Reclaiming the Conscience of Huckleberry Finn

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In ‘The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn’, Jonathan Bennett discusses the moral characters of Huckleberry Finn and Heinrich Himmler (1974). For the purpose of assessing just the moral characters of Huck and Himmler, Bennett sets aside what each of them actually did. Thus, the fact that Himmler acted horribly while Huck acted well is, just in itself, irrelevant. Looking simply at Huck and Himmler’s moral beliefs, there seems little to choose between them — Huck believes that slavery is morally right, while Himmler sees it as his moral duty to murder millions. Bennett’s point is that, even setting aside what the two actually did, and even given that their moral beliefs are equally abhorrent, we are intuitively inclined to judge Huck as morally better than Himmler — that is, to judge Huck’s character as somehow morally better than Himmler’s. These intuitions are justified, Bennett thinks, because Huck had more ‘sympathy’ than Himmler.

I will offer an explanation and justification of our intuitive evaluations of the two characters in terms of qualitative differences between the emotional responses of Huck and Himmler. In particular, I will argue that Huck’s feelings constitute a moral pull, whereas Himmler’s do not. I think such an account does a better job of explaining our intuitive evaluations of the two characters than the account suggested by Bennett’s rather sketchy remarks. Finally, I will argue that casting the situation in terms of ‘Empathy’, of a special sort I will identify, explains why Huck’s emotional response constitutes a moral pull — something which an account in terms of Bennett’s ‘sympathy’ cannot do.

I claim that Huck’s feelings constitute a moral pull, whereas Himmler’s do not, because Huck experiences, and is aware of, emotions which simply constitute moral reasons. Although Huck fails to recognise them as such, he is, nonetheless, aware of crucial moral reasons to reject slavery. Unlike Himmler, in deciding what to do, Huck is
aware of the most important moral considerations, even though he is unable to make sense of his feelings or to consciously recognise them as morally relevant. Whereas Bennett’s remarks suggest at best a rather indirect justification of our intuitive evaluations of the two characters, my view offers a considerably more straightforward solution by suggesting that some emotions simply are moral reasons.

I will begin with a brief sketch of the two characters and Bennett’s own analysis.

1. HUCK AND HIMMLER

1.1. HUCKLEBERRY FINN: ‘BITTY’ MORALITY OR INCOMPLETE PICTURE?

As described in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck is generous, kind, loyal and courageous with some horribly mistaken ideas about ethics (Twain 2002). Bennett describes Huck, like Himmler, as having a ‘bad morality’ (1974, pp. 123–124). Having grown up in a community which takes slavery for granted, Huck has absorbed the attitudes of those around him. Huck accepts without question that slavery is right, that slaves are properly regarded as the property of their so-called owners, that assisting an escaped slave is wrong, and so on. Huck, then, is in some sense committed to some very bad moral principles or, in Bennett’s terms, Huck has a ‘bad morality’.

Huck’s erroneous ethics may seem both better and worse than this picture might suggest. For Huck, morality is a matter of learning, understanding and following a set of rules. It is not only that Huck has no conception of these rules as open to question or as possibly mistaken, he does not seem to consider them as particularly connected or linked together either. Because of this, Huck not only fails to consider the possibility that some of the ethical rules he’s been taught are mistaken, he doesn’t appear to consider them as a set of rules at all. Morality, for Huck, is ‘bitty’ — it is a matter of isolated, disconnected rules which may or may not harmonise with or, even, be consistent with each other.

This may suggest Huck’s mistaken views are worse because the problem is not simply that he has some mistaken beliefs, but nonetheless has the sort of general ethical understanding and skill set to reflect on his beliefs and correct the mistakes. Huck has nothing like this — not only does he have some abhorrent beliefs about slavery, to say that he is ill-equipped to reflect upon and improve them would be something of an understatement. Not only does he lack the skills to do this, he lacks a conception of
morality which even allows this as a possibility.

Yet it is exactly this mistaken conception of morality which points to what is good about Huck’s character — and suggests that Huck’s erroneous ethics are better than the above picture suggests. What Huck thinks of as ‘morality’ isn’t really morality at all — or, at least, it is far from being a complete picture. In particular, what Huck considers ‘morality’ is, at best, only a part of Huck’s own morality. That Huck does not recognise this does not change the fact that it is so.

I think, as Bennett does, that it is easier to see what is good about Huck if one contrasts his character with that of Himmler.

1.2. Heinrich Himmler

Bennett provides evidence in support of his characterisation of Himmler. In this paper, I will assume that this evidence is representative of Himmler’s character and, therefore, constitutes an adequate basis for conclusions about that character in general. Himmler’s moral beliefs are at least as abhorrent as Huck’s, then, since Himmler apparently saw his role in overseeing the Nazi concentration and death camps as his ‘moral’ duty. Far from viewing his role as wrong or his actions as something he did for primarily self-interested reasons, Himmler considered his behaviour to be not just morally permissible, but morally required. Indeed, it appears that Himmler carried out his role at some cost to himself in terms of physical and psychological suffering and, moreover, saw the roles that he and other Nazis played in the slaughter as requiring some degree of personal sacrifice.

1.3. Comparison

Although the actions of Huck and Himmler are not directly relevant to a moral evaluation of their characters, their motivations for acting as they do are. In this sense, then, how each of them responded to the situations they found themselves in is relevant to an assessment of their characters insofar as their responses reflect their character traits.

The relevant situation in the case of Himmler concerns the Nazi’s treatment of millions of persons deemed undesirable for one reason or another. Himmler — despite

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the price he apparently paid personally — oversaw a brutal and cruel system of camps in which millions were used as slave labour and literally worked to death, organised the systematised slaughter of millions considered useless even as slaves, and generally approved the routine torture, degradation, and murder of human beings abhorred by Nazi ideology.

Himmler does seem to feel something negative about his role in the killing. Bennett takes Himmler to be feeling ‘sympathy’, but not strongly enough to prevent him from carrying out what he took to be his moral duty.

In the case of Huck, Bennett concentrates on one particular incident in the story which, presumably, he takes to be representative and to fairly reflect Huck’s character. In the relevant passage, Huck is rafting down the Mississippi with Jim, a runaway slave. A search is on for Jim and Huck finds himself with a stark choice: turn Jim over to the searchers, something he is sure morality requires, or lie to the searchers to keep Jim’s hopes of freedom alive, an action Huck takes to be certainly wrong.

What makes this choice so difficult for Huck is that his emotional response to Jim and his feelings for his friend are entirely at odds with the ‘morality’ of his society. Lacking the skills and insight to question his community’s attitudes, Huck cannot see his situation as anything but a choice between his feelings of friendship and loyalty to Jim, on the one hand, and his beliefs about ‘morality’, on the other. It never occurs to Huck that the former might have something to do with a genuinely moral response so he is unable to recast the choice he must make less starkly.

Eventually, Huck decides to do the ‘right’ thing and turn Jim into the searchers. Nonetheless, when actually confronted by them, he cannot go through with it and deceives the searchers by suggesting that it is his sick father on the raft, suffering from symptoms calculated to suggest smallpox and sure to deter anybody who might otherwise be inclined to check his story. As in the case of Himmler, Bennett takes Huck to be feeling ‘sympathy’, but much more strongly so that Huck’s feelings prevent him from turning Jim in. In Bennett’s terms, then, Huck, unlike Himmler, has enough ‘sympathy’ to prevent his acting on his ‘bad morality’.

I want to suggest that the relevant differences between Huck and Himmler are more fundamental — perhaps, more important — than Bennett’s model might suggest. It seems at least possible that Himmler had a stronger commitment to his ‘morality’. Himmler seems to have been committed to a vision or ‘ideal’, albeit an appalling one. Huck, on the other hand, seems to have no such commitment to his ‘morality’ — perhaps because it is not really his at all. Even if Bennett is correct that the evidence justifies concluding that Huck has more ‘sympathy’ than Himmler rather than, say, a weaker commitment.
to his mistaken moral beliefs, I don’t think this adequately captures the moral value of Huck’s feelings, as opposed to those of Himmler. The mere fact that Huck’s feelings were strong enough to prompt him to act unknowingly well, whereas Himmler’s were not, does not, I think, satisfactorily explain why Huck’s feelings make him morally better — as opposed, say, to simply ‘morally luckier’ — than Himmler.

Bennett’s remarks are, however, rather sketchy. Rather than presenting a more detailed discussion of the view those remarks seem to imply, I want to focus on my alternative approach. The important difference between the characters, I think, is qualitative rather than quantitative.

2. Sympathy and Moral Focus

If Huck and Himmler both feel ‘sympathy’, it cannot be the same sort of ‘sympathy’ in the two cases. What Huck feels is quite different from what Himmler feels, and it is this difference in the quality of feeling which justifies, to at least a considerable extent, different evaluations of the two characters.

Huck’s emotional response is sensitive to Jim’s feelings and experiences, in a way that Himmler’s response is not sensitive to the feelings and experiences of his victims. This means that Huck has an emotional awareness of the most central ethical consideration — the effect that Huck’s decision to turn Jim in or not will have on Jim. In contrast, Himmler has little emotional awareness of the most central consideration relevant to his situation — namely, the effect that Himmler’s decisions have on the Nazis’ victims.

This difference in sensitivity to what should be of primary moral concern is illustrated by some of the quotations Bennett uses as evidence that both Huck and Himmler felt some degree and sort of ‘sympathy’. First, consider Himmler.

2.1. Himmler: Concerned About Whom, Exactly?

Kersten, his physician, attempted to dissuade Himmler from his course by pointing out the suffering which would be inflicted on the Jews. Kersten reported that

[Himmler] knew that it would mean much suffering for the Jews.... ‘It is the curse of greatness that it must step over dead bodies to create new life.... It will be a great burden for me to bear.’ (Bennett 1974, p. 128; Manvell and Fraenkel 1965, p. 184)
One of the things which strikes me most forcibly in these words is Himmler’s shift in emphasis. Kersten expressed concern about the suffering of the Jews, but although Himmler begins by acknowledging that they will indeed suffer a great deal, he then shifts the focus onto what he will suffer, when one might have reasonably expected that it is those who end up as the dead bodies who bear the brunt of ‘the curse’.

Although these particular words do not show that Himmler thinks of himself as engaged in a moral enterprise — those who aspire to ‘greatness’ need not see themselves as aspiring to moral greatness — elsewhere he speaks of ‘obligation’, ‘decency’ etc. in ways which make it clear that it is moral ‘obligation’ and moral ‘decency’ that he has in mind. As Bennett points out, Himmler thought of himself as being caught by ‘...the old tragic conflict between will and obligation’ (Manvell and Fraenkel 1965, p. 184; Bennett 1974, p. 128). Himmler saw himself as pulled, then, between what he took to be his moral duty (murdering millions) and what he was otherwise inclined to do (not doing so).

Why, though, was Himmler caught in this trap? Why would he have preferred to have avoided his so-called duty? His main concern seems to have been with the effects of his actions on his own emotional character, and the effects of his fellow Nazis’ actions on their emotional characters. He saw his role in the concentration camps as requiring the following choice: either he could quash his ability to sympathise with others — including those of ‘good blood’ — altogether, or he could retain this ability despite the discomfort it would cause him. The problem, then, was that those involved in overseeing and running the concentration camps would tend to feel sympathy for the victims, unless they eradicated their capacity for human feeling altogether. Continued involvement would require people to violate a natural inclination to act on their sympathies on a longterm basis. Himmler does not seem to have been concerned about the underlying cause of this dissonance — namely, the suffering of the victims.

What happens to a Russian, to a Czech, does not interest me in the slightest... 
...Whether nations live in prosperity or starve to death like cattle interests me only in so far as we need them as slaves to our Kultur; otherwise it is of no interest to me.

Whether 10,000 Russian females fall down from exhaustion while digging an antitank ditch interests me only in so far as the antitank ditch for Germany is finished...

...[regarding] the extermination of the Jewish race... Most of you must know what it means when 100 corpses are lying side by side, or 500, or 1000. To have stuck it out and at the same time — apart from exceptions caused by human weakness — to have remained decent fellows, that is what has made us hard. This is a page of glory in our history which has never been written and is never to be written... [Original emphasis.] (Shirer 1959, 1960, 1987, 1988, 1990, pp. 937–8, 966; quoted, with slightly different punctuation, by Bennett 1974, pp. 127–8)
One can compare Himmler’s concern about carrying out the concentration camp programme with Kant’s concern about inflicting needless suffering on non-human animals. Although Himmler thinks that despite the difficulties, he and others should still go ahead with the concentration camps, whereas Kant concludes that one should not inflict needless suffering on non-human animals, they see a similar problem in each case.

Just as Himmler failed to see the suffering of the concentration camps’ victims as the central moral problem, Kant failed to see the suffering of the non-human animals as the proper focus of ethical concern. The reason one should not be cruel to non-human animals, according to Kant, is not that the suffering of non-human animals matters morally, but that one would lose one’s capacity to sympathise even with creatures whose suffering does matter morally — namely, rational agents.

Himmler’s concerns about the concentration camp programme are, then, at least as misdirected as Kant’s argument against the infliction of needless suffering on non-human animals. Both worry about what are, at the very most, secondary moral considerations, and miss completely what should be of central ethical concern.

The emotional turmoil of Huck, who experiences his situation as a wrenching and, even, life-altering dilemma is of a different character altogether. Huck’s emotional response is correctly focused, at least in large part, on Jim’s experiences, feelings, thoughts and sufferings — that is, on what should, indeed, be the central moral consideration.

2.2. Huck’s Dilemma

In the episode Bennett focuses on, Huck is rafting down the Mississippi with Jim, a slave fleeing his ‘owner’ Miss. Watson. As they approach the point at which Jim will become legally free and his escape a fait accompli, Huck finds that his internalisation of the mores of rural Missouri — which he takes to be his conscience — starts to give him cold feet. As they get closer and closer to the critical point, Jim naturally becomes increasingly optimistic, and more and more excited about his future as a free-person. At the same time, Huck begins to feel worse and worse about his role in Jim’s escape.

...Jim said it made him all over trembly and feverish to be so close to freedom. Well, I can tell you it made me all over trembly and feverish, too, to hear him, because I begun to get it through my head that he was most free — and who was to blame for it? Why, me...

...[Jim] was saying how the first thing he would do when he got to a free state he would go to saving up money and never spend a single cent, and when he got enough
he would buy his wife... and then they would both work to buy the two children, and if their master wouldn’t sell them, they’d get an Ab’litionist to go and steal them.

It most froze me to hear such talk. He wouldn’t ever dared to talk such talk in his life before. Just see what a difference it made in him the minute he judged he was about free. It was according to the old saying, ‘Give a nigger an inch and he’ll take an ell.’ . . . Here was this nigger, which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children . . .

... My conscience got to stirring me up hotter than ever, until at last I says to it, ‘Let up on me — it ain’t too late yet — I’ll paddle ashore at the first light and tell.’ I felt easy and happy and light as a feather right off. All my troubles was gone . . . (Twain 2002, pp. 95–96)

Telling Jim that he’s off to find out whether they have really reached safety yet or not, Huck paddles off in their canoe fully intending to alert the authorities and turn Jim in. He immediately begins to have second thoughts, however, as Jim expresses his gratitude for Huck’s help and his sense of their relationship as one of valued friendship.

... as I shoved off, [Jim] . . . says:

‘Pooty soon I’ll be a shout’n’ for joy, en I’ll say, it’s all on accounts o’ Huck; I’s a free man, en I couldn’t ever ben free ef it hadn’ ben for Huck; Huck done it. Jim won’t ever forgit you, Huck; you’s de bes’ fren’ Jim’s ever had; en you’d de only fren’ ole Jim’s got now.’

I was paddling off, all in a sweat to tell on him; but when he says this, it seemed to kind of take the tuck all out of me . . .

‘Dah you goes, de ole true Huck; de on’y white gentlman dat ever kep’ his promise to ole Jim.’

Well, I just felt sick. But I says, I got to do it — I can’t get out of it . . . [Original emphasis.] (Twain 2002, pp. 96–97)

Huck’s emotional response centres on Jim’s experiences in a way that Himmler’s fails to centre on the experiences of the Nazis’ victims. Himmler, indeed, doesn’t seem to experience his situation as a dilemma at all — convinced that he has a moral obligation to supervise and support the concentration camp programme, his regrets focus on the unfortunate side-effects on the Nazis involved. Himmler does not feel torn about the concentration camps per se. Presumably, if emotionless robots could oversee and carry out the programme, there would be no downside at all.

Huck, however, is concerned about Jim’s being turned in — and not only about the unfortunate side-effects of turning Jim in himself. Although it is easy to imagine Huck’s feeling a temporary sense of relief if Jim was simply recaptured through no fault of Huck’s — if only because it would provide relief from the agonising process of deciding what to do — it is difficult to imagine that his relief would last very long and, indeed, when Jim is recaptured without Huck’s turning him in, it is not long before Huck decides to free him, even though he considers this simple theft and is convinced he will go to Hell for it.
It was a close place. I took [the letter to Miss. Watson telling her where Jim was]... up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knewed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

‘All right, then, I’ll go to hell’ — and tore it up. [Original emphasis.] (Twain 2002, p. 220)

Huck’s emotional response focuses on the experiences of the most important party affected by his decision — Jim — in a way that Himmler’s does not. Huck identifies with Jim’s experiences and point of view, whereas Himmler far from identifying with the victims of the camps regards them as, at best, sub-human and, at worst, no better than vermin. It is worth noting, I think, that even when Huck is attempting to persuade himself to do what he takes to be ‘right’ — that is, turn Jim in — he does so by thinking about the effects his not turning Jim in will have on other people.

...Conscience says to me: ‘What had poor Miss Watson done to you, that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word? What did that poor old woman do to you, that you could treat her so mean? Why, she tried to learn you your book, she tried to learn you your manners, she tried to be good to you every way she knew how. That’s what she done.’

I got to feeling so mean and miserable I most wished I was dead. I fidgeted up and down the raft, abusing myself to myself... [Original emphasis.] (Twain 2002, p. 95)

Even when most motivated to do what Huck imagines to be the ‘right’ thing and conform to his community’s so-called values, Huck attempts to make sense of those values by identifying with others like Miss. Watson. It is this same ability — and willingness — to identify with others that gives Huck the resources to resist those same values. Indeed, given his lack of the critical capacities a good moral agent needs, Huck, insofar as he is an independent moral agent, must rely on his emotional responses which, unlike his beliefs, do not conform to the conventional values of rural Missouri.

3. WHAT HUCK NEEDS

The fact that Huck lacks the resources to challenge the values of his community is, of course, a major obstacle to his becoming a fully independent and competent moral agent. The fact that Jim’s so-called owner may suffer to some degree as a result of Jim’s freedom is of scant moral significance if one recognises the immorality of slavery and is clear about why it is wrong. Huck, however, far from recognising any of this lacks the resources to even question rural Missouri’s approval of slavery. Huck is unable to make
any qualitative distinction between the misery slavery causes Jim and the ‘harm’ Jim’s freedom will do to Miss. Watson.

In order to develop into a good moral agent, Huck would need to develop the critical capacities necessary to evaluate the so-called moral principles of his community, consider possible alternatives, and choose or develop ethical beliefs of his own. Huck’s ability to identify with others, even when such identification flies in the face of his community’s views, would be a great ethical resource if combined with critical capacities. Indeed, it is not just that Huck can identify with those society would not have him identify with, Huck often does this despite his best efforts not to, since he realises that such identification encourages him to violate the principles he takes to be ‘right’.

According to Bennett, Huck is unable to question or revise his society’s moral beliefs about slavery because he does not have any reasons to think they may be incorrect. I want to suggest, instead, that Huck’s emotional response to, awareness of, and ability to identify with, Jim, provide Huck with perfectly good reasons to think something may be wrong with slavery. The problem, on my view, is not that Huck lacks such reasons but, rather, that he lacks the ability to identify them as such. More generally, Huck lacks an ethical framework because he does not really understand what ‘morality’ is. For Huck, ‘morality’ is a piecemeal set of rules, originating from some mysterious source, which are not subject to constraints such as consistency or coherence. Huck cannot challenge the so-called morality of rural Missouri because he does not think of ‘morality’ as needing to make sense at all. People who he regards as better educated and more knowledgeable than he explain the rules and doing the ‘right’ thing consists in following those rules. It is besides the point to ask whether the rules make sense or are consistent with each other since Huck does not think of ‘morality’ as systematised at all.

Huck also lacks the ability to apply abstract ethical ideals to particular situations correctly. This problem seems to stem, at least in part, from his inability to see ethical principles as connected, coherent or systematised. Consider Huck’s response to an attempt by the widow, who is caring for Huck at the beginning of the story, to explain a fairly general ethical principle. Having been told that people can get the things they want through prayer, Huck reflects that the people around him do not appear to get the things they want, however assiduously they pray. Taking his concerns back to the widow, Huck is told that,

...the thing a body could get by praying for it was ‘spiritual gifts.’ This was too many for me, but she told me what it meant — I must help other people, and look out for them all the time, and never think about myself...I went out in the woods and turned it over in my mind a long time, but I couldn’t see no advantage about it — except for the
other people; so at last I reckoned I wouldn’t worry about it no more, but just let it go.
(Twain 2002, p. 19)

The fact that Huck takes himself to reject this idea does not necessarily imply that
he does not, to at least some extent, actually live by it — either before or after it is
presented to him by the widow. Rather, Huck fails to see that the ways in which he often
responds to situations are actually cases in which he does act for the good of others,
even at considerable cost to himself. Consider again the scene in which Huck decides
to free Jim following his recapture. Learning of the situation, Huck fears that God is
showing him the consequences of his ‘wicked’ deeds. He tries to pray but, finding he
cannot, concludes that the problem is that he is trying to pray dishonestly by saying he
will write to Jim’s ‘owner’ when he really has no intention of doing so.

So I was full of trouble, full as I could be; and didn’t know what to do. At last I had
an idea; and I says, I’ll go and write the letter — and then see if I can pray. Why, it was
astonishing, the way I felt as light as a feather right straight off, and my troubles all gone.
So I got a piece of paper and a pencil, all glad and excited, and set down and wrote:

Miss Watson, your runaway nigger Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville,
and Mr. Phelps has got him and will give him up for the reward if you send.
Huck Finn.

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life,
and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn’t do it straight off, but laid the paper down
and set there thinking — thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I
come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our
trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time; in the day and in the nighttime,
sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and
laughing. But somehow I couldn’t seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but
only the other kind. I’d see him standing my watch on top of his’n, ’stead of calling me,
so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog;
and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like
times; and would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of
for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling
the men we had smallpox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend
old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he’s got now; and then I happened to
look around and see that paper.

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because
I’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of
holding my breath, and then says to myself:

‘All right, then I’ll go to hell’ — and tore it up. [Original emphasis.] (Twain 2002,
pp. 219–220)

In contrast to Bennett, I want to claim that Huck has perfectly good ethical reasons
to doubt the moral acceptability of slavery, but lacks the ability to recognise them

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as such. If one thinks about what motivates Huck to help Jim, one finds that the answer lies in Huck’s relationship with Jim qua human being. He cannot bring himself to betray somebody who has looked out and made sacrifices for him. Although at a cognitive level Huck believes Jim is a slave and should be returned to his ‘rightful owner’, Huck’s emotional response does not reflect this but, rather, reflects a sense of Jim as simply another human being in an especially difficult situation. Huck has an emotional investment in what happens to Jim and cares about Jim’s feelings. Huck feels that Jim’s kindness and goodness are what really matter, even though he isn’t able to articulate this. These emotions and feelings are what motivate Huck to protect Jim, even though he believes that he, himself, will burn in Hell as a consequence.

I claim that, in addition to motivating Huck, the relevant emotions and feelings are also reasons to think slavery is wrong, even though Huck isn’t able to recognise them as such. On my view emotions and feelings can be reasons for believing or doubting a moral claim. What Huck needs to make sense of this — what he needs in order to make use of his emotional capacities’ ethical potential — is a framework or ethical approach which draws on both an agent’s emotional and her critical capacities. Huck, of course, has at best rudimentary critical capacities, so he lacks more than simply the ability to make use of both sorts of capacity. What is striking about Huck’s case, I think, is that despite lacking critical capacities and despite an inability to engage in any real sort of moral reasoning, it is difficult not to see Huck as aware of, and sensitive to, excellent reasons for rejecting slavery as immoral. Huck, one is tempted to say, is, on some level, quite well aware of the wrongness of slavery. He is painfully aware of the suffering slavery engenders, and his own acute discomfort strongly suggests that he is also aware that such suffering is deeply problematic. This, I suggest, is an essentially moral awareness, whether Huck thinks of it this way or not.

Although I cannot defend the view adequately here, I want to say something about the special sense of Empathy I alluded to earlier. Although Huck’s emotional capacities are morally valuable just on their own, I think a stronger case for the moral value of these sorts of emotional capacities can be made by thinking about the role they would play in the ethical thinking of a good moral agent, who possesses both emotional and critical capacities. Looking at such a moral agent should clarify what role emotional capacities like those of Huck can play in moral reasoning, and why they are morally valuable. If I am right about the moral value of Huck’s emotional capacities, in contrast with those of Himmler, then I will have gone some way toward explaining why our intuitive ethical judgements of Huck as morally better than Himmler are justified. At the same time, I will try to indicate why the ethical approach I have in mind, which involves both emotional
and critical capacities, is of more general ethical value.

I will refer to the ethical approach that I have in mind as an Empathic ethical approach, in a sense I will spell out shortly. Before talking about the special sense of ‘Empathy’ I have in mind in the ethical case, I want to say something about the empathy exercises in my secondary school history classes, which involved a closely related sense of ‘empathy’.

3.1. Empathy in History

When I was studying history, ‘empathy exercises’ were one, somewhat controversial, means of assessment. What interests me here is not the nature or basis of the controversy surrounding these exercises but, rather, the advice that we were given before taking one. It was emphasised that we were supposed to demonstrate empathy and not sympathy. While I don’t recall these terms being explicated with the greatest of clarity or in the greatest of detail, the point seemed to be that we were not meant to imagine ourselves into somebody else’s position and pour out ‘our’ feelings on paper, as one might try to do in a creative writing exam. Rather, we had to demonstrate an understanding of the other person’s situation; an ability to imagine how she would have seen and been affected by the situation. We had to describe this not as though we shared that person’s perspective or feelings but, rather, as though we understood them. This required not an outpouring of our own feelings onto paper but, rather, a description of the feelings of the person, derived from a reasonable analysis of the situation presented in the exercise (and, presumably, our background knowledge of the period and some general assumptions about human beings). This did not require us to feel what the other person would have felt, but simply to show that we understood how that person would have felt — although it might, of course, be that the best way to do this would involve imagining how the other person would have felt and this might, perhaps, lead at least some students to feel ‘shadows’ of her feelings.

The emphasis on empathy rather than sympathy seems to serve several purposes in this case. Empathy does not involve pity or, even, compassion. We were told to avoid demonstrating pity completely. The emphasis on empathy also prevented (or should have prevented) candidates from imagining themselves in such a position and describing what they would feel. This was to miss an important point — that the time and place one lives in affects one’s perspective on and emotional reactions to situations. If we had imagined how we would have viewed the situation and how we would have felt, this would have
resulted in our relying on our own perspectives which might be very different from the perspectives of those in other times and places. When using empathy, one can allow (in some approximate way) for such differences, but this may be impossible (or almost impossible) if one uses sympathy. (Nonetheless, in some cases, the best strategy for a particular student might, at least in part, consist in her imagining how she, herself, would have felt — if, say, she could imagine herself with the appropriate perspective.)

For example, suppose we had been taught that working class people in South Wales during the Depression generally had a deep and abiding belief in God and that they generally saw suffering as a ‘test’ — a ‘test’ which they might complete successfully by upholding their faith, overcoming adversity and maintaining hope; or which they might fail by losing their faith, failing to help themselves when they could and sinking into despair. Since we did not, for the most part, share this perspective on life, simply imagining ourselves in the situations described by the exercises would not have been likely to tell us much about how a person living then and there would have felt about them. Had we been required to share their feelings, this might have been an impossible task. On the other hand, some form of sympathy involving pity or compassion, which would have been possible for us from our perspective, based on this type of imaginative exercise, would simply have been inappropriate — pity or compassion based on an attempt to imagine how we would have felt would simply have been pity or compassion for the wrong people. Indeed, it would have been pity or compassion for us (or people like us) in a situation which had never happened to us (or them) — rather than pity or compassion for the people who actually lived at that time.

Empathy, on the other hand, does not require an assumption of (the same degree of) similarity between oneself and another. We could understand how the other would have felt by explicitly taking into account what we knew of her background beliefs. We could also imagine being a person at that time, in that situation — but this would not be the same imaginative exercise as the one suggested by a use of sympathy. This would not be a question of imagining ourselves in that situation but, rather, trying to imagine what it was like to be one of them. Since we could not actually become one of them, we could not do this by imagining ourselves as them and seeing what we felt. We had to use both reasoning and feeling — and appeal to both reasons and emotions/feelings. We had to give ourselves suppositions and assumptions (‘suppose that I thought that... then what would I feel?’). To the extent that one might say we shared their feelings, it wasn’t really a case of us feeling them at all — we identified with and shared those feelings only in the way that one may ‘share’ the feelings of a fictional character. To the extent that one gets carried away and really does share those feelings, one is, temporarily and to a limited
extent, no longer oneself. The problem was to envisage what another would have felt, not what we would have felt.

One might wonder, of course, whether the distinction between imagining what one would, oneself, have felt and what another felt makes sense — or whether empathy, in this sense, is possible at all. (Indeed, perhaps that was one of the sources of the controversy sparked by the exercises.) I will assume, for now, however, that it does make sense although this assumption should be qualified. Even if empathy of this sort is possible, it clearly requires some degree of similarity between the imaginer and the other. Of course, the more similar one is oneself to the other, the closer one may come to actually sharing the feelings of the other from the other’s perspective, but without abandoning one’s own identity. The more different one is from the other, the more it will be true that one could only truly share the other’s feelings by abandoning one’s own identity. This, however, is a matter of sharing the other’s feelings. Empathy does not require this. One of the advantages of empathy, as suggested above, is that one can empathise with another person even if she is quite different from oneself. Perhaps the fact that even empathy is limited by requiring some degree of similarity between oneself and the other, merely reveals a limitation of human psychology; perhaps not. Although I am suggesting that both the sharing of another’s feelings and empathy require some degree of similarity and that the former requires more similarity than the latter, exactly how much similarity empathy requires I leave as an open question at this point. Could one empathise with humans from ancient history? With persons of radically different background and with radically different beliefs from oneself? With (some) non-human animals? Such matters may also vary from individual to individual. I leave open the possibility that some individuals are more skilled empathisers than others or, perhaps, that some cultures or backgrounds better enable people to develop and to exercise their empathic capacities.

3.2. Introducing Empathy

I want to sketch a brief argument for the claim that Empathy in the special sense I have in mind, which is closely related to the historical sense of ‘empathy’ just discussed, should play a central role in ethical theory and moral reasoning. This brief version of the argument is necessarily less complete than the original version, which is considerably more detailed (Rees 2003). What I can say here about the precise nature of the role Empathy should play in ethical theory and moral reasoning is similarly limited.
That said, the concept I have in mind is very like that used in our history exercises. However, although one’s own emotional reactions might sometimes be relevant in the historical case, since they might help one in evaluating the evidence or bring especially significant aspects of the exercise to one’s attention, it seems unlikely that one’s feelings would generally be of central importance. In the moral case, however, one’s own emotional reactions are critical and one’s emotional capacities, along with one’s ability to utilise those capacities effectively, are among those capacities crucial for the development of Empathy.

I suggested above that, to the extent that one did share the feelings of the other, while empathising with her, that one was no longer oneself. The situation is analogous when one Empathises with another. Indeed, this is one danger of Empathy. Insofar as empathy is useful in history, one must maintain some degree of distance from the other. If one does not, then one will not be in a position to assess the situation critically or to take an appropriately historical perspective. I do not mean to suggest that such a perspective could, should or would be completely objective or ‘value-free’ — the point, rather, is that one is trying to do history oneself. The purpose of the exercise is not to find out how the other person would have viewed the situation historically. How the other would have felt is a kind of evidence which one, as an historian, uses in developing one’s analysis. The analysis is meant to be the historian’s — not the other person’s. The trick, then, is to maintain an awareness of both these perspectives, so that one can think through the issues and write about them from one’s own (historical) perspective, as a historian at such-and-such a time and place, using one’s awareness of the other’s (non-historical) perspective as evidence in one’s work. Likewise, Empathy is useful to one ethically only if one can maintain some degree of distance from the other. One must be able to assess the situation critically, from one’s own ethical perspective. Again, one’s awareness of the other’s feelings and perspective forms a kind of evidence which one needs to take into account. I suggest, too, that one needs to be aware of one’s own feelings about the situation and, if one is actually experiencing the other’s feelings as one’s own, then one will not be able to do this. Even if one also has one’s own feelings, so long as one experiences the other’s feelings as one’s own, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish one’s own feelings from those of the other.
4. Huck’s Feelings Reconsidered

What, then, does this discussion of Empathy suggest about the moral value, if any, of Huck’s emotional capacities? Although I have focused on the emotional capacities Empathy requires here, critical capacities are equally crucial. Because he lacks the necessary critical capacities, Huck clearly lacks Empathy. He cannot use or make sense of his emotional responses and awareness. Nonetheless, at times Huck is acutely aware, often in spite of himself, of Jim’s feelings, experiences and, to some extent, perspective. Huck does not really understand Jim’s experiences, but he is aware of several important aspects of them. In particular, Huck is often painfully conscious of the effect of the situation on Jim — he is aware of how Jim feels. Even when he tries, he cannot block out his awareness of Jim’s hopes and dreams, or his griefs, fears, and suffering. Whatever Huck may consciously tell himself about Jim’s status in society, at an emotional level he mostly relates to Jim simply as a fellow human being. This is why something in Huck revolts at the idea of betraying Jim. However many times Huck tells himself that turning Jim over is the right thing to do, he feels that doing so constitutes betrayal.

What Huck has, then, is an emotional awareness of the most fundamental reason slavery is wrong — namely, that it pretends that slaves are not human beings or persons, in order to deny them equal moral status. First, this moral awareness is morally valuable in itself; and, second, an Empathic agent would be able to use this emotional awareness in her moral reasoning and so, perhaps, improve her ethical beliefs about slavery. Huck cannot do this and, so, experiences his situation as a dilemma between what he takes to be ‘morality’ and his emotional response to Jim. That Huck sees it this way, however, does not mean that he lacks the emotional awareness, and such emotional awareness is morally valuable, even in the absence of the necessary critical capacities for Empathy. Moreover, Huck’s emotional awareness is an excellent ethical foundation, which gives him the potential to develop Empathy, should he have the opportunity to acquire the necessary critical capacities. Himmler has nothing like this — he apparently lacks any sort of awareness of the wrongness of the concentration and death camps. This, then, is why our intuitive evaluation of Huck’s character as morally better than Himmler’s is justified.
REFERENCES


