reference to the moral law or by reference

to the best consequences. Next, I will point out the positive and negative aspects of being a moral saint.

1.1.1 Pros

In Wolf's description, the list of the pros of being a moral saint falls rather short. Goodness seems to be the main and basically the only positive feature they have to their name. This is what we love about them: moral saints are good. As Wolf describes them: "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" (1982: 421). Moral saints possess virtues that we appreciate: they are kind, honest, open- and goodhearted, helpful, charitable, etc. One can always trust them, without fearing that moral saints would deceive, lie, or wish one evil. If there is only room for morality in one's life, there cannot be room for anything at odds with it.

1.1.2 Cons

Even if moral saints may seem attractive at first glance, their charm may fade away quicker than expected. Naturally, there rises a question of who would reject a person who is the embodiment of goodness? What are the cons in their lives that diminish the appeal of moral saints so badly? I will answer the questions by examining three aspects of moral saints and their lives: their interests, virtues, and desires. Finally, I will connect these three and take a look at how they influence moral saints' own well-being.

First, let us have a look at the interests of moral saints. Moral saints should always deal with things concerned with morality, since as said before, their every action is as morally worthy as can be. Thus, interests of moral saints should also be of this kind – they should have moral interests instead of non-moral ones. As moral saints devote themselves to morality and to the improvement of the welfare of others, their other interests – i.e. non-moral interests – are limited, to put it mildly. There are always people whose welfare can be improved. As Wolf writes:

For the moral saint, the promotion of the welfare of others might play the role that is played for most of us by the enjoyment of material comforts, the opportunity to engage in the intellectual and physical activities of our choice, and the love, respect, and companionship of people whom we love, respect, and enjoy. (1982: 420)

A moral saint's moral interests alone are at odds with the interests that we usually have, and that belong to the non-moral sphere. We are engaged with diverse activities because we like and enjoy doing them, not because they always improve the welfare of others. It seems that restricting one's interests to morally praiseworthy matters alone is not something we want from life. When thinking about children's hobby groups, we can name tennis, horse-back-riding, basketball, dancing, drawing, singing, piano playing. However, there is no 'doing-only-morally-important-things' hobby group in the list. If we voluntarily raise our children in a non-moral spirit, then how could we fool ourselves into believing that we would want to live a fixedly moral life? It is important to understand that doing non-moral things does not equal with doing things that go against morality. We do not approve the latter, but we seem to be on approval of the former. Without the non-moral sphere our lives seem limited.

One might ask: why should a moral saint only have the interests concerned with morality? After all, as said previously, having non-moral hobbies does not mean having hobbies that go against morality. Wolf (1982: 421) admits that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with moral saints playing a piano or reading a novel, but the problem is practical – namely, the lack of time. Time is something that most of us are often short of and a moral saint is no exception here. Helping others is not just one action that you come across. It is a process that seems to be never-ending. If one is a moral saint, then one just does not have time for hobbies and interests unrelated to morality. There is a practical reason why a moral saint cannot deal with things outside morality.

Second, important are the virtues of moral saints – more precisely the amount and the extent of the virtues that moral saints possess. There are different character traits – e.g. goodness, open-mindedness, kindness, honesty, courage, and wisdom – that are usually understood as essential parts of a virtuous person. According to Aristotle, there are moral and intellectual virtues corresponding to the division of the soul: “Some forms of virtue are called intellectual virtues, others moral virtues: Wisdom or Intelligence and Prudence are intellectual, Liberality and Temperance are moral virtues” (NE, 1103a). As we already saw, in the case of moral saints, the focus is by and large on moral virtues. If one is a moral saint, then one needs to be morally as virtuous as possible. But intellectual virtues play an important role as well, since a truly virtuous person needs to have practical wisdom: “whereas if a man of good natural disposition acquires Intelligence, then he excels in

conduct, and the disposition which previously only resembled Virtue will now be Virtue in the true sense” (NE, 1144b). That means that in order for ethical virtues to be fully developed, they need to be combined with practical wisdom (Kraut 2010). A moral saint is maximally good, honest, open-hearted, compassionate, patient, etc., but also intelligent, in order to have these ethical virtues flourish fully.

There are two problems with being maximally virtuous. One problem with this particular feature of moral saints can be seen as being ‘too good’. Moral saint’s moral virtues are maximized and a person who is always as good, as kind, as compassionate as can be may just become a bit irritating to have around, or, as Wolf (1982: 421) claims a ‘blessing to be absent’. One reason why a moral saint may be unattractive is that she “will have the standard moral virtues to a nonstandard degree” (*ibid*). Another problem concerning moral saint’s virtues is that there is no room for certain type of other character traits that we value. There are character traits that we admire, but that are not strictly speaking compatible with moral virtues. For instance, Wolf talks about black humour, cynicism, and sarcasm that are at odds with moral saint’s character, because they are “going against the moral grain” (*ibid*: 422). For instance, enjoying black humour is incompatible with being fully morally virtuous. Wolf (*ibid*: 421) calls it a logical reason. In order to laugh at black humour, and not to mention to make the jokes of this sort, one needs to “take an attitude of resignation and pessimism toward the flaws and vices to be found in the world” (*ibid*: 422). One should not allow oneself even a single glance of negative attitude towards others, if one is to be a moral saint. But often in life, having a laugh at misfortune is exactly what most of us need in a hopeless situation.

A moral saint’s next unattractive aspect is related to the two previous interests and virtues and is concerned with moral saint’s desires. Namely, just as a moral saint’s interests, her desires need to be moral ones and compatible with moral virtues as well. Furthermore, a true moral saint should really desire only one thing – to be as morally worthy as possible. Wolf describes this desire of a moral saint as being “apt to have the character not just of a stronger, but of a higher desire, which does not merely successfully compete with one’s other desires but which rather subsumes or demotes them” (1982: 424). The non-moral desires are a matter of choice, but the desires whose object is morality itself, are more imperative in nature (*ibid*). These claims of Wolf can be interpreted in the light of

maximizing the realizing of moral principles. The problem seems to lie again in the absence of the limit for following these principles.

In addition, the idea itself – morality being an object of desire – seems to be an odd one. Morality is not something we usually desire: it is hard to see morality as the object of our aspirations or passions. The desire for morality might not be the appreciation of morality itself after all. As Wolf (1982: 424) points out, the desire of morality can rather be understood as the comprehension of the triviality of our other desires. In this light, instead of having a single desire towards morality, moral saints see that other desires are just not worth pursuing. This conflicts with our everyday understanding of what is desirable. Sure, it is generally known that matters related to morality are desirable, but we also desire things that stand outside the moral sphere. For instance, I can desire to master the art of playing piano, although the object of this desire does not promote morality. Playing the piano is a non-moral action, but for those who do, it is a desire worth having and an object worth pursuing.

Finally, from a moral saint's own perspective, we can ask whether being a moral saint is good for her own well-being. If she is always worrying about and taking care of others, then she might easily overlook herself and her own needs. Besides moral aspects and necessary needs, our well-being is dependent upon non-moral aspects as well. Well-being is also about the things we love to do. If someone were to tell me that I could not read books, listen to music, go to concerts, or do sports anymore, then I would probably feel that my self-realization is constrained and well-being diminished. I reckon that this is what moral saints have to deal with on a daily basis. As Wolf writes “if the moral saint is devoting all his time to feeding the hungry or healing the sick or raising money for Oxfam, then necessarily he is not reading Victorian novels, playing the oboe, or improving his backhand” (1982: 421).

Wolf does not argue against being a moral saint merely on subjective grounds. She also brings in two conditions that need to be fulfilled in order to live a good life – Wolf claims that the good life is the life that is well-rounded and meaningful. These two features can be seen as objective characteristics of the good life. In short, with the well-rounded life Wolf has in mind the life that is not dominated by one single aspect. By the condition of meaningfulness, Wolf refers to the need of worthwhile projects in our lives in order for the lives to be the good ones. As Wolf writes:

[a] person's life can be meaningful only if she cares fairly deeply about some thing or things, only if she is gripped, excited, interested, engaged, or (...) if she lives something – as opposed to being bored by or alienated from most or all that she does (...) One must be able to be in some sort of relationship with the valuable object of one's attention – to create it, protect it, promote it, honour it, or more generally, to actively affirm it in some way or the other. (2010: 9–10)

According to Wolf, “meaningfulness deserves to be included in a conception of a fully successful human life” (2010: 32). This gives another perspective to the good life. In other words, what provides us with the meaning is love and acting out of love.⁴ The meaning “comes from active engagement in projects of worth, which links us to our world in a positive way” (*ibid*: 58) and “is one ingredient of a good life” (*ibid*: 52). The meaningfulness “allows us to see our lives as having a point and a value even when we take an external perspective on ourselves” (*ibid*: 58), but it is “a type of value distinct both from morality and self-interest” (*ibid*: 63).⁵

We can make a distinction between the good life understood merely in terms of happy life and the good life understood in terms of the meaningful life. With the good life, Wolf does not mean the life that is full of subjective happiness and pleasures. She does not argue against principle-based moral theories on the basis of subjective happiness that the teachings of these theories fall short to provide us with. In this case, it would also become questionable as to whether Wolf's conception of the good life might be compatible with utilitarianism after all. Rather, Wolf's critique against principle-based moral theories can be seen as indicating the limitedness of these theories. In general it seems that morality could be able to provide us with the meaning in life. Put simply, the principle-based moral theories tell us what kind of final goals we should follow in order to live well in terms of living meaningful: if we follow the principles, we may reach a meaningful life. But the problem is that we end up again with the maximizing. Wolf argues that there are more things in our life that are important to us and more things that can make the life meaningful.

⁴ Still, we should be careful about understanding one's love or care for something or somebody in terms of gaining merit – in this case gaining the meaning in life. As Wolf writes in an article “Self-interest and interests in selves” (1986: 719): “The idea of a world in which people loved (or thought that they ought to love) exclusively on the basis of merit is in fact rather horrifying.” In short, there must be no specific reason – and maybe we even do not want reason to govern here – why to love or care about something or someone.

⁵ Wolf also refers to Harry Frankfurt, who argues in his book *The Reasons of Love* (2009) that pursuing what we care about – what we love – leads us to the feeling of fulfillment. As we see later, the latter is also an important component of good life according to Wolf.

Although meaning is important, it should not override the condition of well-roundedness in the good life. It seems that different aspects should be balanced, not put into a strict hierarchical system. Wolf brings in the category of meaningfulness in her later writings and does not explain its relationship with the well-roundedness that she mentions in “Moral Saints”. One possibility is to interpret the meaningfulness as providing the well-rounded life with a focus. I will turn to the explanation of the well-rounded and meaningful life in more detail in the subsection *1.3 The good life: well-rounded and meaningful*. For now it is important to keep in mind that Wolf does not take into consideration merely the subjective perspective.

1.2 The shortcomings

In the light of the cons of being a moral saint, the life of moral saints seems to be perfectly moral, but strangely restricted. In this subsection I will examine the shortcomings of moral saint’s life in a wider context by bringing out the opposition between moral and non-moral interests, values, and reasons as well as the tensions between different points of view. These oppositions will help me clarify the shortcomings of the life of moral saints, on the one hand, and the content of good life according to Wolf, on the other. First, I will examine why the interests, values, and reasons of moral saints seem too limited for us. Second, I will look at this incompatibility between the moral theories and our ideals in the light of different viewpoints: the moral and the non-moral one. I will bring out the common dichotomy between the moral and the personal point of view, but I will also describe Wolf’s approach to the question by considering the point of view of individual perfection.

1.2.1 Moral vs non-moral interests, values, and reasons

A moral saint is always living up to or even above the moral standards. As we saw in chapter *1.1.2 Cons*, this may imply that moral saint’s sphere of interests is limited just with morality. But dealing with moral interests and hobbies alone is usually not enough for us. We also appreciate interests of non-moral kind. Multiple non-moral interests and activities might not be necessary for good life, but “a life in which none of these possible aspects of character are developed may seem to be a life strangely barren” (Wolf 1982: 421). When we follow the common sense understanding of worthwhile interests, then the sphere of interests is not limited to moral ones alone. There are interests that are related to values and desires of a non-moral kind.

In an article “Asymmetrical Freedom”, Wolf (1980: 152) relates our interests with our values and/or desires. According to her, our interests can be seen as the mirror of our values. There are values of different kind. To look at the bigger picture, E. J. Bond (2001: 1745) has described values in general as something that are good to have, receive or do. In the context of moral theories, moral values are the ones that are important. Bond (*ibid*: 1749) emphasizes the role of moral values as the basis of our social life. Moral values are important to what we are and how we live. They are peculiar to human beings and our way of life, in which morality should have a strong standing.

It is no wonder that moral values, interests, and desires have enjoyed a fair amount of attention as they are being praised by moral theories. Still, there are a lot of other things in life that we value, despite of their non-moral nature. If we think about the role models we have in life, they are often related to our non-moral interests. We do not usually follow them because of the moral ideals they represent, but because of their other features. As Wolf writes:

We may make ideals out of athletes, scholars, artists-more frivolously, out of cowboys, private eyes, and rock stars. We may strive for Katharine Hepburn's grace, Paul Newman's "cool"; we are attracted to the high-spirited passionate nature of Natasha Rostov; we admire the keen perceptiveness of Lambert Strether. Though there is certainly nothing immoral about the ideal characters or traits I have in mind, they cannot be superimposed upon the ideal of a moral saint. (1982: 422)

According to Wolf, there is no wrong done when one is apt to “recognize and appreciate non-moral talents and skills” (1982: 425). What could be wrong about appreciating the things that belong to the non-moral sphere when one stays true to morality at the same time? As we saw in chapter *1.1.2 Cons*, in the case of moral saints there appear to be a practical and a logical reason why moral saints cannot allow themselves to get involved with the non-moral sphere. In addition, Owen Flanagan has pointed out in his article “Admirable Immorality and Admirable Imperfection” (1986) that there might be a conflict between the reasons of our non-moral and moral interests, values, and desires. As Flanagan puts it:

The important idea is not merely that the ideals of morality cannot provide a comprehensive guide to the conduct of life, but that non-moral 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 non-moral reasons and which obstruct satisfying the ideal(s) of moral sainthood. (1986: 51)

Moral saints have reasons for keeping a promise, not telling a lie, and helping others, to bring some examples because this is what morality demands from them, either in terms of the moral law or in terms of promoting general happiness. In the context of moral saints, moral reasons have all the glory – moral reasons play the dominating role in their deliberations, but in our deliberations and decisions, we usually consider both moral and non-moral ones. Non-moral reasons can be more closely related to our own preferences, interests, or as some authors argue also to our rationality⁶. If thinking about our lives, then most deliberations that we make rest upon non-moral reasons and deliberations. For instance, if we go out for a dinner, read a novel or have an opinion in a conflict, we have different reasons for different actions and the reasons are often of non-moral kind.

Again, one can raise the question whether this is really what moral theories claim. Do principle-based moral theories require us to abstain from everything but morality – should we take into consideration only moral reasons? The aim of moral theories might not be leading us to the perfectly moral life, but just to the morally perfect one. But as we saw before, principle-based moral theories do not answer clearly to the questions concerning the maximizing of the realization of moral principles. Another point is that the goal of the moral theories may not be to determine the good life in terms of common sense, but the good life in terms of morality. Their goal can be seen as leading us to live in a right way. But even if the goal of principle-based moral theories might not be reaching the good life in terms of the common sense ‘happy life’, they still must acknowledge that the life where their principles are maximized is too extreme in order to work as an ideal.

It seems that for moral saints, the non-moral values and reasons are not worth pursuing or considering. They stand outside the moral sphere and are thus left out from the moral saint's sphere of interest. In life we adore at least some things that belong to the non-moral sphere. It can be said that we “reject the thesis of the over-ridingness of the morally ideal because it fails to allow enough room for the development of non-moral traits and talents” (Flanagan 1986: 54). Probably because of the latter we also often criticize a moral saint’s character and life for being too one-tracked. But that does not imply that we approve the characters and lives from the other end of the spectrum – lives that are immoral. As

⁶ See e.g. Douglas W. Portmore’s article “Imperfect reasons and rational options” (2012).

Flanagan proposes, we also “reject models of persons which do not make some accommodation to moral demands” (1986: 54). Letting non-moral aspects have standing in our lives does not mean that we approve immorality. Moral and non-moral aspects must not exclude one another. They can and usually do coexist in our lives. Also principle-based moral theories do not seem to deny the non-moral sphere of life. Rather, they fail to put the limit to the moral one. If we accept that our life consists of moral and non-moral aspects and one must not dominate above the other, then there should be some kind of balance between moral and non-moral aspects of our life. One possibility is to see this balance as an essential feature of the good life as this state of affairs would hold back the domination of either of the spheres. Next, I will look at this issue in the context of different viewpoints.

1.2.2 Moral vs non-moral point of view

It is also possible to interpret the conflict between the different concepts of the good life in terms of different points of view. The idea is that we can look at our lives from different perspectives. The distinction can be seen as a dichotomy between moral and non-moral, impersonal and personal, universal and partial, objective and subjective viewpoints. These distinctions deserve attention in the context of moral saints as well: they can shed light upon the question as to why the life of a moral saint is not the one we would prefer. The decisions and actions in the life of moral saints can in all cases be understood as the ones made from the moral point of view. In contrast, the decisions and actions in the life that we would like to live can be understood as being made from some other point of view besides morality.

Wolf (1982: 436-437) describes taking up the moral point of view as understanding that ‘one is just one person among others’: one sees oneself and one’s interests on a par with other people. We can consider the two moral theories again. According to Kantians, one is acting from a moral point of view, if one is taking authority over oneself by enforcing the moral law upon oneself as the law of one’s own will. Wolf (1999: 205) interprets Kantian’s moral point of view as seeing every moral agent as equally deserving the respect and as being equally a subject to moral law. On the other hand, according to utilitarians, one is acting from a moral point of view, if one considers everyone else’s happiness as important as one’s own: what is important is the general happiness in the world. Wolf describes the utilitarian moral point of view as taking “one’s own personal point of view as just one among others” (*ibid*). There are variances in the views of Kantians and utilitarians, but they

share their main core of a moral point of view – they see it extracting from a personal point of view. As Wolf says: “The moral point of view is reached by abstracting from a point of view that one more naturally holds (...) We may call it the personal point of view.” (*ibid*: 204) Considering other people and their interests equally with one’s own can be at odds with the personal point of view. The moral point of view may not be natural for us to hold, but something that we learn to take up, when being raised in the spirit of morality.

The personal point of view might be harder to understand than the moral one. First of all, one can understand the contrasting point of view to morality as being primarily concerned with person’s own interests. This point of view is about what is best for oneself: “what makes her happiest or otherwise maximizes her own well-being” (Wolf 1999: 206). This is the point of view that is driven by self-interest and mainly related to the approach of rational egoism. Secondly, one can understand the personal point of view as the point of view of personal preferences. According to Wolf (*ibid*) this is different from the first approach, because in this case, the personal point of view can also reflect the interests of others, although through this person’s perspective whose point of view is in question. In other words, one can still be concerned with the well-being of her close ones. Wolf claims that the best, according to this approach, is “whatever the person most wants (or would want if she were able to see the full implications of the alternatives – and leaving morality to one side)” (*ibid*).

These two are the most common interpretations of the personal point of view. Still, there are alternative approaches besides these. One of them is the point of view of individual perfection. Wolf uses this approach in “Moral Saints”. Wolf describes this point of view as “the point of view from which we consider what kinds of lives are good lives, and what kinds of persons it would be good for ourselves and others to be” (1982: 437). In another article, Wolf (1999: 217) describes this point of view as providing us “with reasons independent of moral reasons (and not reducible to self-interested reasons) for developing our characters and living our lives in some ways rather than the others”. It seems that in this point of view, moral as well as non-moral aspects are taken into consideration – it includes impersonal as well as personal, objective as well as subjective, universal as well as partial. We do care about ourselves and about our own personal interests, but we also want to see our lives from some detached perspective (Wolf 2010: 28). In the point of view of individual perfection, the moral and the non-moral are united.

It does not seem that Wolf aims at the exclusion of the personal point of view from the good life. Rather, she binds other perspectives with it. In the context of the good life, the moral point of view is concerned with the question of how to live morally. The personal point of view deals with the question of how to live in the way best for oneself or one's own preferences. The main reason why the life of moral saints does not seem perfect lies in the battle between the moral and the personal point of view. We can see here the connection with the second concern of Wolf – the scope of moral theories. If moral theories remain true to the moral point of view, they cannot comprehend all the facets of our lives. Traditional moral theories do not adequately comprehend the whole of our lives, but just the moral domain – the moral sphere. The point of view of individual perfection, on the other hand, accommodates both – it puts weight on moral as well as non-moral aspects. This leads us to the following question: what life is a good one according to Wolf? Next, I will clarify how Wolf sees the good life in general.

1.3 The good life: well-rounded and meaningful

The point of view of individual perfection proposed by Wolf accommodates different viewpoints. Wolf argues that unlike the moral point of view, the point of view of individual perfection leaves room for multiple aspects that we consider important. According to Wolf, when examined from the point of view of individual perfection the “goodness of an individual's life does not vary proportionally with the degree to which it exemplifies moral goodness” (1982: 437). Thus, important is the general state of affairs in one's life, not solely the moral one. But what does this general state of affairs consist of? What viewpoints are presented in the point of view of individual perfection? Wolf does not exclude the moral sphere from the good life. She claims explicitly that morality is included in the point of view of individual perfection although its role is limited: “the moral worth of an individual's relation to his world will (...) have some, but limited, value” (*ibid*). We can also look at other kinds of values – e.g. aesthetic, economic, cultural – and add corresponding viewpoints to the point of view of individual perfection without further trouble.

More interesting is the question as to whether there are also other aspects that are important in the concept of the good life and in its evaluation – whether the point of view of individual perfection also includes other categories that need to be taken into consideration. In what follows, I will examine this in more depth. First, I will examine how

Wolf describes a well-rounded life that she considers to be a good one. Second, I will explain the role of meaningfulness in the point of view of individual perfection and in the good life. Wolf talks about the former in “Moral Saints”, about the latter in her more recent writings.

1.3.1 A well-rounded life

According to Wolf, the good life seems to be the life that consists of different kinds of aspects – both moral and non-moral ones.⁷ Wolf claims that the good life is a life that is well-rounded. To be clear, according to Wolf, a well-rounded life is a good life, but she does not argue for any certain approach to well-roundedness. She understands that the condition of well-roundedness would be too strict if filled with certain content. Then we would have just another moral theory that ascribes us the one certain way we should live in order to reach the good life. The latter is something that Wolf avoids. Thus, Wolf does not give a clear explanation of well-rounded life, but just some indication of what it might look like.⁸

As already said, a well-rounded life should accommodate at least some non-moral aspects. According to Wolf (1982: 423), an aspiration to become as moral as possible is not the same as aspiration to become e.g. an Olympic swimmer or a world-famous pianist. If a person wants to become an Olympic swimmer, then she can sacrifice her other desires, but she understands that these other desires can also be worth pursuing. If a person desires to be as morally good as possible, then there is no room for acknowledging other desires. When we act in full accordance with the moral law or promote the happiness of others, then our conduct falls into such a broad sphere that it subsumes all aspects of our lives. Wolf (*ibid*) does not claim that we cannot have a dominant concern when we want our life to be a well-rounded one, but that his dominant concern should not become imperative.

Furthermore, one central problem for Wolf seems to lie in the fact that traditional moral theories understand the concept of the good life as an objective one. There is a certain way one should live. Wolf, on the other hand, does not agree with the purely objective account

⁷ See chapter 1.2 *The shortcomings*.

⁸ Wolf does not give good explanation though why the good life should be a well-rounded one. As we will see later in the last chapter of this thesis, seeing the ideal as a balance between different aspects of life can include well-roundedness and thus also serve better for understanding the concept of the good life. In addition, Wolf (1982: 423) avoids saying that well-roundedness is more of a virtue or has more of a value than things related to morality. Rather, she acknowledges that in the life of moral saints, morality has all the glory and morality does not allow any other aspects to stand beside her.

of the good life – or at least not with the ones that are so extreme. She seems to be inclined to some approach that stands in the middle of objectivity and subjectivity – there is an objective as well as a subjective dimension in her approach to well-roundedness. Wolf admits that there are some things that are usually part of a well-rounded and good life, but she rejects the approaches that are monist or absolute in their spirit. As Wolf writes:

Even if responsible people could reach agreement as to what constituted good taste or a healthy degree of well-roundedness, for example, it seems wrong to insist that everyone try to achieve these things or to blame someone who fails or refuses to conform. (1982: 434)

Last, Wolf (1982: 428) refers to a well-rounded life as a richer one. But she leaves the meaning of the latter open. Does it mean that morality and moral values unfoundedly restrict our lives and thus should not be seen as the most important? If principle-based moral theories do not do a good job in finding the good life, then what are the other options? Should we be inclined towards relativism or pluralism, what provides us the objectivity then – or is there an objective dimension after all? Wolf does not answer explicitly what should be the role of morality in a well-rounded and good life or what is the role of other values in the latter. I will turn to these questions in the last chapter of my thesis. Next, I will explain the role of meaning in connection with the feeling of fulfilment in good life.

1.3.2 Meaningfulness and fulfilment

Wolf claims that one component of the good life is the meaningfulness. As said in chapter 1.1.2 *Cons*, Wolf does not specify how the meaningfulness is related to the well-roundedness. One possibility is to see the meaningfulness as giving the focus to the well-rounded life. The well-rounded life seems to be a good one, but without more precise guidelines that would serve as an anchor it is easy to lose the direction. If we think about Kantian and utilitarian moral theories, we can see their principles as providing the focus to the life. The principles serve as the guidelines that one should follow in order not to get lost in the babel of diverse aspects that our lives consist of. The main principle can work as a lighthouse for the moral agent. In this sense, there might be nothing wrong with stating and following these principles, but the problem is that for moral saints, the main principle seems to have the status of the only escape from immorality. It is important to keep in mind the imperative nature of morality in traditional moral theories.

First, as we saw before, if morality is dominating, then it is hard to see one's life as a well-rounded one. The situation can be understood similarly in terms of the meaningfulness. If morality is providing one with the meaning in life, then it tends to be imperative in nature. The same problems that we saw concerning moral saints and their devotion to morality arise.⁹ Furthermore, concerning the meaning in life, it is important that the relationship between the subject and the object were active: "One must be able to be in some sort of relationship with the valuable object of one's attention – to create it, protect it, promote it, honour it, or more generally, to actively affirm it in some way or the other." (Wolf 2010: 9). But having an active relationship with morality seems somehow just as odd as having morality as the (only) object of desire. Although the life of moral saints has a meaning, moral saints have desires and interests, and they are virtuous, the problem is that all these aspects are rooted in morality and spring from the moral sphere of life.

Finally, an additional way to understand the connection between meaningful and well-rounded life is to see that meaningfulness alone does not make the life good. Meaningfulness is one ingredient or one dimension of a good life (Wolf 2010: 51, 118). We should still look at the good life as a well-rounded one. The relationship between the meaningfulness and well-roundedness is bilateral – they complement each other. Even if there is one particular aspect that seems to be the most important one – that we recognize as giving our life a meaning – it does not mean that other aspects are unimportant. The aspect that gives meaning to our lives does not diminish the importance of other aspects in such an imperative manner.

As it was in the case of well-roundedness, the guidelines provided by Wolf are quite fuzzy in the case of meaningfulness too. Even if we exclude some projects as not satisfying the conditions of meaningfulness¹⁰, we are still left with multiple projects that can make life meaningful. Important is that one is actively engaged with some project that one loves. It may refer again that Wolf is inclined towards some kind of subjectivism¹¹: there are plenty of projects that can bring meaning to life and the meaning itself is related to the subjective

⁹ See chapters *1.1.2 Cons* and *1.3.1 Well-rounded life*.

¹⁰ For instance, Wolf (2010) excludes the lives of a 'pot-smoker, goldfish-lover, or Tolstoy-copier' from the meaningful ones. Even though we are usually reluctant to judge the lives of others as meaningless or not worthwhile, if we see that someone's life consists of smoking pot all day long or taking care of a goldfish, most of us would question the worthiness of these projects. The latter also makes us question the meaningfulness of their lives. Since meaningfulness is one important aspect of good life, we would also be reluctant to consider their lives as good ones.

¹¹ One can also interpret these ideas of Wolf in pluralistic light as we will see later in this theses.

feelings of care and love. Also, the point of view of individual perfection from where we evaluate lives does not add much objectivity to the picture.

In addition to meaningfulness, Wolf brings in the feeling of fulfilment. According to Wolf, “to find something fulfilling is (...) to find it such as to be characterizable in terms that would portray it as (objectively) good” (2010: 24). There is a difference whether one feels fulfilled by something that corresponds to a merely subjective or some objective condition. Even if a goldfish-lover, an all day pot-smoker, or an enthusiastic crossword-puzzle-solver, might feel fulfilled and in this sense their life can be considered to be meaningful, the “apparent condition of meaningfulness they do satisfy (...) is in a certain way defective and less desirable than fulfilment stemming from a more fitting or appropriate source” (*ibid*: 25).

For Wolf, fulfilment is closely related to meaningfulness. Fulfilment emphasizes the role of subjectivity in a meaningful and good life, but it is not merely about this subjective feeling. Strictly speaking, what is valuable is not the on-going state of fulfilment – the pleasurable feeling – but the fact that one is constantly engaged in the projects of worth (Wolf 2010: 27). It is valuable that one has a meaning in life thanks to the fulfilment. In order to feel the fulfilment, one needs to be actively engaged with worthwhile projects.¹² Worthwhile projects are the ones that we consider to be worthwhile also from some external point of view. Wolf sees some objective dimension in the way we evaluate both the worthiness of the projects that create meaning, on the one hand, and the good life, on the other. According to Wolf, we are usually unsatisfied when we cannot see the project being worthwhile in anyone else’s eyes but ours. As Wolf writes:

Our interest in being able to see our lives as worthwhile from some point of view external to ourselves, and our interest in being able to see ourselves as part of an at least notional community that can understand us and that to some degree shares our point of view, then, seem to me to be pervasive, even if not universal. (2010: 31)

But why does Wolf bring in two different categories: why is it necessary to add the feeling of fulfilment to the category of meaningfulness? Why is it important to add an additional

¹² John Kekes (2008: 50–52) talks about enjoyment in life as the by-products of what we do. One of his points is that “we cannot make ourselves enjoy life” – we cannot achieve enjoyment “by aiming at it directly” (*ibid*: 52). Rather, if our actions and goals “are appropriate, the enjoyment of life follows” (*ibid*). The case of the feeling of fulfilment seems to be similar. One can have the feeling as a by-product of some certain action or of the engagement in certain projects, not make oneself to feel the fulfilment.

subjective feature to the picture? After all, we could see love and acting coherently for reasons of love as sufficient requirements for meaning in life, to paraphrase Robert M. Adams (2010: 76). In other words, we can also ask what is in Wolf's reasoning the difference between the meaning and fulfilment? In her response to Adams, Wolf (2010: 111–113) turns attention to the way one can love and still feel that there is something lacking in one's life – there is no feeling of fulfilment. The feeling of fulfilment can be absent in lives filled with love.¹³

The point of view of individual perfection as described by Wolf is compatible with meaning and fulfilment in the good life. The category of meaningfulness is about caring about something deeply and being actively engaged with that object. The feeling of fulfilment adds extra subjectivity to the picture, because it emphasizes the role of the subjective pleasurable feeling that one gets from this engagement. If there is a feeling of fulfilment in one's life, then this is one reason why we tend to see one's life attractive. Still, for both – fulfilment and meaning – there are some objective standards according to which we evaluate different projects. The claim that we value meaning in life rests partly upon the claim that we value the feeling of fulfilment. We are looking for meaning and fulfilment that stems from an appropriate source.

In this chapter I analysed Wolf's characterization of moral saints. If we try to picture a perfectly moral person and a perfectly moral life, then they may not seem perfect for us. First, I described the life of moral saints and their general character. I brought out the advantages and drawbacks. The former can be seen in the goodness of a moral saint, the latter in the limited scope of her interests and desires. Second, I explained that the shortcomings of moral saints occur because they abstain from non-moral interests, values, and reasons that are important for us. When we think about our lives, then most (if not all) of us have interests, virtues and desires that are of non-moral nature. We enjoy different hobbies and activities that do not go against the moral grain, but do not belong to the field of morality either. We like humorous people, who make cynical jokes about oneself and life in general. We pursue things that are not related to morality, but that we still find worthwhile to desire. A moral saint always takes up the moral point of view: she acts from the position that everybody should be seen as equal and treated correspondingly. Yet, in everyday life, we tend to prefer another – the non-moral – point of view in different

¹³ Wolf gives here the examples of a housewife and soldier. It is possible that they really love, they are engaged actively with the object of their love, they life has meaning, but they still lack the fulfilment.

situations as well. This means that in our actions we usually also take into account our own interests or our own preferences besides the moral considerations. Wolf proposes that in search of the good life we evaluate our lives from the point of view of individual perfection instead of the moral one. Individual perfection must not be at odds with the moral point of view, but its scope is wider: non-moral deliberations are added to the moral ones.

Third, I examined further what the good life according to Wolf consists of. A well-rounded life accommodates various aspects. The problem with the life of a moral saint seems to be that morality single-handedly dominates it. In principle-based ethics, it is hard to find an upper limit for realizing the moral principles. Moral claims seem to be imperative in nature and exclude other aspects from life. Although Wolf's approach may refer to subjectivity of the good life, she also acknowledges some objective dimensions that are in play in the good life. Meaningfulness and fulfilment in life are also attached to this objectivity – we do not consider every project to be able to make life meaningful nor do we see every object as suitable for the feeling of fulfilment. Still, Wolf leaves explicitly unanswered what provides us with the objective dimension and what is the role of morality in the good life. I will turn to these questions in the third chapter of my thesis. Before this, I will consider a couple of critics of Wolf's ideas.

2. In response to Susan Wolf

Wolf's account of moral saints has been criticized from different perspectives. It is fair to say that the main critique against Wolf's article concerns her characterization of a moral saint. This is understandable, since that characterization forms the basis for Wolf's other claims. Thus, in order to criticize Wolf's claims about principle-based moral theories, one must bring out the mistakes in her image of moral saints. Vanessa Carbonell is a young philosopher, who has argued against Wolf's way of depicting moral saints. In her article "What Moral Saints Look Like" (2009) Carbonell claims that the incompatibility between moral saints and our ideals can be surmounted. According to Carbonell, the character of moral saints that Wolf has painted is not accurate but self-defeating. Robert M. Adams is also unsatisfied with Wolf's characterization of moral saints and he makes his critique clear in the article "Saints" (1984). For him, the main problem is that Wolf mixes up the features of moral sainthood and sainthood as such.

In what follows, I will first introduce moral saints as Carbonell and Adams picture them and bring out what is wrong with Wolf's approach according to them. I will point out two mistakes that Carbonell claims Wolf to have made in her reasoning. In addition, I will explain how according to both Carbonell and Adams the life of (moral) saints can be a well-rounded one. Second, I will turn to the defence of Wolf. I will show why Carbonell's and Adams' critique is questionable.

2.1 In defence of (moral) saints: Vanessa Carbonell and Robert M. Adams

As said before, Carbonell focuses her critique on the character of a moral saint and on our attitudes towards them. Carbonell argues that moral saints are not as unattractive as Wolf pictures because "moral commitments do not grossly distort an agent's personality to the extent she [*Wolf*] proposes" (2009b: 372). What Carbonell has in mind here is that living the good life from the moral point of view might not be in contrast with living the good life from the point of view of individual perfection. The moral point of view does not change the agent's appeal to us so sharply. According to Carbonell, the mistake in Wolf's reasoning lies in the over-exaggeration of the general aim of moral saints to be moral.¹⁴

¹⁴ I will not study here in depth Carbonell's (2009a, 2009b) critique concerning moral saint's motivation. Her main idea is that moral saint's motivation is *de re*, not *de dicto* motivation. In short, Carbonell claims

Adams, on the other hand, is mainly concerned with the distorted picture of sainthood that Wolf presents. He states his main concern to be “that sainthood, not Kant or utilitarianism, receives its due” (1984: 392). Although Adams does not argue directly against Wolf’s ideas concerning morality and moral ideals, it is interesting to look at his arguments. This gives us another perspective on the problems that Wolf is concerned about. Adams emphasizes the distinction between religion and morality, when recognizing the limited scope of the latter. In Adams’ work, we can find critique against Wolf’s ideas, but it can also potentially support the wider concerns of Wolf that are related to the scope of moral theories. In this sense we can see the two critics – Carbonell and Adams – as also contradicting each other. I will first introduce the moral saints according to Carbonell and Adams. Next, I will consider the two mistakes that Wolf makes according to Carbonell. Last, I will explain why, according to Carbonell and Adams, the life of a moral saint can be a well-rounded one after all.

2.1.1 New versions of (moral) saints

The main concern of both Carbonell and Adams is related to the way Wolf describes moral saints and the impression they have on us. According to Wolf, moral saints are unattractive. According to Carbonell and Adams, one can also be a (moral) saint without the negative ‘side-effects’ described by Wolf. A moral saint can remain perfectly attractive to us. To prove their point, Carbonell and Adams give the examples of the persons whom we consider to be saints but whom we still admire. Carbonell introduces us to Dr Paul Farmer¹⁵ “who attracts friends and followers like a magnet” (2009b: 376). According to Carbonell, Dr Farmer “satisfies the conditions for moral sainthood” (*ibid*: 377) but also “serves as an ‘unequivocally compelling personal ideal’” (*ibid*).

Adams (1984), on the other hand, uses the well-known examples of saints like St. Francis of Assisi, Gandhi, and Mother Theresa. Adams claims that these real life saints “are quite different from what Wolf thinks a moral saint would be” (1984: 392). While Carbonell

that when we ask a moral saint why she acts the way she does, a moral saint refers to a certain action or aim that she pursues, not to morality as such. We are annoyed when moral saints talk about their good deeds and high morality. But if moral saint’s motivation is *de re*, we ourselves interpret their actions as morally good ones and thus they might not be unattractive. I will leave this part of her critique aside, because the way Wolf and Carbonell approach the question concerning the motivation is too diverse and I would say even incompatible with one another. Wolf talks about a moral saint’s motivation in terms of Kantianism and utilitarianism, Carbonell in terms of *de re* and *de dicto* motivation.

¹⁵ Dr Paul Farmer is a real life person, who fought tuberculosis in Haiti, Peru and Russia. Carbonell’s description of him is based upon the book *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World* written by Tracy Kidder in 2003. This is a non-fictional biographical work about Dr. Farmer and his life.

questions Wolf's approach to moral saints, Adams is more concerned with 'the actuality of sainthood'. Adams (*ibid*) is worried about the fact that Wolf uses the examples of real life saints to talk about the moral ones. Adams is not directly concerned with the conditions of moral sainthood nor the unattractiveness of moral saints, but with giving fair standing to the actuality of sainthood.

Carbonell does not draw a contrast between moral sainthood and sainthood as we understand it from the examples of the persons whom we consider to be saints. Carbonell (2009b: 377–378) describes Dr Farmer's life as ascetic, but being ascetic is partly why we admire him. Dr Farmer is a doctor and medical anthropologist and his non-profit organization manages clinics that treat the world's poorest and sickest people. Dr Farmer tries to help as many people as he can. At the same time he is in close contact with people and is compelled to make heartfelt decisions. He is not obsessed with the morality as a whole nor the moral goodness itself. Rather he is obsessed "about the *object* of his concern – the poor, the sick" (*ibid*: 379). Dr Farmer does not worry as much about how he himself is acting, but rather about in whose interests he is acting.

Although Dr Farmer is busy with distributing and creating as much goodness as he can, his life is rarely barren. He finds pleasure in his work itself: his work provides him hobbies and satisfaction (Carbonell 2009b: 378). Furthermore, Carbonell (*ibid*: 378–379) claims that Dr Farmer's life is not merely free from barriers but also flourishing. He is using his "talent and intellect to improve the lives of thousands of people" (*ibid*: 379) – this is what most of us would consider interesting, fulfilling, and deeply satisfying way of living. There are costs to this kind of living – Dr Farmer has to make sacrifices – but it is important that despite these costs, his life is appealing to us. Dr Farmer is "obsessed but not fanatical, ascetic but not self-righteous (...) he is a distinctly human moral saint (...) He proves that someone who exhibits all of the important features of a moral saint can be the sort of person we want to be." (*ibid*: 380)

Adams approaches the criteria of being a saint from a different perspective. Like Carbonell, Adams also rejects the demand for sainthood as being fanatical with producing the good. But instead of explaining this away with the help of showing the possibility for non-moral interests and hobbies that coincide with the activities of the saint, he refers to the substance of being a saint. Adams claims that "the substance of sainthood is (...) goodness overflowing from a boundless source" (1984: 396). One does not need to be

fanatic about producing the good in order to be a saint. Rather one needs to believe in the goodness. This goodness is present in the saints in exceptional power (*ibid*) and this is what makes them saints. According to Adams “saintliness is not perfectionism, though some saints have been perfectionistic in various ways” (*ibid*). Next, I will examine the two mistakes that Carbonell points out in Wolf’s reasoning.

2.1.2 Two mistakes in Wolf’s reasoning

Carbonell supports her characterization of Dr Farmer as a moral saint instead of the one that Wolf proposes with two main claims. First, Carbonell (2009b: 381–385) criticizes the selection of the character traits that Wolf ascribes to moral saints. The problem is their overly positive attitude. In short, Carbonell claims that Wolf misunderstands what it means to have a generally positive attitude towards the world. For Wolf, being virtuous includes the positive attitude. Carbonell (*ibid*: 383) claims that if moral saints always remain positive, then they respond inadequately to some features of the world – e.g. remain positive and indulgent towards persons or actions that actually do not deserve this attitude. In order to prove her point, Carbonell focuses mainly on the virtues of charity – as being ‘charitable in thought’ – and patience.

Carbonell finds support from Julia Driver. In her article “The Virtues of Ignorance” (1989) Driver addresses the problem concerning Aristotle’s claim that a virtuous action involves one being aware of what one is doing, because a virtuous choice must be made based upon practical wisdom. Contrary to Aristotle, Driver claims that there are some virtues that “involve ignorance in an essential way” (1989: 374). Ignorance is understood in terms of being unaware of something. Driver examines the virtues of modesty and blind charity. Driver characterizes modesty “as a dogmatic disposition to underestimation of self-worth” (*ibid*: 378). With blind charity Driver has in mind “a disposition not to see the defects, and to focus on the virtues of persons” (*ibid*: 381). It is “charity in thought rather than charity in deed” (*ibid*). Modesty and blind charity are alike, because both of them involve being unaware about something. In the case of modesty this something is related to oneself, in the case of blind charity more to the outside world.¹⁶

¹⁶ Although these virtues of ignorance, as Driver calls them, have ‘deficiencies’ compared to the other virtues, we still value them. Driver (1989: 383) provides us with three possible explanations for the latter: (1) there is a certain psychological state that has an intrinsic value for us, (2) there is an instrumental value due to these virtues because they generate good, (3) we value the psychological states but we do that for instrumental reasons.

According to Carbonell, we can think about moral saints in two ways: a moral saint as being blindly charitable or a moral saint as “being charitable when charity is *called for*” (2009b: 384). The first one of two fits with Wolf’s characterization of moral saints: they never take a negative attitude towards others. We often admire blind charity, but we admire it to a certain degree (*ibid*). If blind charity occurs in the situations where it is not deserved or ‘called for’, we usually disapprove it. If blind charity were always in play in the case of moral saints, we would not see moral saints as ideal characters. This suits well with Wolf’s ideas, because the blind charity of moral saints is unattractive.

Carbonell argues against the blind charity of moral saints with reference to moral agency. According to Carbonell (2009b: 384), at the same time as moral saints are being as charitable as possible, they are also diminishing their moral agency. We can see one part of moral agency to be the avoidance of ignorance towards the different aspects of the actions that we perform.¹⁷ In the case of blind charity, moral saints are not fulfilling their role to the utmost degree. Since blind charity involves some ignorance, a blindly charitable moral saint “will be much less effective, and much less admirable, as a moral agent” (*ibid*). Thus, according to Carbonell, there is a contrast between the perfect moral agency and the everlasting positive attitude. Wolf’s moral saints cannot possess both.

Carbonell (2009b: 384) offers that instead of being blindly charitable, moral saints are charitable only if charity is *called for* – only if it is warranted. According to Carbonell, this approach to moral saints is more plausible, because it does not diminish the role of moral saint’s moral agency nor their appeal to us. If moral saints are charitable only when it is *called for*, then they are not unattractive to us because of their charity. Carbonell (2009a: 27) questions the reluctance of moral saints to make negative judgements concerning others. Instead of emphasizing the importance of always remaining positive, Carbonell emphasizes moral saint’s task of benefitting others. We expect moral saints to turn their attention to the ones who need as well as deserve their help. Otherwise, when helping people whose intentions are not good, the actions of a moral saint might bring about exactly the opposite of goodness. Blind charity can work against a moral saint’s task of promoting and benefitting others.

According to Carbonell, in order to benefit others, a moral saint can make negative judgements. Carbonell claims that Wolf “is failing to recognize that making a negative

¹⁷ I also discussed the question concerning the ignorance in chapter 1.1 *The life of moral saints*.

judgement *when they are warranted* is an *essential* component in the project of benefiting others” (2009a: 27). Carbonell’s (2009b: 384) point is that the considerations that are taken into account when acting out blind charity are not strictly speaking moral considerations. Instead, in many cases, blind charity may undermine the moral goals.¹⁸ This occurs specially when we think about blind charity in comparison with naiveté. According to Carbonell, these two can be indistinguishable in many cases. Naiveté is not a virtue.

Carbonell’s second concern is related to the previous one. Carbonell (2009b: 386) claims that moral saints are logically self-defeating. Carbonell has in mind that “two or more necessary components of sainthood cannot consistently be instantiated in the same person” (*ibid*). The problem lies in the fact that moral saints should be sincere, but it is hardly ever the case that one can remain positive and charitable towards others at every instance, unless one admits to blind charity. If blind charity is not necessarily or should not be a part of a moral saint’s character – as claimed by Carbonell earlier – then Wolf’s moral saint has to be insincere, at least occasionally: “the moral saint cannot *sincerely* be considerate of illegitimate demands, unless she is completely unaware of their illegitimacy” (*ibid*: 387). Next, I will explain how, according to Carbonell and Adams, a moral saint’s life can be a well-rounded one.

2.1.3 Well-rounded life in accordance with the moral point of view

Different understandings of a moral saint’s character lead us to the question about what it means to take up a moral point of view. In Wolf’s description, a moral saint’s life is not well-rounded. The fact that moral saints issue single-handedly from the moral point of view makes their life strangely barren and unattractive to us. Both Carbonell and Adams criticize Wolf for her approach. Carbonell questions Wolf’s understanding concerning the relation between the moral point of view and the point of view of individual perfection. According to Carbonell, “a moral saint is a *person*, not just a deliberative faculty” (2009b: 396) – taking up a moral point of view does not make one ‘a robot’. As we saw previously, then, for Carbonell, a person whom we call a moral saint can accommodate different character traits and welcome different interests. Moral saints do not refrain from everything besides morality: they just take morality and morally important issues as their main concern. Carbonell understands Wolf’s point of view of individual perfection as “not exactly moral, not exactly egoistic” but certainly containing “elements of both of those

¹⁸ For instance, when the person is acting charitably with another person whose bad character traits cannot be overlooked.

perspectives” (*ibid*: 375). If we present moral saints as persons and human beings, not as machines, then their life can be compatible with the point of view of individual perfection and be a well-rounded one. The latter also include morality.

For Adams, on the other hand, there is an inconsistency between the Loving Saint and the moral point of view. Adams (1984: 394) claims that the Loving Saint fits perfectly into the framework of utilitarian moral theory without taking up the moral point of view described by Wolf.¹⁹ As Adams puts it while citing Wolf:

A utilitarian (...) might argue that for many people a life not "dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole" could perfectly express “recognition of the fact that one is just one person among others equally real and deserving of the good things of life”. (1984: 394–395)

If, for utilitarians, acting morally means, first of all, the improvement of the welfare of others or of society as a whole, then a moral point of view might not be about recognizing one’s equal position among them: “dedication to the good of others is not the same as weighing their good equally with one’s own” (Adams 1984: 395). Adams (*ibid*: 394) emphasizes the role of general utility in utilitarian thinking. The latter can also be purported by pursuing one’s own happiness and perfection. Thus, the Loving Saint must not take up the moral point of view described by Wolf in order to act morally worthy.

In addition to Wolf’s moral point of view, Adams poses an interesting question concerning the limits of morality as an object for maximal devotion.²⁰ Adams (1984: 399) makes a distinction between the ‘perfect obedience to the laws of morality’ and ‘the maximal devotion to the interests of morality’. He claims that Wolf’s arguments do not go against the former, but the latter: Adams questions Wolf’s understanding that maximal devotion can be understood in terms of passion.²¹ According to Adams, “maximal devotion is much more than passion” (*ibid*: 400). Maximal devotion can be understood in terms of religion, not in terms of morality: “Religion is richer than morality, because its divine object is so

¹⁹ For Wolf’s moral point of view, see chapter 1.2.2 *Moral vs. non-moral point of view*.

²⁰ Adams starts her argument with questioning the limited nature of saint’s life. He issues from the understanding that “sainthood is essentially religious phenomenon” (1984: 398) and “saints are people in whom the holy or divine can be seen” (*ibid*). According to him, the interests of saints are dependent upon the interests of god, because “sainthood is a participation in God’s interests” (*ibid*). But Adams claims that god is far from being that limited as Wolf claims moral saints to be – god has time and attention for interests other than morality as well. In addition, “as the author of all things and of all human capacities” (*ibid*), god should also be “interested in many forms of human excellence” (*ibid*) – the latter for the sake of the excellences themselves, not merely for the sake of morality.

²¹ See chapter 1.1.2 *Cons* about Wolf’s critique against morality as the object of desire.

rich” (*ibid*). A moral saint’s life can be a well-rounded one: Wolf’s description of a moral saint’s life does not take into account the limits of morality and moral devotion as such. Next I will turn to defend Wolf’s claims against Carbonell’s and Adams’ critique.

2.2 In defence of Susan Wolf

In counterbalance to the critics, Wolf has proponents as well.²² Most of them try to further develop one aspect of Wolf’s ideas in “Moral Saints”. They hardly ever try to explicitly question the claims of the critics of Wolf. Rather, they just leave them out from the picture. In what follows, I will break the ‘tradition’ and answer to the critics of Wolf. This is relevant because Wolf’s characterization of moral saints is important for her other claims. If it can be shown that Wolf’s critics are mistaken or that their claims are at least questionable, then the ground for making further claims concerning morality and moral theories based on Wolf’s ideas is definitely more solid. First, I will turn to the characterization of moral saints as blindly charitable by Carbonell. Second, I will focus on the question about the essence of moral sainthood according to Carbonell and Adams. Finally, I will turn to the problem concerning different viewpoints and open the door to further questions concerning morality and moral theories that stand in the centre of the outcomes of this thesis.

2.2.1 *Charity and moral saints*

Carbonell claims that Wolf’s moral saint is self-defeating due to the incompatibility in her virtuous character traits.²³ Carbonell finds support from Driver’s analysis about virtues – such as blind charity – that necessarily include ignorance in order to be exercised. In Wolf’s description of the blindly charitable attitude of moral saints, ignorance should have its place. According to Carbonell, this would be incompatible with the moral sainthood as such. Still, there are some weak points in Carbonell’s argument. For starters, it is fair to question whether blind charity is a virtue after all, because “characterized essentially in terms of an epistemic defect of never seeing the bad in others, might well lead the blindly charitable person to support and sustain all sorts of bad habits in others” (Flanagan 1990: 427). If blind charity is not a virtue, then it adds further doubts to the correctness of

²² See e.g. Owen Flanagan’s “Admirable Immorality and Admirable Imperfection” (1986) or Earl Connee’s “The Nature and the Impossibility of Moral Perfection” (1994).

²³ See chapter 2.1.2 *Two mistakes in Wolf’s reasoning*.

Carbonell's understanding of Wolf's moral saints. Again, Wolf does not seem to propose this kind of charity for moral saints.

Furthermore, Carbonell presents the idea that moral saints should be charitable only when charity is *called for*. She claims that this weakens Wolf's characterization of moral saints because this feature (a) would not make moral saints unattractive to us and (b) would contradict with Wolf's understanding of moral saints as never allowing themselves to take a negative attitude towards others and the world. Still, both of Carbonell's claims are questionable. Carbonell does not clarify what she means by being charitable when it is *called for*. If this merely means that one is not blindly charitable, then moral saints can still be unattractive to us – a moral saint can seem 'too good' for us without necessarily being naïve. A person who never acts solely according to her own interests, although remaining charitable only if charity is *called for*, can still be 'too good' as a real life character. A moral saint can be careful about bad people or situations where helping someone or something would definitely not produce any good, but this still leaves room for a zillion situations where a moral saint can show her charity. That might not be too many for moral saints, but probably is too many for us to handle.

Also, remaining charitable only when charity is *called for* does not mean that one has to take a negative attitude towards others and the world. Being reasonable or realistic does not necessarily lead us to a negative attitude. Wolf does not claim moral saints to be charitable in the sense of being naïve. Wolf states that moral saints are 'too good' and the question is whether a moral saint's goodness diminishes her own well-being from the perspective of the well-rounded life. Wolf (1982: 421) says that moral saints need to be 'reluctant to make negative judgements' – important is the general disposition to be positive. Also, in the case of charity, one does not need to take 'an attitude of resignation and pessimism' towards others or the world. Rather, one needs to be able to reason one's way through different situations in a moral way. This is compatible with being virtuous. Moreover, Kantians and utilitarians would demand this kind of behaviour from their moral saints. For Kantians, it is important that one understands, accepts, and follows the moral law. For utilitarians, one should be able to decide in favour of the situations that produce more happiness. Reasoning is needed in both cases. Next, I will turn to the question concerning the essence of moral sainthood.

2.2.2 *The essence of (moral) sainthood*

Wolf, Carbonell, and Adams seem to interpret the essence of moral sainthood in different ways. For Wolf, it is important that moral saints try to be ‘as morally good as possible’ – both, in their thoughts and deeds. Carbonell seems to emphasize the morality of actions over the one of thoughts. For Adams, the essence of sainthood is the goodness in a religious sense. In what follows, I will defend Wolf’s ideas against Carbonell and Adams. First, I will analyse the relationship between a saint’s inner disposition to be moral and her outer deeds. Next, I will turn to the question of goodness in the case of morality.

It seems that, for Carbonell, the essence of moral sainthood lies in the way one acts. When talking about charity as a virtue, Carbonell emphasizes the role of a negative attitude that a moral saint can – and she seems to suggest that even should – take. If a moral saint sees someone acting wrongly, then, according to Carbonell, she must not refrain from the negative attitude that these kinds of actions evoke in her. The latter would make a moral saint insincere. In addition, there can be other reasons why a moral saint might not want to show off her attitude. For instance, Carbonell claims that a moral saint might have “moral reason not be angry at the person preaching hatred on the street corner,” if her “anger might provoke him to become violent against innocent bystanders” (2009b: 381). Thus, in certain situations, a moral saint might have “a reason not to *display*” her anger, “not a reason to *refrain from feeling* it” (2009b: 381). Moral saints can make negative judgements concerning others and the world without really deviating from their title. For Carbonell’s moral saint – Dr Farmer – the goodness and positivity of actions seems to be more important than the same in one’s feelings and thoughts.

This is incompatible with moral saints described by Wolf. Although Wolf states that a moral saint is a person whose ‘every action is as morally worthy as can be’, she also emphasizes the absence of negative attitude toward others in moral saints. This indicates the important role of inner disposition concerning ones thoughts and feelings. As we saw at the end of the chapter *1.1 The life of moral saints*, for Wolf, the distinctive feature that all moral saints share is that they are motivated to be ‘as morally good as possible’. According to Wolf, the Rational and the Loving Saint have different motivation to fulfil this essential feature, but being as morally good as possible is dominant ‘in the determination of their characters’. Moral thoughts as well as deeds are essential for Wolf’s moral saints.

Although Carbonell does not claim that moral thoughts are unimportant, she certainly emphasizes their role less than Wolf does.

This conflict between the views of Wolf and Carbonell can be seen as a disagreement concerning what it takes to be moral: what is the essence of moral saints that makes them the ideals of moral theories? The question is related to the wider problem about what morality can demand from us – about the normative judgments and claims that morality can make. David Heyd (2011) distinguishes between two categories of normative judgments through which morality guides our behaviour. On the one hand, there are judgments related to phenomena that show the open-ended face of morality – goodness, ideals, and virtues. Heyd (*ibid*) sees virtuous character traits and ethical ideals as having no fixed measure. Thus, it should be possible to always improve and realize them further. In other words, there seems to be no certain limit how far can one go with morality – we can always aim at higher ideals.

On the other hand, there are also moral judgments related to moral requirements – related to ‘what ought to be done’. In contrast to the open-ended aspects of morality, moral judgments as requirements have more or less clear criteria for fulfilment or violation (Heyd 2011). If one follows a certain set of principles, then one can be assured she has acted morally. The existence of the fixed set of principles that most of us have approved seems to refer that there is a general ability of moral agents to act according to these rules (*ibid*). This is what morality in general demands from us, but it does not seem to indicate that there has to be an inner disposition to be and to do morally good. This normativity of morality is mainly about human actions.

Still, in the case of moral saints it seems that following the principles of moral theories also leaves room for maximizing the realization of these principles. If we recall Urmson’s claims concerning the limits of morality, then he stated that there are some things that should be morally mandatory for everyone and some that should belong to the sphere of sainthood.²⁴ For Heyd, the latter is related to the open-ended part of morality. One possibility is to see the open-ended facet of morality making it possible for us to distinguish between saints and persons who are just ‘moral enough’. Otherwise – if we would settle merely with the demands of morality and with the display of human actions – we could say that moral saints are not extraordinarily moral, but simply persons who fulfil

²⁴ See chapter 1.1 *The life of moral saints*.

their moral obligations. Indeed, most – if not all – moral theories leave the borders of morality open for their affirmers. For utilitarians, it can be seen in the endless promotion of happiness, for Kantians²⁵ in following the moral law and duties to the utmost degree. In the case of principle-based moral theories the problem seems to be thus again that they do not put down a limit to which the principles should be followed. The realization of the principles themselves can be seen as belonging to the open-ended part of morality.

In relation to the open-ended part of morality, it is easier to understand why Wolf relies mainly upon the goodness as such in moral saints: it is something that differentiates moral saints from ‘normal’ moral agents. In contrast to Wolf, Carbonell refers more to moral saint’s important aim of benefitting others. Since a moral saint can benefit others mainly through her actions, Carbonell’s emphasis on the latter seems justified.²⁶ Nevertheless, it seems that a moral saint’s moral actions are the *outcome* of them already being moral, not the essence of it. There must be something inside moral saints that precedes their actions even if the role of the moral actions is also essential. One can do outer moral deeds without deeper inner implications and we would usually praise it as good moral behaviour. Still, we would not consider a person who acts perfectly moral but does not have a moral mind-set to be a moral saint. We would probably think this person to be just moral enough. Compared to actions, Carbonell seems to give undeservedly little attention to other moral aspects of moral saints.

Adams, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of goodness in the essence of saints.²⁷ For him, the saint’s actions are of second importance. As he states that saints “are not in general even trying to make their every action as good as possible” (1984: 396). In Adams’ interpretation, saints “commonly have time for things that do not have to be done, because their vision is (...) of a divine goodness that is more than adequate to every need” (*ibid*). Since Adams is mainly talking about sainthood in a religious context, we cannot transfer his words directly to the context of moral theories. Yet, there are some interesting

²⁵ In the case of Kantians, it might be hard to understand that there is a sphere of open-ended part of morality. Also, there are philosophers who argue against the possibility of supererogation in Kantian ethics (see e.g. Marcia Baron’s article “Kantian Ethics and Supererogation”). But if we think about moral law, there certainly are different levels according to which one can obey it. We all should obey the moral law, but some of us are able to do it in more perfection than others.

²⁶ Saying that Carbonell does not turn attention to moral saint’s thoughts would be an obvious exaggeration – she does talk about the sincerity as an important virtue of moral saints, about the wish to help others as a crucial feature of them, etc. The problem occurs mainly when she criticizes Wolf’s characterization of moral saints. Then Carbonell’s emphasis is put on moral saint’s actions, not on her thoughts.

²⁷ See chapter 2.1.1 *New versions of (moral) saints*.

implications. Along with the traditional – i.e. religious – sainthood, moral sainthood also seems to imply some sort of special goodness with which the saint is related to or better intertwined with. Also Wolf claims that moral saints are ‘too good’ for us. But what kind of goodness are we talking about here? Adams is certainly talking about the goodness that derives from god. Moral theories talk about goodness as such but they do so without necessarily referring to god.²⁸

An interesting comparison can be drawn between seeing persons as saints or as blessed ones. William Desmond writes about a kind of blessedness that is ‘happiness and more’ – it is being “blessed with goodness and by the good, and perhaps the good things of life” (2001: 71). According to Desmond (*ibid*: 72) we are all already blessed with some goodness as we are seeking it: we could not search for the good if the good was not already at work in us. But there are also people who we see as specially blessed. As Desmond describes them:

A different light shines upon them, shines out of them, from the start. We notice this in special cases, and we say the person is blessed with, say a laughing temperament, or a good memory, or an amiable disposition: as much gift as achievement, a predisposition towards the good that already is a sharing in the good (...) The halo of the good shines around the person, because it is clear that something deeply good is at work in this person (...) This is a blessed condition. (2001: 71).

This kind of being blessed seems similar to what Adams had in mind when talking about goodness in a religious sense. In real life it can be hard to differentiate a person who is being blessed by the goodness described by Desmond from a person who is a saint according to Adams and thus related to divine goodness.²⁹ They both have ‘a different light shining upon them’, but they are still able to live a life that is well-rounded and full of different experiences. Neither being blessed nor being a saint seems to diminish the person’s appeal to us. But the case of Wolf’s moral saint is different because a moral saint can be blessed and believe in goodness, but she is also extremely devoted to morality. Moral saints incline towards maximizing the moral principles because there is no explicit

²⁸ Although the traditional reference to god as the (source of) goodness was still dominating until the 20th century and is also included in traditional moral theories.

²⁹ In a footnote, Desmond mentions that this kind of blessing should be seen as related to the “personalism” of the divine. This also refers that there is a relationship between sainthood – as a religious phenomena – and being blessed.

limit until how far the principles assigned according to moral theories should be followed.³⁰

There is an incompatibility between how Wolf, Carbonell, and Adams see the essence of sainthood. For Wolf, sainthood is about being as moral as possible: this includes both thoughts and deeds. Carbonell puts more emphasis on the importance of actions as she emphasizes the role of a moral saint's actions in benefitting others. For Adams, the sainthood is about goodness. One can think about a saint's goodness as being blessed with the good. If we look at Desmond's description of blessedness, then moral saints certainly seem to be blessed with the good, but in addition, there is an indispensable desire and interest in morality. The latter is dominative: the essence of a moral sainthood is goodness understood in the context of morality. Adams' standpoint talks against Carbonell here as well: Carbonell's critique falls short when we point out the important part of the dimension of goodness or blessedness in moral saints. Carbonell describes moral saints more as regular people who are morally worthy. But if we think about moral theories and the open-ended part of morality, then Carbonell's description looks too moderate. Wolf's description of moral saints is more in line with Adams' understanding about the essence of sainthood. But since we are talking about moral saints, the dominating role of morality is added to the picture. Next, I will examine the relationship between morality and different viewpoints.

2.2.3 Different points of view and morality

As we saw in chapter 1.2.2 *Moral vs. non-moral point of view*, there are different viewpoints from which one can have a look at life. The opinions about the same life can differ depending from the viewpoint. Also, moral saint's attractiveness is dependent upon the latter. In "Moral Saints" Wolf introduces us to two points of view: one of morality and other of individual perfection. Just to review, for Wolf taking up the moral point of view is 'understanding that one is just one person among others'. The point of view of individual perfection is the point of view "from which we consider what kinds of lives are good lives, and what kinds of persons it would be good for ourselves and others to be" (Wolf 1982: 437). The latter viewpoint provides us "with reasons independent of moral reasons (and not

³⁰ Another interesting article "The Paradox of Moral Worth" (2004) is written by Kelly Sorensen and it gives another perspective to the problem. Sorensen analyses person's desire to be morally praiseworthy and its unattractiveness to us. I will not study this here further because the moral saints of principle-based moral theories do not set as their aim to be morally praiseworthy. Rather, their aim is to live moral and they do that by following the principles.

reducible to self-interested reasons) for developing our characters and living our lives in some ways rather than the others” (Wolf 1999: 217).

Carbonell and Adams do not agree with Wolf’s claims about the moral saint and different viewpoints.³¹ Carbonell argues that if we take into consideration her characterization of moral saints, then a moral saint’s point of view might not be that different from the point of view of individual perfection. Morality is also included in the latter. But the fact that morality or the moral point of view is also included in the point of view of individual perfection is not really a critique against Wolf’s claims.³² Wolf does not exclude the former from the latter, but claims that moral saints take up only the moral point of view. Wolf’s idea is that the point of view of individual perfection is broader than the moral point of view. When we assess our life, then we take into account morality as well as other aspects that play an important role in it. There are different kinds of reasons that we take into consideration and all of them are not moral ones. The strength of the point of view of individual perfection is exactly that it provides us with and also allows us to see the reasons that are independent from the moral ones. Thus, Carbonell’s claims do not really go against Wolf’s argument.

Adams claims that a utilitarian moral saint must not take up the moral point of view described by Wolf, because it is not necessary in order to achieve the aim of the Loving Saint. The Loving Saint is the one who can maximize both utility and one’s own happiness at the same time: understanding one’s place among others might not be crucial for a utilitarian moral saint. Adams indicates that for utilitarians morality might not be essentially about others. The moral point of view is different for them: the Loving Saint can turn more attention to herself in order to reach her moral aim. There are other philosophers too who emphasize the role of oneself in our moral reasoning. This is often done with reference to the intrinsic worth of human beings. If one is to respect others for their intrinsic worth, one should also acknowledge the intrinsic worth of oneself. Patricia M. McGlodrick is one philosopher whose writings support Adams’ claims. As McGlodrick writes in her article “Saints and Heroes: A Plea for the Supererogatory” (1984):

³¹ See chapter 2.1.3 *Well-rounded life in accordance with moral point of view*.

³² Carbonell’s claims concerning the viewpoints are based upon of her arguments against Wolf’s characterization of moral saints. But we already saw in the chapters 2.2.1 *Charity and moral saints* and 2.2.2 *The essence of (moral) sainthood* that the latter critique is questionable.

That morality involves something like recognizing and respecting the intrinsic worth or value of human beings is an idea implicit in most, if not all, ethical systems. But necessarily this entails recognizing and respecting the intrinsic worth of oneself. For if all human beings have intrinsic value, then so has each human being (...) we must also have respect for ourselves as beings with inherent worth. (1984: 526)

However, the fact that morality is also about respecting ourselves does not exclude others from the picture. Respecting ourselves as human beings who have an intrinsic worth is compatible with recognizing one's place among others. The main principle of utilitarianism is the principle of happiness. But in addition we should remember their general goal and ask what this happiness serves. We cannot overlook the social aspect of morality – in the case of utilitarians, happiness is still promoted for the general welfare of the society. One can promote one's own happiness, but by doing that she is always connected to the others who live in the society. What matters is the general amount of happiness. If the Loving Saint would be benefitting just herself, then I doubt that the outcome would be greater than it would be in an opposite scenario – when she would try to benefit others. As we saw earlier, moral saints do reason and through this same reasoning, the Loving Saint understands that recognizing one's place among others is important for the promotion of the general happiness in the society. One is having a moral deliberation, if one is looking at the situation “from a point of view that aggregates all the personal points of view into one” (Wolf 1999: 205).

Another aspect that Adams questions is concerned with the scope of morality. He claims that morality cannot be an object of maximum devotion, because morality is not rich enough. According to Adams, in the case of saints, we cannot look at morality on par with religion – religion is something much more. In the light of Wolf's writings, we can interpret this claim in two ways. On the one hand, we can understand Adams' claim as initially directed against the main desire of Wolf's moral saints. But in this case, Adams' claims are not in sharp contrast with the ones of Wolf. Wolf sees sole devotion to morality weird and unhealthy – this is one feature of moral saints that we find unattractive. If we also look at Adams' claim as questioning the reasonableness of a moral saint's maximum devotion to morality, then Adams' and Wolf's thoughts are compatible.

On the other hand, we can understand Adams' claim as indicating the impossibility of moral saints. If morality cannot be the object of maximum devotion in a way that religion

can, then moral saints may remain solely the product of Wolf's imagination without really questioning the ideals of moral theories. In this case, Adams' claim questions Wolf's whole project. Still, the claim that morality cannot be the object of maximal devotion is questionable. We can recall the open-ended part of morality described by Heyd.³³ If there is a part of morality that has no limits, then why should there be a limit that restricts maximum devotion? Adams claims that religion is much richer than morality. He does not explain the basis of his claim, but if we interpret it in terms of goodness and the essence of sainthood, then we already saw that in the case of moral saints, goodness and morality are both integral parts of their character and life. Moral saints are the ideals of moral theories and maximum devotion to morality is compatible with the open-ended part of morality.

Another question is whether maximum devotion to morality is something that we would approve: would we want to live a life dominated by morality? Wolf claims that we would not. Although she criticizes the life of moral saints, she does not claim that moral values are unimportant. Rather, for her the problem lies in the way moral theories usually understand the hierarchy of values, where moral values occupy the highest place. As Wolf writes:

This is not to say that moral value should not be an important, even the most important, kind of value we attend to in evaluating and improving ourselves and our world. It is to say that our values cannot be fully comprehended on the model of a hierarchical system with morality at the top. (1982: 438)

Wolf criticizes the moral theories that issue from one principle. According to these theories, one can live morally, when one is guided by the main principle. Wolf argues that these moral theories are mistaken: they adhere too strongly to the moral point of view and look at life only from this perspective. Carbonell's and Adams' critique seems to miss this point that Wolf makes. They do not pay attention to the character of moral saints as criticizing the status of main principles. The importance of the problems proposed by Wolf lies in big part in the way principle-based moral theories fail to draw a limit for following the principles and thus their conceptions of the good life may turn out to be too extreme.

Wolf does not argue against the importance of morality in our lives, but she leaves unanswered what kind of role we should admit to the moral values in the good life as well as how should we understand the hierarchy of values. This leads us to the central questions

³³ See chapter 2.2.2 *The essence of (moral) sainthood*.

of this thesis: what is the role of morality and moral values in the concept of the good life when we keep in mind the character and life of moral saints? Are there still objective dimensions that should be taken into consideration when analysing different aspects of the good life? How can we understand the good way of living and how is it related to morality and moral theories?

I propose there is a certain set of values, that is important for the good life, but there is not such a strict hierarchy as there is in the case of traditional moral theories. In the case of the latter, in life we should follow the central principle and maximize the highest values of the hierarchy. In the light of Wolf's writings, there appear to be alternative ways of reaching the good life. One way is to see the good life – the maximum – that is looked for as a balance. In this balance, there is an objective dimension and moral values can still play the most important role, but in addition there are also other values that are important for the good life and also help to restrain the domination of moral ones. As we have learned from moral saints, the domination of morality and moral values in life is not the ideal we strive for.

In this chapter I looked how Carbonell and Adams have criticized Wolf's characterization of moral saints. First, I described Carbonell's and Adams' picture of moral saints. Carbonell claims that if moral saints were to be 'as morally worthy as can be', then they could not practice perfect moral agency, because their actions would include ignorance at least to some degree. On the other hand, if some of the traits – such as being charitable to an extreme degree – were not admitted to moral saints, then Wolf's claim that moral saints are unattractive to us, might not hold. In addition, both Carbonell and Adams claim that moral saint's life can be well-rounded despite of the fact that they issue from the moral point of view. Carbonell emphasizes the fact that a moral saint is still a person: although a moral saint takes morality to be her concern, she remains interested in other things as well. Adams claims that, for a utilitarian moral saint, the moral point of view is different from the one proposed by Wolf. Furthermore, he denies the possibility of morality being an object of maximal devotion. According to Adams, we can talk about perfect obedience to moral laws, but not about maximal devotion to morality.

Second, I defended Wolf against her critics. I showed that Carbonell's critique is questionable concerning the blind charity. Blind charity might not be a virtue in the first place. Wolf's moral saint can be charitable only when it is *called for* – what Carbonell

seems to suggest as an appropriate way of charity – and still remain unattractive to us. Carbonell’s critique does not really go against Wolf’s claims. In addition, I examined the essence of moral sainthood described by Wolf, Carbonell, and Adams. I showed that the main aspect of moral sainthood is the intertwining of goodness and morality in moral saints. Last, I explained that Wolf’s understanding concerning the moral point of view holds. I proposed that the good life might consist of finding a balance between the different aspects of life instead of maximizing morality. In this balance moral values can still be the most important ones, but they are not dominating single-handedly – there is no sole aspect that should be maximized in the search of the good life. Next, I will turn to the testing of my proposals.

3. The way to the good life: in search of balance

Wolf urges us to think about the role of morality and moral values in the good life and her claims concerning the unattractiveness of the ideals of moral theories are to the point. Still, there are questions that Wolf hesitates to give a clear-cut answer to. Among others are the questions concerning the role of moral values in the good life, the deeper explanation of the objective dimension of the point of view that one takes in order to evaluate life, and the clarification of what the good life consists of if it should not be concerned solely with morality. In this final chapter of my thesis I propose possible answers to these questions. Also, I will provide explanations why these answers comply with the good life given the way we usually understand it. In addition, I will point out how these answers go well together with Wolf's ideas presented in her "Moral saints" as well as in her later works.

First, I will open the question concerning the objective dimension of the good life with the help of Robert Nozick's experience machine. Further, I will examine the role of moral values in the good life. I will look for the answers to some of the questions that Wolf leaves open. While taking into account Wolf's ideas on the good life, I will examine whether the concept of the good life can be seen in relativistic or pluralistic manner. Second, I will explain how the maximum that we are looking for in the good life can be seen as a balance between different aspects – moral as well as non-moral ones – of our life. I believe that my proposal also provides moral theorizing with a better and more down-to-earth standing in today's world.

3.1 The good life and its objective dimension

Wolf refers to non-subjective values that are in play when evaluating the meaningfulness and fulfilment of lives. She is against subjectivism – the view that moral judgments are "merely expressions of deeply held but unfounded emotional attitudes, the results of human psychology and social conditioning" (Wolf 1992: 786). But she does not explain what these non-subjective values that she is talking about are – according to Wolf, "finding an adequate account of the objective values – that is, of the ways or respects in which value judgments are not radically subjective – is an unsolved problem in philosophy" (2010: 47). It seems that the concept of the good life stemming from Wolf's writings can be interpreted in the light of relativism as well as in the light of pluralism. In what follows, I will first explain the experience machine – a thought experiment

constructed by Robert Nozick. Next, I will examine the good life in the spirit of relativism and see whether Wolf's ideas fit with this approach. Further, I will look at the good life from the pluralistic perspective and provide a Wolfian answers to the questions whether we would want to be plugged into the machine proposed by Nozick and if not, then why.

3.1.1 *The good life and the experience machine*

Robert Nozick's (1974) experience machine is a famous thought experiment that is related to the question concerning the subjective dimension of the good life.³⁴ Nozick describes the thought experiment as follows:

Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life experiences? (...) Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think that it's all actually happening. Others can also plug in to have the experiences they want, so there's no need to stay unplugged to serve them. (Ignore problems such as who will service the machines if everyone plugs in.) Would you plug in? (1974: 42–43)

In short, the experience machine can produce all sorts of pleasant, interesting, thrilling, etc. experiences and these experiences seem as authentic as real life ones. Thus, the quality of the experiences does not diminish because of the machine. These experiences can be the best ones we could ever undergo, if this were our wish and if the machine were programmed accordingly. The question is whether we would want to be plugged in for life or not. Nozick's (1974: 43) answer is that we would not. In general, Nozick emphasizes the role of directness, genuineness of the experiences that we like to have in our lives or that we want our lives to consist of.³⁵

If we try to answer the question in Wolf's spirit, then our answer might be a bit different. Although it would also be negative, there may be other reasons for not plugging into the machine. Besides emphasizing the role of directness to and connection with the actual

³⁴ Although its main aim is questioning hedonism, especially the hedonistic claim that the only things that matter are our pleasurable experiences, it also suits to the given context. The point is that if we really thought that pleasure were the only good, then we would happily accept the proposal to plug into the machine. Still, at least some or most (if not all) of us would not be so eager to do that. In general, the argument can be seen as an argument against any theory of value that puts weight only to the subjective experiences, and in case of hedonism, it is to experiences of pleasure.

³⁵ Nozick claims that (1) "we want to *do* certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them", (2) "we want to be a certain way, to *be* a certain sort of person", (3) "plugging into an experience machine limits us to a man-made reality (...) There is no *actual* contact with any deeper reality" (1974: 43).

world, we would also pay attention to the category of meaningfulness.³⁶ As we already saw, meaningfulness is not solely about subjective pleasurable experiences, but about ‘active engagement in projects of worth’. But can the experiences that are not genuine – not related to the ‘real world’ – fulfil the conditions that make the project worthwhile and thus also make life meaningful? It seems that the experiences created by the experience machine would not satisfy this condition. Next, I will study further why the experience machine would not suffice for the good life by looking at moral relativism and pluralism.

3.1.2 *The good life and moral relativism*

Moral relativism is often referred to when talking about moral disagreements.³⁷ Relativism is seen in opposition with absolutism. In short, it can be understood as a view that sees morality as relative to some group of people. There is no absolute truth in moral judgments (Gowans 2008); moral codes are relative to a society (Wolf 1992: 786). The claim that moral judgments do not present absolute truth can be seen as a metaethical claim. It implies that there are no absolute moral truths. The second claim that morality is relative to some group of people is an empirical claim. It describes the way things are in the world: when we look at the way world is, we see that in practice there are different moral norms in different societies and we cannot say that some of them are true and others are false.

Relativistic views are often compatible with sociological approaches to morality. In general it can be said that the sociological view on morality is based upon the fact that human beings are social beings and are thus constantly influenced by others: individuals feel and share a certain attitude of the group to which they belong. Morality is bound by the way people organize the world in a common way: it is not reducible to individual level. As George Herbert Mead (1972: 253) explains this idea using the example of an audience under the great speaker already at the minimal level of the development of the society: “One is influenced by the attitude of those about him, which are reflected back into the

³⁶ See chapter 1.3.2 *Meaningfulness and fulfilment*.

³⁷ Nowadays, relativism is often used as a negative term, because it roughly implies that different cultures and societies should just keep to themselves and not interfere in matters that are specific to a certain society. This also means that e.g. western people should not judge cannibalism if it takes place in other societies. Still, although few, there are philosophers who declare themselves to be relativists. See for instance David B. Wong’s book *Natural Moralities: A Defence of Pluralistic Relativism* (2006). Also, moral relativism often implies tolerance towards other moral systems. Wong talks about the relation between relativism and tolerance in „Moral Relativity and Tolerance“ (1984).

different members of the audience so that they come to respond as a whole. One feels the general attitude of the whole audience.”³⁸

An interesting parallel can be drawn between Wolf’s views on meaningfulness and Axel Honneth’s theory concerning self-realization. Honneth’s approach to morality is more compatible with Mead’s approach and more different from classical ethical theories. In the case of classical ethical theories, moral norms are explicitly reflected upon in order to influence the conduct of individuals. Honneth also understands morality as being normative, but without reflecting upon certain claims that are e.g. derived from the main principle. Rather, morality is normative with the reference to the implicit barriers that people feel when living in a certain community. It means that there is a certain synergy that is felt by the group members and that assigns the normative rules for the conduct.

Honneth emphasizes the role of self-realization in the good life. According to Honneth (1995: 172), one important precondition for the good life is meeting the conditions for self-realization. In the *Translator’s Introduction* to Honneth’s book *The Struggle for Recognition*, Joel Anderson claims that the conditions of self-realization in Honneth’s theory can be seen as “the establishment of relations of mutual recognition” (1995: x). The self-realization can be understood as individuals becoming autonomous. But the autonomy that Honneth has in mind is socially embedded – it does not issue from a single individual. The self-realization, autonomy, full human flourishing depends upon ‘ethical relations’ such as love, rights, and solidarity. These three form an inter-subjective protection of the good life.³⁹

³⁸ This is similar to cognitive sociologists’ analysis about our cognition. They look at social perspective and analyse human beings first of all as social beings. For instance, according to Eviatar Zerubavel (1997: 6) we are the “products of particular social environments that affect as well as constrain the way we cognitively interact with the world” as social beings. Cognitive sociologists neglect the strictly individualistic understanding of our thinking. They claim that “what goes on inside our head is also affected by the particular thought communities to which we happen to belong” (*ibid*: 9). Inter-subjective world categorizes things according to the standard: “it is a world where the conventional categories into which we force different “types” of books, films, and music are based on neither our own personal sensations nor any objective logical necessity” (*ibid*: 10).

³⁹ What unites these relations is that they share ‘the same mechanism of reciprocal recognition’. Honneth understands love relationships as “constituted by strong emotional attachments among a small number of people.” (1995: 95) Legal relationships are experienced, when “one is able to view oneself as a person who shares with all other members of one’s community the qualities that make participation in discursive will-formation possible.” (*ibid*: 120) Relations of solidarity refer to a need of human beings for “a form of social esteem that allows them to relate positively to their concrete traits and abilities.” (*ibid*: 121)

Self-realization is at the same time individual and inter-individual: it is about a single individual who becomes autonomous and realizes herself, but the individual is related to other individuals and realizes herself according to these relations. If we think about it in terms of meaningfulness, then one can understand the conditions that need to be satisfied for self-realization similar to the conditions that need to be satisfied for the ‘appropriate’ meaning. There needs to be a mutual recognition: in the case of self-realization, one needs to be involved in different relations; in the case of meaning in life, the object of love and fulfillment should also be recognized by others as the object of worth. There is an individual and an inter-individual aspect in the kind of self-realization described by Honneth and in the kind of meaningfulness described by Wolf.

According to Honneth, self-realization is important for the good life. For Honneth the good life is an ethical life, but that does not mean that the good life is a strictly moral life. Honneth understands morality as “the point of view of universal respect” that is concerned with “the structural elements of ethical life” (1995: 172). In this case, morality “becomes one of several protective measures that serve the general purpose of enabling a good life” (*ibid*). Ethical life presupposes a common value-horizon among individuals. As Honneth claims: “For self and other can mutually esteem each other as individualized persons only on the condition that they share an orientation to those values and goals that indicate to each other the significance or contribution of their qualities for the life of the other.” (*ibid*: 121)

The value-horizon consists of an array of life-goals. According to Honneth societal goals can be determined “in terms of a seemingly neutral idea of ‘achievement’ or in terms of an open horizon of plural values” (1995: 126). In either way, further determination is needed because modern societies provide little guidance in measuring multiple goals. According to Honneth, cultural interpretation plays an important role. Thus, “in modern societies, relations of social esteem are subject to a permanent struggle, in which different groups attempt, by means of symbolic force and with reference to general goals, to raise the value of the abilities associated with their way of life.” (*ibid*: 127) Although there is a variety of life-goals, Honneth sees the need for “defining an abstract horizon of ethical values that would be open to the widest variety of life-goals” (1995: 179).⁴⁰

⁴⁰ In *The Struggle for Recognition* Honneth does not explicitly determine the value-horizon, but in his later writings he examines the relation between power and the determination of value-horizon. Also he brings the

Honneth brings in an interesting new point of view that is important for the good life – the point of view of universal respect. For Honneth morality is an important aspect of the good life, but it does not single-handedly determine the life's goodness. Individuals can have different life-goals and according to their life-goals they also consider certain aspects of life more valuable than others. This is surprisingly similar to the combination of the point of view of individual perfection and the external point of view described by Wolf. If we combine these two, then the good life is individual in a sense that there is no single way to it – it can consist of diverse aspects. But we also have the need for some external proof – we consider our lives good when we see them good from some point of view other than our own.

For Honneth, in the point of view of mutual respect the common value-horizon that individuals share – the cluster of shared values – is important. People can have diverse life-goals, but they share some core values that are more or less compatible with general life-goals. Similarly, Wolf assumes that there is a non-subjective dimension in the good life – that is, in life that has meaning and fulfilment. The way we understand what projects and objects are worth pursuing is inter-subjective. But for Honneth the point of view of universal respect is the point of view of morality itself. For Wolf the point of view of individual perfection contains morality, but is not limited to it. It seems that for Wolf, the good life and morality are not merely relative to society, but there is also some deeper objective dimension to them.

Still, it can be argued that different categories – meaningfulness and fulfilment – that Wolf brings into her discussion of the good life can be filled with different content. In case of moral disagreements, there are common categories – for instance, different societies have such a category as moral values – but the problem is that they fill in these categories with different content. In the case of meaningfulness, diverse societies can accept that meaningfulness is an important aspect of the good life, but if they see the opposite projects as being able to provide a meaning to life – if they see different things as valuable – then their understandings over the essence of a good life are relative to the societies.

In Wolf's approach to the good life, there are things that seem generally compatible with relativism. First of all, she questions the absoluteness of moral values. Secondly, Wolf

conception of good closer to autonomy. See e.g. "Recognition and Ideology" (2009) by Honneth and the introduction to *Recognition and Power* (2007) by Bert van den Brink and David Owen.

states that in principle “almost anything that a significant number of people have *taken* to be valuable over a long span of time is valuable” (*ibid*). She claims that things can be valuable because a group of people believes them to be so. This claim can be interpreted as if according to Wolf there were no certain truths that one can take for granted and that can lead one to the good life. Finally, it is unclear, who are the ‘we’ that Wolf is talking about: is it the people who are a part of the western culture, the people who cannot stand moral saints, the people who theorize about morality and moral values, or people who share some other feature? There are several lives that can be good ones and the good life can contain values that are relative to a certain group.

However, Wolf clearly does not want to end up in relativism. She never says that morality or moral values are relative from person to person or society to society. Wolf argues against one single conception of the good life and against the dominating role of morality, but not against absolute morality and objective moral values as such.⁴¹ Wolf’s approach to the good life can be defended against relativistic claims stated in the previous paragraph. First, the fact that Wolf argues against principle-based moral theories and the absoluteness of moral values does not mean that she argues for relativism. There are also other alternative approaches that one can have to morality and the good life. When Wolf refers to things that are valuable because some group of people have thought so at some point of time, then it seems that she is talking about different things in life that can provide meaning and are thus valuable to us. We can say that writing philosophical essays about morality provides a person with a meaning in life because these kind of philosophical essays are valued by a certain group of people and thus the person feels that her project is worthwhile. This does not necessarily mean that the good life is relative: there can still be an objective dimension in it.

Also, one can see a difference between ‘something’s being a value and something’s being valued’ (Kekes 1993: 38; Kekes 1995: 19). In the case of the former, the connection with the benefits and harms is essential (Kekes 1995: 19). Wolf’s claim seems to refer to this. We can interpret it in terms that there are values that are objective, but the things that

⁴¹ Similarly, Alasdair MacIntyre (2000: 213) has argued that there are different values in different traditions. The societies and groups of people can be mistaken and they have to take into consideration that they might fall into epistemological crisis at some point. Still, the fact that traditions can be mistaken and in this process learn from each other does not mean that morality is relative. Instead, it shows that there are some standards that are not merely relative to the tradition itself. There are some standards that can vindicate moral systems in the cultures that have been mistaken.

provide us with the meaning are not values in the strict sense. They are things that are being valued by somebody. Thus, there are things that are values in strict sense and things that are valuable and related to the individual meaning in life.⁴² Finally, there is a question concerning the ‘we’ that Wolf is referring to. I believe that this ‘we’ should not be over-emphasized. I take it as referring to people who are used to living according to the so-called everyday morality. It does not mean that morality is relative to groups of people. Rather, it means that the way we understand the good life is not in accordance with the ones who understand the good life as a strictly moral one.

Although at first glance, the way the good life is considered in this thesis might look compatible with relativism, it would be arbitrary to interpret it as being completely relative to a specific environment, culture, or society that we belong to. The fact alone that Wolf points out different aspects and viewpoints according to which we evaluate lives, recognizes that there are some categories in life that are important and stand above the relative conditions. One example of these categories is the meaningfulness understood in combination with fulfilment. If we think about Wolf’s description of moral saints, about the point of view of individual perfection, about the meaning in life, and about the feeling of fulfilment, she tries to show that there is no one way to reach the good life. The good life is something that consists of different aspects – it is a combination of different interests, values, desires, reasons, and viewpoints. People can live different lives and all of them can be good ones. There are no absolute principles or absolute values that can help us on our way. But while arguing for these claims, Wolf never questions the objective dimension of morality and the good life. Next, I will turn to the question whether this objective dimension can be found in the pluralistic approach to morality.

3.1.3 The good life and moral pluralism

For Wolf, how we exactly understand and live a good life can be relative to a person, but she does not claim the same for morality. In a good life, there is an objective dimension that we take into consideration. Wolf supports some kind of objectivism, but what kind of objectivism are we talking about here? The opposition between relativism and absolutism did not get us any further in interpreting Wolf’s thoughts. Maybe looking at the opposition

⁴² Kekes has in mind that we can make mistakes in our valuing: there are so called ‘real values’ and things that are being valued. This can also be compatible with Wolf’s writing.

of moral pluralism and monism is more fruitful.⁴³ Moral pluralism can be defined in different ways. The most common is to understand moral pluralism in terms of values: it is a view according to which diverse values are not reducible to a single one.⁴⁴ Besides values, it can also refer to principles. In her “Two Levels of Pluralism”, Wolf describes pluralism as follows:

Pluralism in ethics (...) is the view that there is an irreducible plurality of values or principles that are relevant to moral judgment (...) the plurality of morally significant values is not subject to a complete rational ordering (...) no principle or decision procedure exists that can guarantee a unique and determinate answer to every moral question involving a choice among different fundamental moral values or principles. (1992: 785).

In short, according to pluralists, there can be multiple values and principles that are not reducible to a single one. In the context of the good life this leads us to the understanding that human lives can be good in various ways: there is not one single rule that has to be followed in order to live well.

Although Wolf does not explicitly claim that she is a pluralist she seems to be so inclined. We can see it in the way she balances between the claims that there are multiple values and there is no one way to the good life, on the one hand, and the claims that there is some sort of objective dimension in the way we evaluate lives, on the other. She does not give explicitly her voice to pluralism, but certainly does not argue against it either. As Wolf ends her “Two Levels of Pluralism”:

Pluralism is offered, not as a challenge to absolutism, but as an option for those of us who find ourselves for other reasons unable to unwilling to be absolutists. Pluralism offers an answer to the question of how a commitment to objectivity in ethics can be reconciled with pervasive and persistent disagreements, given the very significant possibility that rational reflection and empirical fact may never be sufficient to resolve them. (1992: 798)

In addition, in *Freedom Within Reason* (1990) Wolf argues for the view of normative pluralism: “the view that although Reason constrains values it does not constrain them

⁴³ This is not the only way to understand these oppositions. For instance, Wolf contrasts pluralism with absolutism.

⁴⁴ See e.g. Elion Mason’s compendious article “Value Pluralism” (2011) in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

completely, and that therefore there may be two or more normative positions that are equally and maximally supported by Reason” (1990: 135). Normative pluralism supports the objectivity of values, but according to this view “values and value judgments are *partially* objective” (*ibid, emphasize added*).

Wolf argues that if we have to choose between different actions, there is no certain answer to the question what kind of action we should perform. Indeed, it is often the case that in situations with multiple choices there are no clear-cut solutions: different reasons that we take into consideration do not provide us with the answer, they just limit the choice. As also Douglas W. Portmore argues “the relevant reasons do not require performing some particular act, but instead permit performing any of numerous act alternatives” (2012: 24). According to Wolf:

The fact that Reason cannot choose between two particular actions or policies, or even two particular systems of value or normative theories, does not imply (...) that Reason does not constrain the options among which it fails to choose (...) it may point to the fact that the truth about values, even in conjunction with, say, the truth about human psychology and concrete circumstances, is merely insufficient to determine a single specifiable way of life. (1990: 135)

Wolf emphasizes that although the debate over the objectivity of the values usually goes about moral values, she is also interested in other kind of values: “there may be a plurality, not only of good moral outlooks, but also of good aesthetic values and of good personal ideals” (1990: 137).

Being inclined towards pluralism does not mean that there cannot be any universal or objective claims concerning the good life. Pluralism does not exclude objectivity. Important is the personal satisfaction as well as the moral merit – these two are linked with each other in a good life (Kekes 1993: 161). Moral merit is not merely relative. As we have seen, Wolf believes in some objective standards that we are looking for and that we take into consideration in search of the good life. Wolf admits that there is an objective dimension in the good life. As we saw in chapter 1.3.2 *Meaningfulness and fulfilment*, there are projects that are not suitable for the meaningfulness in life. There are things that we find valuable and things that we do not. We want to see that the projects that we are engaged in, the way we are, and the way we live is valuable from some other point of view besides our own.

Wolf does not argue against the objectivity of the values. She just leaves open the exact nature of this objective dimension because she claims that no exhaustive explanation has been provided yet. Wolf (2010: 46) is reluctant to agree with philosophers who argue for the inter-individual account of values as well as with the ones who refer to the hypothetical responses of idealized individuals or groups. Against the former, Wolf claims that “the history of art, or for that matter of morals, seems ample testimony to the view that whole societies can be wrong” (*ibid*). Concerning the second view, Wolf (*ibid*) cannot see why the value of an object should depend upon an imaginary individual rather than upon us – the people who actually value the object. One possibility is to see this objective dimension in humanness as such.⁴⁵

Aristotelians emphasize the importance of the objective dimension among human beings and their lives. In “Moral Saints”, Wolf mentions that her “remarks may be taken to support more Aristotelian (...) approach to moral philosophy” (1982: 433). Let us see next whether these two approaches coincide with one another. Martha Nussbaum is one of the Aristotelians who argues for the shared features of human beings. Nussbaum (2000: 170–171) points to the care with which Aristotle described the spheres of experience of human beings that virtues correspond to.⁴⁶ If one is living a human life, then one’s experiences fall into these spheres: one cannot escape them “no matter where one lives (...) so long as one is living a human life” (*ibid*: 171). For instance, when we think about the sphere of fear – and especially about the fear of important damages such as death – then everybody has ‘some attitude and corresponding behaviour’, towards her own death. One can ask what kind of attitude and behaviour is considered to be appropriate, but the sphere itself is the same.

Nussbaum examines human life and brings out the spheres that we can find in human life in general – regardless of the specific culture.⁴⁷ Nussbaum (2000: 176–177) lists among others mortality, body, pleasure and pain, cognitive capability, practical reason, and humour. Based upon these spheres, she claims that there is an objective dimension according to which we can compare and evaluate different lives and different moral

⁴⁵ Wolf (1990: 135) mentions ‘the truth about human psychology’. She obviously refers to the shared features of human beings.

⁴⁶ In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle brings out spheres like fear, pleasure and pain, getting and spending, honour and dishonour, anger, self-expression, conversation, social conduct, shame, indignation.

⁴⁷ Nussbaum says Aristotle’s approach to be the role model of her list.

systems. Nussbaum agrees with the critique that there is no pure access to human nature as such. But she claims that there is human life as it is lived and in this human life “we do find a family of experiences, clustering around certain focuses, which can provide reasonable starting points for cross-cultural reflection” (*ibid*: 177).

In this light, Nussbaum’s standpoint looks compatible with Wolf’s views. Nussbaum’s theory about the shared experiences can help us provide an answer to the question why some lives are better and why some projects are more worthwhile than the others. It is that some lives are more compatible with the common features of humanness and some projects help promote these features more than others. Aristotelians provide an objective dimension to the evaluation that Wolf has been looking for. Still, there is an incompatibility between Wolf and Aristotelians. Namely, according to Aristotelians, because of the shared aspects of human nature – the ‘features of humanness’ – there should also be one single account of human good. For Aristotle, the human good consisted of virtuous activities. As Kraut (2014) has put it, living well for Aristotle consists in ‘lifelong activities that actualize the virtues of the rational part of the soul’. For Wolf, on the other hand, there is no single account of human good, but several, and this is likely why Wolf ultimately refrained from approving Aristotelian virtue ethics. There are things that we exclude from the good life, but there is not a sole solution for finding it. Human good as such cannot be determined in an absolute way.

There are also other philosophers who believe in a plurality of values and add an objective dimension to the picture. John Kekes is one of the most famous contemporary pluralist who states that there are certain features that are peculiar to human beings. Kekes (1991: 28) points out three kinds of facts that represent universal human characteristics: the facts of the body, the facts of the self, and the facts of social life. With the facts of the body, Kekes has in mind human characteristics that are physiological – that “determine the structure and function of the human body” (*ibid*). The facts of the self are psychological characteristics. These include having “capacities to learn from the past and plan for the future”, “view of our talents and weaknesses”, and “attitudes (...) toward our family, illness, death, toward the young and the old, success and failure” (*ibid*). The facts of social life are concerned with the aspects of our lives that force cooperation – e.g. vulnerability, scarce resources, bringing up a child, limited strength, intelligence, and energy. These require “social organization that, in turn, depends on the adjudication of conflicts, handing

down customs, respect for authority,” etc. (*ibid*). These three types of human characteristics “establish what must be the minimum conditions for human welfare” (*ibid*).

As a pluralist, Kekes claims that “human lives can be good in many different ways” (1991: 147), but at the same time there are universal claims based on the facts of the body, the self, and social life that are ‘equally binding on all moral agents’ (*ibid*). These universal claims are not sufficient for the good life, but are the minimum human needs that must be met. We should think about them as conditions that satisfy the basic needs of human beings – these needs “are the same for all human beings at all times and all places and under all conditions” (Kekes 2008: 95–96). The good life also includes other things, but these can vary from individual to individual or from society to society. The plurality of values, principles, and goods allows this kind of variation without diminishing the importance of universal claims.

The connection between Kekes’ approach to objectivity and Wolf’s ideas concerning the good life might not be that clear at first glance. How can the determination of basic facts about human beings lead us closer to deciding what life is a good one? As we saw in chapter 3.1.1 *Meaningfulness and fulfilment*, there are some projects that are more suitable for creating the meaning in life and some that are less. Similarly, when we think about the good life, there are some lives that we consider to be better than others. The objectivity that Kekes offers is about the basic needs and thus not refined enough to suit for the latter purposes.

Nevertheless, we should remember that determining the good life is not really Wolf’s purpose. There is no single way to a good life, because there is no single good life.⁴⁸ There is a plurality of values – some of them more and some of them less individual. Among others, there are values that are objective and valid for all. Still multiple lives that accommodate a plurality of values can be good ones. The sphere of ethics can be understood wider than morality in terms of the good life: if we think about ethics in terms

⁴⁸ Also Kekes (2000: 98) argues that meaning in life cannot be found when looking for a general answer. There are individual differences and these differences are not merely variations, but meaning in life derives from different sources.

of how to live well, it may not be merely about morality and moral values.⁴⁹ As Wolf claims:

[a]ppreciation of the Good need not be confined to appreciation of the moral Good. Indeed, in certain contexts, appreciation of the moral good may interfere with one's ability to appreciate the non-moral good or with one's ability to recognize reasons for preferring a morally inferior course of action. (1990: 137)

It seems that Kekes' pluralistic view on morality and his understanding that there are things common to all human beings, are indeed compatible with Wolf's ideas concerning the good life. Kekes examines human beings according to our physical, psychological, and social features and points at the objective dimension that we all share. With reference to these features, Kekes claims that there are objectives that need to be fulfilled for the minimum welfare of human beings. There is a plurality of values and they have an objective dimension due to our common human needs.

According to Wolf, there seem to be some values that are more basic – we want to see these values as objective. Kekes offers us a possibility to see these values as stemming from the shared essence of human beings and human life. Kekes (1993: 18–19) names these values primary ones: they are resulting from the basic needs of human being and related to benefits and harms that are universally human. Since there are physiological, psychological, and social facts, there is also plurality among primary values. In addition, there are also secondary values. The secondary values reflect the differences among individuals, societies, traditions, and historical periods. These values depend upon the life that we are living. There are different kinds of lives and in different lives different things can be rightly valued. After all, our basic needs can be satisfied in different forms and ways – e.g. we need to eat, but there can be a variance in what, where, and how we eat. The way we see the good life can vary from individual to individual and from society to society.

We can combine Wolf's conception of the good life with Kekes' understanding of the plurality of values. We can understand the primary values as providing an objective dimension to Wolf's conception of the good life. The primary values are naturally occurring values and can be seen as the most important ones. We can think about primary

⁴⁹ In this light we can also draw a connection between Honneth's and Wolf's views. For Honneth, morality is one part of the ethical – the good – life. For Wolf, there are multiple aspects that constitute a good life – some of them are moral ones, but not all.

values as being the closest to the moral sphere of our lives. Kekes (1993: 19) also exemplifies the distinction between primary and secondary values with the distinction of moral and non-moral ones. Indeed, when we think about the features that all human beings share, then by large moral values seem to fall under one of the three facts that Kekes points out. Also, when we think about Wolf's understanding of the moral point of view⁵⁰, then it seems that the values upheld when taking up the moral viewpoint are compatible with Kekes' description of primary values. Primary values can be seen as a core of what it takes to live a human life and upholding them implies that we see ourselves just as humans among other humans.

We saw earlier that Wolf does not use the term 'moral values' when describing pluralism, but refers to 'morally significant values'. This change of terminology looks like a good idea. Primary values described by Kekes are related to moral sphere, but to call these values strictly moral values is a bit sudden. Especially when we think about the primary values in terms of basic needs that humans have. The values that are related to basic human needs are certainly morally significant ones, but drawing a direct line between e.g. the need to eat and a moral value seems some how too sharp. The morally significant values can be seen as the most important ones. Morality plays an important role in Wolf's concept of the good life, but besides moral reasons and values, there are other reasons and values that are important for us as well

Wolf's conception of the good life is compatible with pluralism also when we think about meaningfulness and well-roundedness. There is an objective dimension in her understanding of the good life and the role of the meaningfulness in it, but plurality of things can provide meaning in life. We can interpret it in terms of primary and secondary values. The meaningfulness itself is important to us because it is closely related to the shared features of human beings. It is an objective category of the good life. But there is a plurality of things that can provide our lives with the meaning. These things are – similarly to secondary values – dependent upon individuals and societies.

The questions concerning the experience machine can also be answered in the light of pluralism and the meaningfulness: we would not want to be plugged into the machine because the good life is not merely about subjective pleasurable experiences, but accommodates the category of meaningfulness and there is a plurality of objects and

⁵⁰ See chapter 1.2.2 *Moral vs non-moral point of view*.

projects that can fulfil this condition. The meaning can be provided by different things in life, but there is also an objective dimension according to which we evaluate the worthiness of different projects and objects. But our evaluation is not purely individual: it is important for us to see life from one or another external point of view. We can agree with Kekes and say that there is a plurality of values: some of them might be more, others less important to us. But morally significant values – i.e. the primary values – are the values that can be seen as related to the essence of being a human and living a human life. Similarly, the meaningfulness can be seen as being tightly related to the shared core of human life. Satisfying the condition of meaningfulness can be understood as an essential part of the good life. In the case of the experience machine, we have subjective pleasurable experiences, but these experiences do not provide our life with the meaning. There is a difference whether a life is a ‘happy’ or a meaningful one. The two do not exclude each other, but for the good life the meaningfulness seems to be essential. In the good life, there is a strong subjective dimension, but the good life seems not to be limited by that. Next, I will turn to the further question concerning what might be the essence of the good life.

3.2 Finding the maximum in balance

It looks that principle-based moral theories lead us to the life where we maximize one aspect – where we maximize morality. Our conduct should be led by the principles of morality. A moral saint is a person, who maximizes morality and lives according to moral principles, but she is not the person we would want to be and her life is not the one we would want to live. Thus, there is a question: if maximizing morality does not lead us to the good life then what does? In a nutshell, we can sum up the argumentation concerning the good life so far as follows:

- (1) The broad aim of moral theories is to help us to find the way to live well. The conceptions of the good life vary among moral theories.
- (2) According to principle-based moral theories there are certain principles that one should follow in life. One of these principles is authoritative before others.
- (3) It is hard to find a limit to the extent to which one should live according to moral principles. Principle-based approach to morality seems to lead to the maximizing of morality.

- (4) The moral saints and their lives are unattractive to us. Morality dominates their character and life too strongly. We don't see the life of a moral saint as the good life.
- (5) We evaluate lives from the point of view of individual perfection that accommodates different viewpoints: the good life consists of different aspects – moral and non-moral ones. The good life should be a well-rounded one.
- (6) In addition, the meaningfulness may be an important condition for the good life. The meaningfulness can be seen as providing the focus to the well-rounded life. In the case of principle-based moral theories we can see the principles as helping us reach the meaningful life, but in their case it seems that the meaning is provided by morality alone.
- (7) Still, there are multiple projects and objects that can provide life with the meaning. The relationship between the condition of meaningfulness and well-roundedness is bilateral. Meaningfulness is one aspect of the well-rounded life, but also the well-roundedness is one condition that has to be preserved in the case of meaningfulness. The project that provides us with the meaning should not single-handedly dominate our life.
- (8) We can see this approach to the good life as a pluralistic one. There is a plurality of values, reasons, interests, projects, etc. that can be related to the meaningfulness and well-roundedness of life. Although there is a possibility of variance, there is an objective dimension in the good life and in our evaluation of it. The objectivity is based upon the common features of humanness – there are minimum conditions that need to be fulfilled in order to satisfy the basic human needs.
- (9) There are morally significant values. These values do not dominate our lives, but are nevertheless the most important ones. Thus, morality still has an important role to play in the concept of the good life, but the good life is not about the maximizing of one single aspect of our lives.

We saw that morally significant values provide the minimum conditions for human life – these are the basis for the good life. But what is the maximum for the good life? Continuous maximizing of one aspect does not do the job. The question arises as to

whether we can find the maximum in maximizing after all.⁵¹ Moral theories should avoid the outcome that the maximum of the good life turns out to be maximizing itself. It seems that in the case of moral saints – in the case of principle-based moral theories – this cannot be done: it is hard to determine the limit to which the principles should be followed. For moral saints, being moral seems to end up with maximizing morality. Their concepts of the good life differ, but the life that we would end up with by following their principles would be similar – it would be dominated by morality.

If we think about the good life in a pluralistic manner, the maximum might not be found in maximizing. Although morally significant values play the most important role at the minimum level of the good life, they must not dominate the good life in its maximum. One possibility is to understand the good life in terms of balance. This balance can consist of multiple values, interests, desires, and reasons. It is important that morally significant matters have a strong standing in this balance, but they should not become dominating. Similarly, when we think about the projects that provide us with the meaning in our lives and make us feel fulfilled, then these projects should not single-handedly dominate. Wolf talks about projects that are not suitable for giving meaning: there are objects that are not worthy enough to provide the meaning in our lives. Indeed, I can love hot chocolate and see it as contributing to the goodness of my life. It can provide me with plenty of pleasurable experiences, but seeing it as the main object that provides me with the feeling of fulfilment seems somewhat off. There is nothing wrong with hot chocolate, but there seems to be something weird about the role I give to it in my life.

But is there any object at all that, when dominating, can give our life meaning in a way that would be sufficient to satisfy the condition of the good life? It looks doubtful. In other words, it seems to me that it does not really matter whether the project of our lives is drinking hot chocolate, healing the sick, or reading philosophy. In all of these cases, the problem lies in the fact that these actions are maximized. We also see a qualitative difference between these projects, but this is another question. In light of the good life, the main problem seems to lie in the domination of one aspect over the others.

We find morality as unsuitable for dominating life in the case of moral saints – we say that this life is not a good life for us. But what would be better suitable for making the life good

⁵¹ Wolf (2010: 109) also indicates that there is no reason to maximize meaningfulness. She claims that it does not look reasonable nor intelligible to make one's life as meaningful as possible.

than morality? It seems to me that the maximum that we are looking for in the end does not consist in maximizing, but in balance. There are projects that can be better or worse for creating meaning, there are values that are more or less important, there are reasons that are more or less sound, and there are actions that are better or worse. But what is important in the end is that our life would not consist of a single one of them. There should be a balance between different values, interests, and desires. There is no single way to the good life, but there is a certain way one can deprive it – by letting one aspect to dominate single-handedly.

Seeing the maximum in balance is well compatible with the condition of well-roundedness that Wolf sees relevant. Well-roundedness itself seems to refer to a sort of balance in life. But it can be easier to understand the importance of different kinds of aspects of our lives in terms of balance instead of well-roundedness. Balance as such seems to refer that there are several aspects in play. Also the meaningfulness can still be an essential part of the good life – it can still serve as providing a focus. But while acknowledging different viewpoints to life, different aspects of life, and different projects that can provide us with the meaning in life we can still acknowledge the importance of morality in it. Moral values can be seen as the most important kind of values, since they are closely related to the shared content of human life.

For some reason Wolf does not want to go that far with her analysis and state the ingredients of the good life. She even avoids determining the role of moral values in the good life. She probably wants to leave these questions open, because every approach to morality and the good life is accompanied with some problems. On the other hand, it seems to me that declining from giving any wider answers to the questions concerning the role of morality and moral values in our lives as well as the issues related to the objective dimension of values, underestimates moral theories. We can keep on thinking that the good life can differ among individuals and still state that there is a plurality of values, where moral values play a prominent role.

Moral theories might not indicate the path to the good life, but they can show us the importance of moral values. Morally significant values do play a relevant role in the balance that should be found in the good life. These values are closely related to the objective dimension of the good life, but in the state of balance they stand next to other values that can be of non-moral kind and are nevertheless important to us. There are things

that are not worthwhile and draw us away from the good life, but it is essential to understand that multiple lives can be good. After all, I can enjoy hot chocolate, take care of sick people, and devote all of the beautiful springtime to writing a thesis that only a handful of people will ever read, and still live a life that is a perfectly good one. The good life, the maximum, and the balance that we are looking for may be about the absence of dominance not about the determination of the ingredients of the good life.

Conclusion

In this thesis I focused on Susan Wolf's view on moral perfection and the good life. With the help of moral saints, Wolf wants to show that moral perfection does not lead to a good life. Moral perfection belongs to the perfectly moral life, but this is not the life we would like to live. Rather, it turns out to be the outcome of principle-based moral theories. In general, Wolf argues against moral theories that press for living according to the leading principle of morality. In other words, Wolf argues against the moral theories that state that we should live according to moral principles in order to live the right way and thus also reach the good life understood accordingly. The problem is that these theories do not seem to draw an explicit line to which extent it is mandatory for a moral agent to follow the principles and to which extent is the agent already going beyond the necessary limit – they do not make use of the concept of the supererogation. Thus, if we follow their teachings to perfection, then it seems that we end up with maximizing morality in our life. The concepts of the good life differ among theories as well as among different people, but at least the life that we reach by maximizing morality does not seem to be the life we would like. Following Wolf's lead, I examined the question concerning the role of morality in the good life. If we agree with Wolf's understanding, it is unclear what kind of role morality and moral values can play in our lives after all. In addition, there are the questions about the objectivity of values and the objective dimension in the good life.

I arrived at the conclusion that although we may not like to live a perfectly moral life, morality still plays an important role in the good life. The concept of the good life is not purely subjective – there is also an objective dimension. One possibility is to see this objective dimension in morality. First of all, when we evaluate lives from the point of view of individual perfection as Wolf proposes, then the objective dimension of our evaluation can be seen in the point of view of morality. Wolf never excludes the moral point of view from the picture, she just adds another – more pluralistic – dimension to it. Furthermore, when we think about meaningfulness that is important in the evaluation and in the good life in general, there is an objective dimension in this category as well. Meaningfulness is essential for the good life because it provides the well-rounded life with a focus. The values are realized in different ways in different lives, but the objective dimension of the good life can be found in the shared features of human beings. These features form the basis for universal claims that satisfy the basic needs when fulfilled. Basic needs are essential for the minimum level of human welfare. We can see these features as the basis

for moral values – or rather, for the values that are morally significant. These values provide us with the objective dimension, but do not exclude other kinds of values from the picture. Moral values are still essential to us. The fact that Wolf criticizes the ideals of principle-based moral theories does not mean that moral values are unimportant.

If following the principles may not bring us closer to the good life according to common sense, it seems that the good life for us is not about maximizing one single principle or one set of values. But if maximizing morality does not do the job, how can we reach the good life: What is the essence of the good life? I proposed that we can find the good life when we look for a balance between different aspects of our lives. This balance can be seen as a maximum, but it is not about maximizing. We have different values, principles, reasons, interests, and desires. They can be moral as well as non-moral. In the balance that we are looking for, it is not determined what kind of values, principles, reasons, interests, and desires one must have and promote. The ratio between different aspects is also not dictated. Rather, it is important that one aspect would not single-handedly dominate over others. If maximum devotion to morality that brings the objective dimension to our lives does not look suitable for the good life, it is hard to imagine why should any other.

I arrived to these conclusions by taking the following three steps. In the first chapter of my thesis I focused on Wolf's characterization of moral saints. Wolf's picture of moral saints is provocative as it questions the ideals of principle-based moral theories. According to Wolf, if we try to picture a perfectly moral person and a perfectly moral life that corresponds to principle-based moral theories, then these ideals can be perfectly moral, yet they are not perfect for us. The problem lies in the way principle-based moral theories emphasize the realization of the leading principles and the leading values. The problem is that following the leading principle and leading values tends to lead to the maximizing of these principles and values. In this chapter I first described the general character and life of moral saints. I brought out the pros and cons of being a moral saint. The former can be seen in the goodness of moral saints. The latter lies in the limited scope of their interests and desires. Second, I explained that the shortcomings of moral saints occur because they abstain from non-moral interests, values, and reasons that are important to us. The general problem is that their life is limited to the moral sphere. The life of a moral saint does not look like a well-rounded one: morality may become single-handedly dominating. This leads us to the second concern of Wolf – the scope of moral theories. If moral theories

remain true to the moral point of view that is peculiar to them, they may not comprehend all the facets of our lives. Our lives consist of moral as well as non-moral aspects. When the latter is left aside, then the image remains partial. The principle-based moral theories may not adequately take into consideration the whole of our lives, but just the moral domain – the moral sphere. Wolf proposes that in search of the good life we evaluate our lives from the point of view of individual perfection instead of the moral one. The point of view of individual perfection allows us to see the objective as well as the subjective dimensions of the good life. It also takes into account moral as well as non-moral aspects. Finally, I examined more deeply how Wolf understands the good life. I brought out well-roundedness, meaningfulness, and fulfilment that Wolf sees as important aspects of the good life. I explained that these categories are compatible with the point of view of individual perfection. Furthermore, they complement the point of view of individual perfection by bringing out important aspects that the good life ought to accommodate. According to Wolf, it is important that the good life were meaningful. Meaningfulness can be understood as providing a focus to a well-rounded life. The meaning in life is related to the feeling of fulfilment. There are subjective and objective elements included in these categories. The feeling of fulfilment is subjective: the objects and projects that we are engaged with depend upon individual. But we want our projects that provide us with the meaning to be approved from some point of view external to ourselves as well. We need some sense of objectivity.

In the second chapter of my thesis I took into consideration Vanessa Carbonell's and Robert M. Adams' critique against Wolf's characterization of moral saints. First, I described Carbonell's and Adams' understandings of moral saints. They claim that moral saints are not unattractive as Wolf claims, that they are suitable role models after all. Next, I brought out the mistakes in Wolf's reasoning according to Carbonell and Adams. By bringing in the virtue of charity, Carbonell claims that Wolf's moral saints are self-defeating. In addition, there is a confusion concerning the viewpoints that moral saints take up. According to Carbonell, moral saints can have interests and desires of different kind – morality and a moral point of view do not exclude other aspects of life. Moral saints might take up the moral point of view, but the moral point of view itself is compatible with the point of view of individual perfection. Also according to Adams, taking up the moral point of view is not as extreme as Wolf describes. Both Carbonell and Adams claim that moral saint's life can be well-rounded despite of morality being their main concern. Second, I

defended Wolf against her critics. I showed that Carbonell's critique is questionable concerning the virtue of charity: moral saints are not self-defeating, rather it seems that Carbonell's critique is self-defeating. It is doubtful whether blind charity is a virtue after all and that moral saints described by Wolf should have blind charity in their arsenal of character traits. Next, I examined the essence of moral sainthood described by Wolf, Carbonell, and Adams. I showed that the main aspect of moral sainthood is the intertwining of goodness and morality in moral saints. In addition, I explained that Wolf's understanding concerning the moral point of view holds and Adams' critique concerning the incompatibility of the utilitarian moral saint and the moral point of view misses the essence of moral sainthood. Finally, I proposed that the good life might consist of finding a balance between different aspects of life. In this balance moral values can still be the most important, but they are not dominating single-handedly. There is not one single aspect that should be maximized in the search for the good life. Next, I turned to test my proposal.

In the third chapter of my thesis I argued for my proposals concerning the good life. First, I examined with which wider approach to morality the Wolfian concept of the good life complies. I opened the question with the help of Nozick's experience machine. I compared Wolf's views with relativism and pluralism. Wolf's views are not compatible with relativism. Although different lives can be good ones, there are limits to the projects that can make life meaningful. The conditions for different projects are not relative to society or culture. In addition, I drew an interesting parallel between Wolf's description of the importance of meaning and Axel Honneth's approach to the self-realization. Both philosophers see morality as an important aspect of the good life, but they see the good life as a combination of individual and inter-individual dimensions. For Honneth, the conditions for self-realization are inter-individual and the objective dimension seems to be provided by society. For Wolf, on the other hand, the conditions for meaningfulness seem to be in need of some non-subjective dimension other than society or tradition. Wolf's views are well compatible with pluralism. There are different values and principles that are not reducible to a single one. Morally significant values can be seen as the most important kind of values. John Kekes bases these values in the shared features that humans have in common. There are basic needs – derived from the basic facts about human beings – that have to be fulfilled for the minimum welfare of a human being. Finally, I concluded that since we do not reach the good life by maximizing one single aspect, we could understand the good life in terms of balance instead. We can see the good life as a balance between

different kinds of principles, values, reasons, interests, and desires. Seeing the good life as a balance is compatible with the conditions of well-roundedness and meaningfulness stated by Wolf. Also, the projects that provide one's life with the meaning should not be single-handedly dominating, but their importance should fit to the balance. Although moral values are still the most important ones, they should not dominate over all the other ones. They are important for the minimum welfare, but do not suffice for the maximum. In this sense, maximum cannot be found maximizing. Maximum is about balance.

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Summary

Susan Wolf on moral perfection and the good life: a critical analysis

I am examining the problem concerning the relationship between morality and the good life according to Susan Wolf's critique against the principle-based ethical theories. The main question is that if we find questionable the concept of the good life that principle-based ethical theories lead us to, what role does morality play in the good life after all? Is morality still important?

In the first chapter, I introduce Wolf's characterization of moral saints and their lives. I explain why they may not be our ideals. In the second chapter, I argue against some critics of Wolf and show that their critique against Wolf's ideas is questionable. I propose that even if principle-based moral theories are mistaken – as Wolf claims – morality can still play an important role in the good life. A good life can be found in balance between different aspects: moral and non-moral ones.

In the third chapter I test my proposal. I look at the concept of the good life stemming from Wolf's writings in the context of moral relativism and pluralism. I conclude that the good life can be understood in balance where multiple values, principles, reasons, interests, and desires are represented. There is no single way to the good life, but morality still has an important role to play.

Resümee

Susan Wolf moraalsest täiuslikkusest ja heast elust: kriitiline analüüs

Magistritöös uurin moraali ja hea elu vahelist suhet. Töös lähtun Susan Wolfi kriitikast printsiibipõhiste eetika teooriate vastu. Peamine küsimus on: kui me leiame, et printsiibipõhiste eetika teooriate hea elu kontseptsioonid on küsitavad, siis missugune on moraali roll heas elus – kas moraal on jätkuvalt oluline?

Esimeses peatükis tutvustan Wolfi arusaama moraalipühakutest ja nende elust. Seletan, miks nad ei pruugi olla meie ideaalid. Teises peatükis vaidlen vastu Wolfi kriitikutele ja näitan, et nende kriitika on küsitav. Pakun välja, et isegi kui printsiibipõhised eetika teooriad tõesti eksivad – nagu väidab Wolf – saab moraal siiski mängida olulist rolli heas elus. Hea elu saab mõista kui tasakaalu mitmesuguste – moraalsete ja mittemoraalsete – aspektide vahel.

Kolmandas peatükis panen oma pakkumise proovile. Vaatan Wolfi arusaamast lähtuvat hea elu kontseptsiooni moraalirelativismi ja -pluralismi valguses. Jõuan järeldusele, et hea elu saab mõista tasakaaluna, kus on esindatud mitmesugused väärtused, printsiibid, põhjused, huvid ja soovid. Ei ole üht ainsat teed, mis viiks hea eluni, aga moraalil on siiski hea elu kontseptsioonis oluline osa.

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