Can a perfectly moral person, who never does anything morally wrong and always does the morally right thing, be a good friend? Why, or why not?

In this essay, I will argue that a perfectly moral person would not be a good friend. Following Susan Wolf, I shall call such a person a moral saint. While more moral people are better friends at the margin, at some point this trend reverses.

First, if you were friends with a moral saint, they would only be using you instrumentally to achieve the most amount of good. They would have no commitment to the friendship above and beyond this. This would be, at the least, disconcerting, and it may well prevent you from even wanting to be their friend. Perhaps a moral saint would try to squash any rumours that they were a moral saint, lest their friendships cease to be optimal!

Second, friendships frequently make immoral demands of us, and a moral saint would never fulfill these demands. A moral saint would not keep your secrets if they thought blabbering them could make other people better off. A good friend might lie to get out a commitment to go to a concert with you, but if this were immoral upon reflection, then the moral saint wouldn’t do it.

Third, a moral saint would be dull. “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.”, as Wolf observes. Many traits, such as recklessness, would be absent from a moral saint, even though limited amounts of such traits may comprise much of the fun of friendship. A moral saint wouldn’t have much of a sense of humour; they would walk on eggshells to avoid hurting anyone’s feelings, and they would lack the pessimism and resignation which wit so often requires.

Fourth, a moral saint wouldn’t prioritise the interests of their friends over the interests of strangers. A moral saint, among other things, would never buy you a birthday present, or take you out to coffee, since there are other ways in which they could have spent the money and time that would do more good. It is true that friendship would allow a moral saint to better know your preferences and thus how to improve your life, but a moral saint would spend most of their time improving the lives of those they could benefit the most, which is unlikely to include you. Would a moral saint really put no priority on their loved ones? Most people’s moral views would maintain that we do have special moral obligations to our friends and families. What exactly, is the argument for this? How could morality be so contingent – with your obligations arising out of pure accident?

One way to think of special moral obligations is as blameless wrongdoing. If a mother prioritises the interests of her child over the interests of strangers, and she could have helped the strangers more than her child, she has led to a worse outcome. However, we recognise that the motivation that mothers have to care for their children is so close to universally beneficent that such a motivation would be bad for the woman to lose. Hence, while some wrong has been committed, it is blameless. This seems like one plausible account of why, in the real world, we would want to

---

1 (Wolf, 1982).
2 See (Cocking & Kennett, 2000).
4 In addition to the contingency problem, this also seems to give people with no family or friends the short end of the stick.
5 See (Parfit, 1984).
encourage special moral relationships. However, considerations of psychology and motivation are moot to the moral saint, who always does the right thing by definition. So, there are no motivations that it would be bad for a moral saint to lose. I admit that the family case is more problematic. While you can choose to not have friends (and this is probably the choice a moral saint would make), you can’t choose not to have family, and this is plausibly morally relevant.

There is a caveat to the argument sketched above, and it depends on how we define ‘moral saint’. Wolf says that a moral saint never takes their own well-being into account (and thus that utilitarianism says we should not all be moral saints, since then total utility would be reduced by people’s self-sacrifices). Since I have been working from a perspective that is neutral between who is having positive and negative experiences, I don’t see a reason to include this proviso. Hence, if a moral saint would be more harmed by an action than the action produces benefit, they wouldn’t do it. If this is the case, then moral saints could be good friends, but only in a world which is much better than ours! For the time being, the good that an individual can do is much greater than the suffering induced by their sacrifice. You might wonder if there are people for whom this isn’t true, and who could thus be both good friends and moral saints; many people are reckless, and we would be better off if they didn’t try to do good. But a moral saint is, by extension, perfectly rational – since being moral involves prediction and deliberation over actions with the best available evidence – and so this consideration does not apply. Therefore, our conclusion stands that a perfectly moral person would not be a good friend.

Choose one of these markets: markets in historic monuments; markets in surrogacy services; markets in kidneys. Should we be able to buy and sell these things? Why or why not?

People ought to be allowed to buy and sell kidneys. Moreover, if a kidney market is to be rejected, it is for reasons of practical implementation, and not because of the abstract moral concerns in the philosophical literature.

There is a general presumption that people should be allowed to do what they want unless it causes harm to others. The task with kidney markets is to find what considerations would override people’s general right to participate in a voluntary exchange. One candidate consideration is that the market crowds out moral motivations with nonmoral ones (in this case, people losing their altruistic desire to donate kidneys because of the monetary incentive). While this is theoretically a concern, the empirical evidence for crowding out is weak and is prematurely endorsed by those who disfavour commodification. For instance, a celebrated study of an Israeli day care found that fining parents for their tardiness actually caused the level of lateness to increase. The proposed explanation is that, when we put a price on something, people view it as a transaction, and so social motivations like politeness are crowded out. However, this is only one possible interpretation, and that authors actually favour an alternative explanation: before the fine was introduced, parents did not know what kind of reprimand they would receive for being late. The introduction of the fine sent a signal that the possible negative consequences were not as bad as they had thought. Another study purporting to show crowding out involved the citizens of Wolfenschiessen, who narrowly supported the building of a nuclear waste repository in their town, but whose support fell by half when they were offered monetary incentives. This study has been subject to criticisms I view as fatal. First, monetary incentives may signal that the waste repository was more dangerous than initially assumed. Second, this study consisted of economists asking about hypothetical money: when the same situation occurred with real money in

1995, support for the repository was highest in the areas that had received financial compensation.\textsuperscript{10} Finally, Robert Titmuss’s comparative study\textsuperscript{11} of the (paid) US and (voluntary) UK blood donation system has been criticised because it does not show that the US donates less because donors can be paid – in fact a paid system might exist in the US because the donation rates would otherwise be even lower.\textsuperscript{12} More recent studies also directly contradict Titmuss’s conclusion.\textsuperscript{13} All of this is to say that we have good evidence that a kidney market would follow the common-sense expectation and save many thousands of lives per year by incentivising people to sell their kidneys, while not significantly reducing the (already small) level of altruistic donation.

A second consideration surrounds inequality or unfairness: by the very nature of the transaction, those selling kidneys will mostly be poor, while those buying kidneys will be disproportionately wealthy and privileged. One commenter said of this situation that “Perhaps we should look for better ways of helping the destitute than dismantling them.”\textsuperscript{14} While this was just a quip, I think it betrays a problematic perspective on what a kidney market would achieve. We are not choosing among options to find which policy helps the poor the most. We are debating whether or not to prevent the poor from helping themselves. While some people would be too poor to afford a kidney, the government could introduce a voucher scheme to buy kidneys for poor people, and the monetary incentive would so dramatically increase the supply that these considerations are minor in comparison.

A further objection says that paying for a kidney would be a corrupt exchange, or would cheapen how we think about our bodies. But the way we think about market exchanges is culturally-relative and certainly doesn’t intrinsically corrupt goods.\textsuperscript{15} Research in psychology\textsuperscript{16} describes how people react with disgust, and find it hard to analyse costs and benefits, when there is a trade-off between a ‘secular’ and a sacred good – such as money and organs. Why be so confident that our initial disgust points to something ethically meaningful? A set of interviews with prostitutes and art appraisers, whose job consists in putting a price on the “priceless”, found that they have no trouble frequently toggling between a commodified and a non-commodified understanding of the goods they are selling. A majority of both groups indicated that contact with the market actually enhanced their appreciation for sex and art, respectively.\textsuperscript{17}

The fact that some sellers may only have weak agency, or may not be fully informed, I view as the most serious objection to kidney markets. In a survey of Indians who had sold their kidneys, 76% said that they would not recommend someone else donate a kidney, and 86% reported some health problem following their nephrectomy.\textsuperscript{18} However, donating a kidney in rich countries appears to be remarkably safe – involving a 1 in 4,000 risk of death.\textsuperscript{19} Much of this problem could also be solved by being more selective with who you allowed to donate – for instance, by not allowing someone to sell their kidney if there was any evidence of pressure. One may favour a government monopsony for this. Iran has a tightly-regulated market for kidneys, and has consequently successfully eliminated the waiting list for transplants. According to a review of the system, “many ethical problems that are associated with paid kidney donation were prevented”\textsuperscript{20} through psychiatric evaluations, medical screening, and disallowing non-Iranians from participating in the system as ‘transplant tourists’.

\textsuperscript{10} Newman & Nagtzaam, 2015.
\textsuperscript{11} Titmuss, 1970.
\textsuperscript{12} This is the thrust of the critique in (Arrow, 1972).
\textsuperscript{13} Lacetera, Macis, & Slonim, 2012.
\textsuperscript{14} Nancy Scheper-Hughes, quoted in (Finkel, 2001).
\textsuperscript{15} Brennan & Jaworski, 2015.
\textsuperscript{16} Tetlock, n.d.
\textsuperscript{17} Clowney, 2020. Also see (Tabarrok, 2020).
\textsuperscript{18} Goyal, Mehta, Schneiderman, & Sehgal, 2002.
\textsuperscript{19} Singer, 2016.
\textsuperscript{20} Ghods & Savaj, 2006.
It is plausible to me that a kidney market is more trouble than it is worth in specific cases. However, I have shown that many of the standard arguments given in the philosophical literature do not provide reason to reject a kidney market, and that these arguments make crucial empirical omissions.

If there is a right to freedom of association, what does this imply about individuals’ right to immigrate to a state of their choosing? Justify your answer.

If there is a right to freedom of association, this pushes both in favour of and against individuals having a right to immigrate, depending on who possess this freedom and to what degree. If individuals have a freedom of association, they have a right to join or leave groups voluntarily, so if we think of a nation as a group, individuals will have a right to immigrate. If groups have a right to freedom of association, they may take actions to pursue the interests of their members, which may include restricting immigration. If associations (that is, formal groups with membership) have a positive freedom of association (that is, a freedom to include whomever wants to join), this pushes in favour of a right to emigrate to states that enforce this freedom, but if they have a negative freedom of association (freedom to exclude whomever), this may justify restrictions on the quantity and type of immigrants. I think that, in most cases, the net effect of freedom of association pushes toward individuals having a right to immigrate.

In philosophical discussions of immigration, nations are frequently analogised to clubs, and since clubs can permissibly decline membership, it has been argued that so too can nations decline immigrants. Michael Huemer points out some problems with this analogy by asking us to imagine an island on which individuals have their water provided to them by “water clubs”. Some water clubs are better than others, and when a member of one of these clubs wants to help any islanders from the worse-off clubs, he is outvoted by his fellow members. Hence, islanders are constantly dying of thirst and water-borne illnesses, while members are prevented by the threat of violence from sharing water with anyone thirsty who is not in their club. Huemer says it is in this sense that nations are clubs. In this approach, nations’ freedom of association – their ability to pursue their members’ interests, and to set the criteria of admission – does not apply, because (a) you cannot choose to not live in any country, and (b) governments provide essential services. Any water club’s desire for self-determination would be outweighed by the obligation to provide people with water, and to allow people to share their water. Huemer’s water clubs are an extreme case of freedom of association being overwhelmed by other moral considerations. Some countries, e.g. a handful in Europe which provide similar social services, might be more helpfully analogised to clubs, and so their freedom of association might permissibly allow them to restrict immigration (these are the countries for which there is the least controversy over immigration, however).

Insofar as groups have a freedom of association, there are serious concerns about how those groups come to a decision. There could be serious doubt over what direction a nation wants to steer itself in, and what immigration policy it prefers. Are we really committed to the view that if 51% of the population wants closed borders and 49% wants open borders, states are justified restricting immigration, but not if 51% of the population wants open borders and 49% wants closed borders? There are also metaphysical problems of preference aggregation: the Condorcet paradox shows that even if you know the full ordinal preferences of all citizens, there is not always a way to determine transitive preferences for the collective. While an individual theoretically has consistent preferences, there may be no fact of the matter as to what the preferences of a group or association are. However, even if this is so, the judgement of a nation’s political authorities may still be well-defined, with their system of choosing leaders.

21 (Huemer, 2010).
22 (Wikipedia, n.d.).
having come to a solution to these problems of preference aggregation, and so I will bracket this issue.

The right of states to restrict immigration because of their freedom of association is stated by Christopher Wellman like this: “Just as an individual has a right to determine whom (if anyone) he or she would like to marry, a group of fellow-citizens has a right to determine whom (if anyone) it would like to invite into its political community.” Wellman says that unless we acknowledge the right of free association of states, we cannot explain state’s rights to not be annexed, or enter into international agreements. After all, if a nation can choose to associate with the EU, why can’t it choose to associate only with people of certain cultural values? There is a significant tension here between individual freedom of association and collective freedom of association. What if I want to associate with immigrants that my country won’t let in? One view is that the nations’ freedom of association is not relevant here because borders are not morally relevant (and often arbitrary), and that rights violations are as bad when conducted between countries as within countries. Under this view, the right to immigrate is at least as strong as the right to move home in your country. In addition, many scholars have pointed out how problematic groups’ freedom of association is in cases where immigrants are admitted on the basis of religion or ethnicity. I do not actually think that this is a problem with freedom of association per se, but an example of the general wrongness of discrimination, which has received ample treatment in the philosophical literature.

The above considerations – water clubs, voting theory, and the arbitrariness of borders – weaken groups’ and associations’ freedom of association, but there are not such large considerations which detract from individuals’ right to freedom of association. Hence, we should privilege individuals’ rights to associate with whomever they want in most cases, implying a right to immigrate. Note, however, that I do not view this right as absolute, and so what this implies for actual immigration policy needs additional empirical and philosophical work.

24 (Wellman, 2008).
25 This is the perspective in (Oberman, 2016).
Bibliography


