

## The moral praiseworthiness of Huck Finn

Julie Altemueller

In Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn", Huck is confronted with the decision whether or not to turn in his friend and runaway slave Jim. Huck does not morally object to slavery and his conscience tells him to cooperate with the slave catchers he encounters. However, he lies to them concerning Jim's skin colour and therefore saves Jim, acting upon his feelings of sympathy<sup>1</sup> towards him. Afterwards, he struggles with his decision for a short while and then settles with not acting upon what he considers *right*<sup>2</sup> (Twain, pp. 147-149). The moral question arising from this is whether Huck can be considered morally praiseworthy for doing the right thing (according to modern moral standards) although his conscience tells him not to. James Montmarquet argues in his essay that Huck is not morally praiseworthy. In his opinion, deliberation and the ability to justify one's action are crucial and Huck, in his view, lacks those qualities when saving Jim (Montmarquet, p. 60). In his essay "Huck Finn, Moral Reasons and Sympathy", Craig Taylor rejects Montmarquet's claim. In this essay, I will defend Montmarquet against Taylor with focus on Huck's moral considerations *after* his decision not to inform on Jim. I will leave out other aspects of Taylor's argument, such as the effect of the reader's response to Huck (Taylor, p.592). Taylor agrees that Huck does not act upon his moral beliefs (Taylor, p. 584), yet he argues that the latter do not and should not have complete authority over our everyday decisions (Taylor, 589). He describes the intuitive moral responses of everyday life which do not call for a moral evaluation before acting and calls them "Primitive Sympathetic Responses"

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<sup>1</sup> *Sympathy* in this case refers to Huck's friendship with Jim, including the fact that he recognizes Jim as a fellow human being (Taylor, p. 587)

<sup>2</sup> i.e. ethically correct / praiseworthy

(Taylor, p.588). He argues that those primitive responses do not require justification (although he acknowledges that there are exceptions) and names the example of someone stopping another from walking into bus traffic without thinking about it (*ibid*). Naturally, this is an example with no underlying moral conflict and Taylor does acknowledge that this could be seen as a simply automatic response with an obvious justification that could easily be provided afterwards (Taylor, p. 589).

As long as justification could be given eventually, I fully agree with Taylor that on many occasions it is indeed wise to follow one's instincts. However, Huck Finn is not able to provide any justification afterwards. Instead, he simply refrains from further evaluating the matter and accepts that there is "no use for [him] to try to learn to do right" (Twain, p.149) and seems to commit to the "Primitive Sympathetic Response" Taylor describes (Taylor, p.588), when he concludes to just "always do whichever come handiest at the time" (Twain, p.149). Taylor responds to the possible focus on the subject's justification *after* the deed by pointing to the relationship between moral beliefs and primitive responses (Taylor, p.589). As I have previously stated, he questions the authority of moral principles and suggests that they are for the most part coined and shaped by our primitive sympathetic responses (*ibid*). As an example he names one of the most prevalent methods to convince people of the evil of slavery: the appeal to human fellowship (Taylor, pp. 590-91). I agree with Taylor that our moral beliefs are in many aspects formed by our sympathetic responses, especially if acting upon them affects the well-being of others. The attempt to demonstrate the condemnable nature of slavery by appealing to empathic emotions instead of reasoning may be very successful. My point however is that this feeling of friendship towards Jim on Huck's part does not result in a re-evaluation of his racist moral beliefs. Huck does not question those moral principles at all. Instead, he questions whether it is right to follow such moral doctrines in general (Twain, p.149). Consequently, Taylor's claim that the "Primitive Sympathetic Response" (Taylor, p.588) precedes moral principles and should therefore be sufficient

ground for moral praiseworthiness (Taylor, p.589) is not fully applicable to the case of Huck Finn, as there are no new or re-evaluated moral principles following his sympathetic response. Taylor mentions this briefly and points to Huck's young age as an explanation (Taylor, p.591). However, as Huck Finn in this case serves as an exemplary model for ethical judgement of sympathy, I intend to assess Huck's actions irrespective of his age.

Montmarquet's argument against Huck's praiseworthiness<sup>3</sup> is precise in that he clearly distinguishes between explanation and justification. According to his view, the ability to provide justification instead of mere explanation is essential in order to be considered morally praiseworthy (Taylor, p.587). My point here is that the described justification may as well happen *after* the respective action in form of a re-assessment of one's values. Taylor's claim about the importance of the "Primitive Sympathetic Response" (Taylor, p.588) does not contradict my statement, as a sympathetic response to another human being can be the reason for such re-evaluation. However, I disagree with Taylor concerning his claim that one should not generally, but only in exceptional cases ask for justification (Taylor, p.592). His example of an exceptional case is Montmarquet's example of the escaped convict<sup>4</sup>. Taylor sees this as an exceptional case as the mere sympathetic response is not sufficient ground for helping the escaped convict. However, an evaluation of possible moral justification is needed in order to realise that sympathy does not suffice here. Thus, the question for justification should always be part of the process in moral decision making<sup>5</sup>. If the "Primary Sympathetic Response" (Taylor, p.588) dominates one's actions such as in Huck Finn's case, a re-evaluation of one's moral beliefs is crucial in order to maintain stability and some form of control over one's values and actions. Montmarquet seems to support the importance of re-evaluation with his

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<sup>3</sup> according to Taylor's outline of Montmarquet's argument (Taylor, p.587)

<sup>4</sup> Montmarquet names the example of the escaped convict in order to underline his statement that the mere recognition of Jim as a fellow human being does not justify Huck's decision to help him. Huck Finn could have followed the same impulse of kinship in the case of an escaped convict, in which case his decision to help him would be considered morally wrong (Montmarquet, p.57)

<sup>5</sup> Justification in this case refers to the accordance of one's actions with one's (subjective) moral principles.

suggestion that Huck is a “case of near praiseworthiness” (Montmarquet, p.63), as he could have developed moral beliefs, which then could have let him act praiseworthily (Montmarquet, p.63). I want to emphasize the importance of constant interaction between one’s sympathetic responses and one’s moral beliefs and thus the permanent questioning and re-evaluating of one’s moral beliefs. Only then, I argue, true praiseworthiness can be achieved.

### **Bibliography**

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