

## Moving vs. Persuading a Racist

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In his article “Huck Finn, Moral Reasons and Sympathy,” Craig Taylor provides the fictional account of Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn. From my reading of the article I believe that Taylor is correct in thinking that one cannot persuade a racist to abandon their racist beliefs but instead, one can only attempt to move them away from such beliefs. This concept is outlined by Taylor towards the end of his article in what he refers to as Human Fellowship (pg. 10). However, for me personally I actually found this to be evident throughout the entire account provided in the article of Huck Finn in his journey down the Mississippi river on a raft with Jim, the runaway slave.

Although Taylor’s primary focus in his article is defending Jonathan Bennet from the criticisms’ of James Montmarquet in saying that Huck Finn is deserving of praise<sup>1</sup> for his actions towards Jim; despite being unable to recognise as to why that is the case; I will focus for the purpose of this essay mainly on why Huck behaved the way in which he did when confronted by the slave-catchers. And the answer to this, I believe is good moral, shared sympathy, that had come about through Huck being moved away from his racist beliefs, not persuaded against them. Lastly I will comment on the anti-intellectualism of Huck Finn which renders him unworthy of any moral praise according to the criticisms of James Montmarquet.

Both Bennet and Taylor put forward that Huck’s conscience is one that is distorted by racism<sup>2</sup>. Bennet says that Huck acts on the basis of his feelings<sup>3</sup>, and that the conscience which contains principles, arguments, and considerations<sup>4</sup>, is of essentially no help in such a situation and is left completely unused by Huck. Taylor does not entirely agree in this view and believes that sympathy is not mere feeling<sup>5</sup>. Taylor sees sympathy as something which is much more powerful and perhaps as something which is much more complex (albeit it being

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.584

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.583

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.583

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.590

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.590

distributed almost immediately<sup>6</sup> and in the form of an unthinking response)<sup>7</sup>. He expands on this point by using the example of the American Declaration of Independence<sup>8</sup>. The document explicitly states that all men are born and created free and equal. Yet slavery was a practise that ran rampant in the south of America, and the society in which Huck was raised. So, the issue then becomes that an internal relation<sup>9</sup> (Stanley Cavell) must exist or be recognised before a person is to extend any sympathy to another. Human fellowship must be formed, in order to prevent one seeking justification before coming to the aid of another's suffering in the form of a sympathetic response<sup>10</sup>. Although Taylor says that certain sympathetic responses are so elementally and powerfully primitive that they are of course immediate, i.e. to stop somebody that is about to walk into traffic<sup>11</sup> from doing so, I believe that with the exception of life and death cases, most of us do fundamentally need to allow that fellowship to be born before we can make good moral decisions. And this is exactly something which I believe Huck allows to happen to him.

Huck considers Miss Watson<sup>12</sup> being wronged over the loss of her slave and feels immense guilt in being a part of Jim's escape. His conscience is unable to fully see Jim's humanity at this time. A black slave like Jim is mere property in the eyes of a young<sup>13</sup> white boy like Huck from the south. It is his intention to paddle ashore and inform on Jim; but when he is fifty yards off, Jim tells Huck that he is the only white gentleman to ever keep a promise<sup>14</sup> to Jim. And that makes Huck feel sick<sup>15</sup>. Just then the two men come alongside Huck and ask to know the colour of the skin of the man left in the raft, and as Huck felt himself weakening, he lies and says that the man is white<sup>16</sup>. In doing this he saves Jim from re-capture. In his journeying with Jim; in the separation on the island, in the trick which Huck plays on Jim, a highly unlikely and unforeseeable bond is made. It is crucial to examine this relationship which forms between the young boy and the young man. On some level of his psyche, I am sure, Huck can recognise his internal relation and his human fellowship with Jim. And

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<sup>6</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.590

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.590

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.590

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.591

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.588

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.588

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.584

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.591

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.584

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.584

<sup>16</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.584

although he at first perceives what he has done for Jim to be weakness and even feels physical pain in trying to deliberate what to do with the slave in his raft, he “weren’t sorry” (pg.4) in the earlier incident of the trick played on Jim in which he had to humble himself in front of Jim, and I feel that because of his response here, over time he would not be sorry for this either. The foundation of his current morality was challenged and Huck did well to allow his feeling of sympathy for Jim to overcome him.

As Taylor says, Huck’s whole pattern of response to Jim is extraordinary<sup>17</sup>. He responds to Jim with genuine immediate moral concern. The comparison to this can be seen between Huck and Tom Sawyer. Both boys want to help Jim. However, Tom’s eyes are lit up at the prospect of a kind of lark<sup>18</sup> to be undertaken. The difference is stark. As is the difference between persuading and moving a racist. It would not be true to say that if Huck were given a lengthy list of reasons as to why the colour of somebody’s skin makes them no different to him that he would actually believe it, or have much reason to. In his world he has not had the opportunity to see those that are not white being treated how he is. His interactions with people of colour, especially black people would be severely limited to seeing them as his neighbours slaves. As outlined above, he would have to create the connection, the relation, and the fellowship, with them.

It should also really be said that moving a racist is an incredibly arduous task. It is a human being trying to establish their humanity in front of another human who has branded them devoid of any. I accept that society has changed since the time of Huck Finn and with the abolishment of slavery, but it is undeniable that certain aspects of systematic racism still permeates much of our everyday lives. Having to rely on or to relieve enduring experiences to racists in the hopes to move them is a further chore to non-racists and to those who have actually experienced racism themselves. I do believe that Taylor is correct in thinking that one cannot persuade a racist, and must move them instead, for any real change to arise. But I simply resent the need to do so in the first place. For this reason I find myself also supporting James Montmaquet’s criticisms of anti-intellectualism and the dangers which come with praising acts of moral good that have not been carefully considered and understood as moral good simply for the sake of moral good. Huck Finn was exploited by his emotions and his

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<sup>17</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.589

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, Craig (2012) p.585

sympathy to Jim. Ideally Huck should have made active conscience decisions to consider what was morally correct or not in the situation he found himself in. The character of Huckleberry Finn is in my opinion therefore a case of near-praiseworthiness, and proof of how ingrained racist beliefs are in the minds of racists.

**References:**

- **Article:** Craig Taylor (2012). *Huck Finn, Moral Reasons and Sympathy*. *Philosophy*, 87, pp 583-593 doi:10.1017/S003181911200040X