



My Grandmother and Moral Philosophy

The notion that moral conduct is primarily a matter of “obeying” rules or principles alleged to be universal in scope has figured prominently throughout the modern era. The moral point of view, according to this line of thought, requires the strictest impartiality. This idea has been expressed in a variety of idioms, the most dominant of which is the doctrine of “natural” or “human rights.” Morality, from this perspective, chiefly consists in “respecting” or “protecting” peoples’ “rights.”



In spite of the prevalence of this universal conception of morality, there is an older tradition that has, remarkably, managed to survive to date. On this older account, morality isn’t about *obeying* abstract universal *principles*. Rather, it is about *becoming a virtuous person*.

Virtues are not principles to which all rational beings have access. They are character dispositions that are acquired over time through *habit*. And since they are habits, this means that, unlike the knowledge of universal principles, knowledge of virtue cannot be sandwiched between the covers of a textbook or otherwise transmitted through *propositions*. Knowledge of virtue can only come through the *imitation* of a virtuous person.

A virtue-centered approach to morality is, then, the antithesis of a principles-oriented account. If the latter regards morality as something universal and impartial, the former holds it to be concrete and partial. We learn about morality, not by being taught about “rights” or “natural law” or “the Form of the Good” or anything else of the kind; rather, we learn about morality through those “little platoons” — our families, churches, and local communities — to which Edmund Burke famously alluded.

It is against the backdrop of this continuing conflict of moral visions that I find myself thinking about my grandmother, Ferrera Wieser.

On Friday, March 9, while surrounded by her family, my grandmother — my *Nonna*, as her grandchildren affectionately referred to her—died at the age of 88.

Born Ferrara Veronica Squarcia, Nonna was the second youngest of six children born to Christofero and Barbara Squarcia, Italian immigrants who made America — and little Lambertville, New Jersey — their new home during the second decade of the twentieth century.

I would spend hours and hours as I grew older speaking to my grandfather about his youth. The ease with which he recalled his childhood memories was rivaled only by that with which he relayed them. “Pop Pop” would get a visible glimmer in his eye as he catapulted me to 1930s New York City, where he was born and reared. With his wife, Nonna, things were, unfortunately, otherwise. She couldn’t



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recollect all that much, but the few stories that she did share were enough to bring into focus a reasonably coherent impression of her childhood: it was good.

Nonna and her siblings were exceptionally close and they were all devoted to their parents. Her family's home was located on a hill — "Cottage Hill" — that led away from town. In those days, long before television and well before it would become commonplace for every American family to own a car, Nonna and her family would entertain themselves by way of singing songs and playing games. At Christmastime, they would trek out into the woods to cut down a tree, and on Christmas morning, each sibling could anticipate receiving, among one or maybe two other things, a piece of fruit.

But all was not fun and games in the Squarcia household.

My great grandfather was a shoe repairman. His shop was in the hub of town, about a 30-minute walk from his home. As I said, the Squarcias had no car, and so my grandmother, as a very young girl, would sometimes be entrusted with delivering her father his lunch. In addition to this responsibility (and who knows how many others), it was also left to her to cap the bottles into which her father would pour his homemade beer.

When she entered grade school, apparently from a heightened self-consciousness regarding her Italian name, she identified herself, *not* as Ferrara, but as "Mary." The name stuck and until this day, most people who know her know her as Mary.

In 1946, she married my grandfather, Frank Wieser. They would build a life together that would include five children, eight grandchildren, and, eventually, three great-grandchildren. Sadly, Pop Pop wouldn't live to meet his great-grandchildren. In 2007, after 61 years of marriage with Nonna, he passed away.

My grandparents lived but five blocks away from my parents' home. Thus, along with my siblings and, for that matter, all of my cousins, I essentially grew up in their house. It was nothing fancy, this house of theirs, and it took them nearly 20 years to acquire it. Being of modest size, my grandparents' house was typical of the residences of their lower middle class neighborhood. But it was theirs. It was the first and last house that they would ever own, for they remained within its walls for the rest of their lives. It is there that they would supply their family with a rich fund of memories.

Family was *everything* for Nonna (and Pop Pop too, of course). It wasn't just every holiday and birthday that we celebrated at their home. When I was growing up, *every weekend* — Saturday *and* Sunday — may as well have been a holiday weekend, for my entire family would gather at my grandparents' where we would eat — "*Mangia!*" ("Eat!") Nonna would order — and the adults would play cards.

Through the family's struggles and hardships, my grandparents were the glue that would preserve its integrity.

And preserve it they did.

Nonna was not in the least bit politically oriented. My aunt may have dragged her off on a couple of occasions to vote, but as far as knowledge of current events is concerned, my grandmother had not a speck of it. She didn't know what was going on in the world and she didn't care to know. What this means is that unlike so many of our contemporaries, she most certainly did *not* measure her moral standing according to *the positions* that she took on the political issues of the day. Nonna had no such positions.

I never once heard my grandmother speak of "rights," whether "natural," "human," or otherwise. In fact, for that matter, notwithstanding few exceptions, Nonna scarcely *spoke* about morality at all.



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She *lived* it.

And she lived it well, without any sense of self-consciousness, and certainly not in a manner that would suggest that she was trying to “apply” principles to specific situations.

No one is ever *just* a person. Each of us is someone’s child. Most of us have friends, siblings, and colleagues. Some of us are spouses, parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents. Each persona that we assume comes with obligations and virtues that are peculiar to it. It is by way of discharging these duties and fostering these excellences that we become the people, the moral agents, who we are.

Nonna masterfully played out each of the roles into which life cast her. No one who knew her would even dare to suggest otherwise.

St. Francis of Assisi is said to have admonished his disciples to preach the Gospel — and, when necessary, to use words. When it came to virtue, Nonna was short on words but long on action. The difference, though, between the disciples of Saint Francis, on the one hand, and Nonna, on the other, is that while the former *intended* to instruct others, Nonna acted as if she no more intended to teach others in the way of virtue than rain intends to moisten the Earth. Her virtue was her nature.

The passing of my grandmother marks the passing of an era. Our family will miss her more than words can express. She was among the finest human beings that we ever could have known. Yet we can thank God that we had her with us, and had her with us for as long as we did.

Rest in peace, Nonna (September 13, 1923-March 9, 2012).



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