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Moral agency under oppression

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Abstract

In Huckleberry Finn, a thirteen-year old white boy in antebellum Missouri escapes from his abusive father and befriends a runaway slave named Jim. On a familiar reading of the novel, both Huck and Jim are, in their own ways, morally impressive, transcending the unjust circumstances in which they find themselves in to treat each other as equals. Huck saves Jim's life from two men looking for runaway slaves, and later Jim risks his chance at freedom to save Huck's friend Tom. I want to complicate the idea that Huck and Jim are morally commendable for what they do. More generally, I want to explore how oppression undermines the moral agency of the oppressed, and to some degree, the oppressor. In §1 I take a careful look at Jim's choice, arguing that his enslavement compromises his moral agency. In §2 I show how Jim's oppression also shapes the extent to which Huck can be praiseworthy for his action. In §3, I consider the consequences for thinking about the moral agency of the oppressed, and in §4 I explore the limitations of the concept of moral worth for theorizing in cases of oppression.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In *Huckleberry Finn*, a thirteen-year old white boy in antebellum Missouri escapes from his abusive father and befriends a runaway slave named Jim. When Huck is approached by two

men looking for escaped slaves he finds himself unable to turn Jim in. Later in the novel, Huck's friend Tom is shot in the leg, and Jim risks his chance to run for freedom to look after Tom, making sure he receives medical attention. On a common reading of the novel, both Huck and Jim's actions are morally impressive. Huck is moved by his friendship with Jim to see him as human, like himself, despite the bad moral education he has received. Jim reveals his nobility when he risks his life to save his friend, despite the world's persistent attempts to deny his humanity.

I want to complicate the idea that Huck and Jim are morally commendable for what they do. Specifically, I argue that once we take seriously Jim's perspective, we find Jim is in a situation where, no matter what he does, he is unable to fully express his morally impressive qualities. This result has consequences for the moral quality of Huck's action as well. Here, I am not interested in the moral desirability of their actions, that is, the question of whether they do the right thing. Instead, I am interested in what philosophers sometimes refer to as the moral worth of their actions: the extent to which they deserve praise or credit for what they do.

I have two goals in this paper. First, I want to show how oppressive circumstances constrain the moral agency of the oppressed. I will argue that because of the structure of choices under oppression, oppressed agents are often in situations where, even when they do the right thing for the right reasons, their actions fall short of being fully praiseworthy. Second, I argue that the dominant concepts in moral philosophy cannot capture this fact because they are insensitive to the ways an agent's choices are structured by their oppression. The upshot is that, without more adequate resources, moral philosophers risk obscuring the role that oppression plays in structuring the agency of both the oppressor and oppressed.

Here's the plan. In §1 I take a careful look at Jim's choice, arguing that his enslavement compromises his moral agency. In §2 I show how Jim's oppression also shapes the extent to which Huck can be praiseworthy for his action. In §3, I consider the consequences for thinking about the moral agency of the oppressed, and in §4 I explore the limitations of the concept of moral worth for theorizing in cases of oppression.

2 | JIM

2.1 | Jim's Choice

Consider in more detail the choice Jim makes near the end of the novel. Huck has been reunited with his friend Tom Sawyer. Jim ends up being captured by Tom's relatives on their farm. Huck and and Tom stage an elaborate scheme to free him. In the course of this scheme, Tom is shot in the leg. Instead of running for his freedom, Jim stays with Tom, insisting that he needs medical attention.

In the context of the novel, the scene is presumably meant to show Jim demonstrating incontrovertible proof of his humanity. Jim has the choice to run for his freedom, and instead he acts to protect the life of his friend. And, indeed, he is almost hanged as a result. Given the background context of his enslavement, Jim is surely not morally required to risk his chance at freedom to help Tom. The fact that he does so anyways makes him especially morally commendable.[1]

[1] See for example David L. Smith's take: "Jim demonstrates his moral superiority by surrendering himself in order to assist the doctor in treating his wounded tormentor. This is hardly the behavior which one would expect from a commodity,

Closer attention to the details of the case, however, lends itself to a different reading, namely that Jim's action is a failure of self-respect. Jim's stated reason for saving Tom is that Tom would have done the same for him.[2] Even by the lights of the novel, Jim seems to be mistaken, and to overestimate Tom's concern for him. Tom has been treating Jim as a mere instrument in his amusement, risking his life to play out a dramatic fantasy.[3] Jim has spent much of his life treated as an object, in the service of white interests. At the moment he has the chance to secure his freedom, it is not obvious that he has good reasons to save Tom's life instead.

Perhaps we get different results if we imagine that it was Huck, rather than Tom, who was shot in the leg. Much of the novel is about the relationship between Jim and Huck, and there is a much stronger case to be made that they have a genuine and important friendship. Jim and Huck seem to care for each other, they laugh together, they share beliefs and superstitions. And, as we've seen, Huck defies everything he has been taught in order to save Jim's life.

But here again, we might think matters are not as simple as the novel presents them. For all the ways that Huck and Jim seem like friends, there is also the reality of their situation. Jim is a grown man and an escaped slave. Huck is a thirteen-year old white boy who believes that slaves are property, and who has the power to end Jim's life at any moment. The relationship between Jim and Huck is, in many important respects, deeply unequal. We might think that, in this context, there are strong moral reasons *against* Jim risking his own life to save the life of Huck (or Tom).

Specifically, Jim has a duty of self-respect, to respect his own person and demand that respect from others, rather than being servile. Again, Jim lives in a world where white lives are systematically overvalued at the expense of Black lives, and where he is expected to prioritize white lives over his own. Perhaps, in this context, it is important for Jim to resist this expectation, and to assert the value of his own life by trying to secure his freedom. One worry, if he stays, is that his action communicates a kind of tacit condonement of his circumstances. Du Bois makes an argument of this sort, insisting that even in conditions where Black people will make their material life prospects worse, they should protest on the grounds of self-respect.[4] He argues that if Black people did not protest, their silence might be read as tacitly condoning their mistreatment, or as believing the treatment was not in fact unjust.[5]

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and it is *precisely* Jim's status—man or chattel—which has been fundamentally at issue throughout the novel… Up to this point, we have been able to admire Jim's good sense and to respond sentimentally to his good character. This, however, is the first time that we see him making a significant (and wholly admirable) moral decision. His act sets him apart from everyone else in the novel except Huck" (Smith, 1984, p. 9).

[2] "Well, den, dis is de way it look to me, Huck. Ef it wuz *him* dat 'uz bein' sot free, en one er de boyz wuz to git shot would he say, 'Go on en save me, nemmine 'bout a doctor f'r to save dis one'? Is dat like Mars Tom Sawyer? Would he say dat? You *bet* he wouldn't!" (p. 381)

[3] Huck proposes a simple plan to free Jim, but Tom convinces him instead to stage an elaborate game to free Jim that involves digging a tunnel, warning Tom's uncle via an anonymous letter, and filling Jim's room with snakes and rats– all meant to add to the drama of the escape plan. It is during the course of this elaborate and cruel game that Tom is shot. As Tom says: "What's the good of a plan that ain't more trouble than that? It's as mild as goose-milk" (p. 348)

[4] As Du Bois insists: "We will not, by word or deed, for a moment admit the right of any man to discriminate against us simply on account of race or color. Whenever we submit to humiliation and oppression it is because of superior brute force; and even when bending to the inevitable we bend with unabated protest and declare flatly and unswervingly that any man or section or nation who wantonly shuts the doors of opportunity and self-defense in the faces of the weak is a coward and knave. We refuse to kiss the hands that smite us" W. E. B. Du Bois, 1995, p. 331.

[5] Tommie Shelby offers a somewhat different argument for a similar conclusion. He suggests that a failure to protest can result in a kind of moral degradation. He argues that in conditions like those of Blacks in the south where "the prospects

A further argument, perhaps even more pressing for Jim, is that he is in a situation, including in his friendship with Huck, where it is very hard for him to *know* that he is self-respecting. Consider Boxill's argument for why Black people should protest injustice against them in circumstances where they cannot improve their material condition. Rather than being concerned with what one's actions might communicate to others, Boxill is worried about what one's failure to protest might mean for oneself. Specifically, he argues that in oppressive conditions, it is tempting for the member of an oppressed group to pretend servility in order to appease the oppressor.[6] Even someone with self-respect might act to appease their oppressor in order to get some relief. But, Boxill argues, this pretense can be dangerous; it can shake his confidence in his own self-respect.[7]

In these conditions, a person concerned with self-respect needs to know that he is self-respecting. And Boxill argues, the only proof that he can have is to sometimes protest the injustice against him. Jim's friendship with Huck, I am suggesting, poses a kind of epistemic problem: it is very difficult for him to know whether the love and care that he feels for Huck comes from a place of genuine connection and appreciation, or whether it comes from a place of self-preservation. It is difficult for him to know that the basis for his friendship isn't a kind of a servility.[8] In a moment where Jim has the opportunity to prove to himself that he is not servile, he has strong moral reasons to do so.

All of this is to say, there is a reading of Jim's action where it is morally commendable, a testament to his nobility, and a reading where it is not commendable, where it betrays a lack of self-respect. What makes Jim's choice difficult, I will suggest, is that there is some truth to both of these readings. Again, the difficulty I'm interested in here is not primarily the difficulty in determining what Jim ought to do. I myself do not have a clear view, though perhaps some will have strong intuitions. But we can imagine a version of the case where Jim has overriding reasons to perform one course of action over the other: for example, imagine he knew that Tom (or Huck) would likely survive the gunshot wound, and he was confident he would be hanged if he stayed with Tom. In this case it would be clear that Jim ought to run. The difficulty I'm interested in is the difficulty that remains even when it is clear what Jim ought to do.

for ending, reducing or escaping one's oppression are dim, one can easily come to accommodate oneself to unjust conditions, effectively surrendering" and that the "moral dissonance can even tempt one to rationalize one's condition, perhaps regarding it as not all that bad" (2010, p. 352). Someone who lacks self-respect will submit to injustice because he doesn't think his rights are worth fighting for, or that they have been violated. And someone with self-respect might also submit to injustice because he believes that resistance will make no difference or even make things worse. But, Shelby worries, we can never in such a situation be confident that our silence in the face of injustice is not rooted in rationalization or cowardice. So, he argues: "When one is convinced that all other modes of resistance are closed off, one can at least voice one's resentment about one's maltreatment. To be secure in one's belief that one values one's rights, one must break one's silence, and suffer the consequences" (p. 352).

[6] As he argues, the oppressor wants to feel their actions are justified: "They want to believe more than that their treatment of others is fitting; they want those they mistreat to condone their mistreatment as proper, and therefore offer inducements and rewards toward that end" (Boxill, 2013, p. 65).

[7] Someone who is able to perfectly pretend to be servile has no way of knowing whether they are in fact servile: "If Sambo gave a perfect imitation of servility, neither he nor his master could have any reason to think he was anything but servile" (p. 68).

[8] As Boxill argues, someone who is able to perfectly pretend to be servile has no way of knowing whether they are in fact servile: "If Sambo gave a perfect imitation of servility, neither he nor his master could have any reason to think he was anything but servile" (p. 68). (Boxill, 2013)

I'm interested in the difficulty of saying that Jim is morally commendable whichever action he chooses.[9] He seems courageous in a way by sacrificing his chance at freedom to help his friend. He seems courageous in a different way by insisting on the value of his own life in the face of world that tries to deny it. He seems self-respecting in a way by refusing to allow his status as a slave to prevent him from forming meaningful human connection. He seems self-respecting in a different way by resisting the ever-present threat of servility. We can imagine this reflected in his first personal experience of his action: whatever he does, we can imagine him feeling enormous pain, regret, or remorse.

It might seem that Jim's choice is a tragic conflict of the sort familiar to moral philosophers.[10] Recall Antigone, facing a choice between burying her brother in line with familial and religious customs, or obeying the laws of the state. On one reading of Antigone's case, she faces two competing moral demands that are mutually unsatisfiable. Even when she does what is best, there is cause for regret or remorse because of the strong moral reasons also counting against her action, in favor of a different action. So also, we might think, what makes Jim's choice so difficult is that he is faced with two competing but mutually unsatisfiable moral demands: to save his friend and to resist his own oppression.

In fact, I'll argue in the next section that this comparison is not quite accurate. The choice Jim faces is different from, and more vexed, than familiar moral dilemmas. Specifically, Jim is not faced with a choice between two competing goods or values. Instead, he is faced with a choice where whatever good he seeks to promote in his action will also, to some degree, be undermined by his action.

2.2 | A Double BInd

What makes Jim's choice different in kind from other more familiar tragic conflicts is, I want to suggest, the background context of his oppression. Specifically, Jim is in what Marilyn Frye calls a double bind: a choice situation where an agent is "immobilized" because, although they have choices available to them, every choice exposes them to "penalty, censure or deprivation". Jim's choice cannot be understood in isolation from the way his options in general are systematically structured, like bars in a cage, by the oppressive system.[11]

To get clear on the structure of his choice, consider again the question of whether Jim and Huck have a genuine friendship. On the one hand, they seem to love and care about each other, and act in the ways that friends do. On the other hand, they exist in a deeply unequal relationship; Huck has little understanding or ability to imagine Jim's experience, and has the power to end Jim's life

[9] Here I am sympathetic to Lisa Tessman's observation that much moral theory has been focused on being action guiding, and that moral philosophers need to focus on other kinds of pressing questions including attending to situations of moral failure and moral remainder, and "understanding moral life under oppression" (2010, p. 808). See also Norlock (2018) for discussion. See also Hursthouse (Ch 3, 1999) for a discussion of virtue ethics and tragic conflicts.

[10] For a classic discussion of tragic conflicts, see Williams and Atkinson (1965). See also Nussbaum's characterization as "a wrong action committed without any direct physical compulsion and in full knowledge of its nature, by a person whose ethical character or commitments would otherwise dispose him to reject the act" (1985, p. 234). I don't here take a stand on whether we should understand Antigone's choice as a dilemma. For a classic discussion of the nature of moral dilemmas, see MacIntyre (1990). I am here assuming a reading of Antigone's case that is largely apolitical. However, see Holland (1998) for a review of the long tradition of feminist readings of Antigone; on these readings, Antigone's choice will be much more like the double bind Jim faces.

[11] See Frye (2019), Hirji (2021), p. 652–655.

at any moment. What is clear is that Jim deserves a better friend than the one he has in Huck. He deserves a friend who is also an adult, who can understand some of his basic life experiences, and who stably sees him as more than property. Anyone deserves this.

That being said, Jim also deserves any friend at all, and in the world he inhabits, Huck is the only friend available to him. He has been separated from his wife and child, and has escaped from his enslavement. No human relationships are safe for him. His relationship with Huck is the only relationship that is even possible for him. If Jim was not a slave, if he lived in a world where he was not subject to constant threat and domination, if he was allowed a human life, whatever relationship he might have with a boy like Huck wouldn't count as a genuine and important friendship. But, given the reality of his situation, his relationship with Huck is his best and only friendship, and so something worth taking seriously.[12]

When we ask whether Jim and Huck have a real friendship, the answer is not straightforward. In an ideal world, they would not. In the non-ideal world, they do. And, crucially, what makes it the case that it is rational for Jim to form a relationship of care with Huck, and to take that relationship seriously, is the fact that he is a slave. That is, the fact that he is oppressed, and that he doesn't have the opportunity to make better, more equal friendships, makes it the case that he has reasons to be friends with Huck that he would not have if he were free. This is because the oppressive system controls his access to prudential goods like friendship.

Hirji (2021) argues that oppressive double binds work by offering a member of an oppressed group a choice between cooperating with or resisting some oppressive norm. In virtue of their oppression, the individual is in a situation where the two goods at stake in their choice—their prudential good and their resistance to oppression—are bound up together. Cooperating with an oppressive norm generally comes with some prudential reward, but at the cost of reinforcing the system that controls one's access to prudential goods. Resisting one's oppression generally comes with some kind of penalty or censure which compromises one's ability to do well in the system. But one's surviving or flourishing in the system itself constitutes a kind of resistance to oppression.[13]

[12] Here, I want to resist a reading of Jim's concern for Huck and Tom on which that concern is necessarily an adaptive preference or a reflection of the degree to which he has internalized his oppression. I think we can imagine a version of Jim who knows the extent of his oppression, believes it to be unjust, and still finds genuine value in his relationship with Huck. For a discussion of the challenges of ascribing adaptive preferences to oppressed agents, see Khader (2011).

[13] Compare this with Lisa Tessman's influential account of burdened virtues, to which I am very much indebted. Tessman argues that oppression interferes with the ability of the oppressed to achieve moral goodness because the character traits that may be required to face and resist oppression inhibit an agent's own flourishing. Tessman posits a class of traits called "burdened virtues" that contribute to agent's flourishing insofar as they enable survival of or resistance to oppression, but that at the same time detract from a bearer's well-being, sometimes to the point of making the bearer's life "wretched". (Tessman, 2005, 95) If Jim is in a situation like Tessman describes, we should expect that the character trait that would allow him to best resist oppression is not one that is conducive to his flourishing, and this is what generates the sense of ambivalence about his choice. It seems plausible that the action that best resists oppression is Jim running, and refusing to provide care for the two boys. So, perhaps, his oppression makes it the case that a certain kind of self-reliance, and an insensitivity to the needs of Tom and Huck, would be a virtue. More generally, perhaps it is a virtue for Jim to be indisposed towards relationships of care with white people. There is something importantly right about this analysis. On my analysis, if Jim cultivates a disposition not to care about white people, this interferes with his flourishing. But the opposite is true as well: if Jim cares for white people, and acts to protect and preserve his friendships with white people at the expense of his own safety, this also interferes with his flourishing. I agree with Tessman that oppression shapes the moral choices of the oppressed in ways detrimental to the agent's flourishing. But I disagree that the hard choices oppressed people face are best characterized as being between what allows them to best resist oppression and what is conducive to their well-being.

Jim's friendship with Huck is a prudential good for him in part because it affords him some measure of protection. It is also a prudential good for him because it is one of the only ways he can access something deeply human, namely, meaningful connection. But in order to protect and promote that good, Jim has to cooperate with an oppressive norm that claims his life is less valuable than a white life. By cooperating with this norm, Jim reinforces the oppressive system that controls his access to meaningful, reciprocal human relationships. However, if he resists this norm, asserting the value of his own life relative to white lives, he loses access to one of the things that makes his life a human one. This itself is a setback to the goal of resisting the oppressive system that seeks to strip him of his humanity.

It is in this way that Jim's choice is different from other kinds of tragic conflicts. He is not simply faced with a choice between two competing demands: caring for his friend and resisting his oppression. Instead, because of the way his prudential good is inextricably tied up with resisting his oppression, either option available to him has significant costs both to his prudential good and to the good of resisting oppression. Otherwise put, whatever he does to some degree undermines the good he is seeking to achieve in his action. Moreover, that this is so is not merely a matter of bad luck, but part of how oppression works. The upshot is that there isn't any action that allows Jim to be unqualifiedly courageous, or noble, or self-respecting. I'll return to the question of the moral worth of his action in §4. For now, let's revisit Huck.

3 | HUCK

I have argued that Jim's friendship with Tom and Huck, and his decision to save Tom's life, is complicated by the fact he is oppressed. There is no action available to him that doesn't involve him to some degree cooperating in his own oppression and so, I have suggested, no action available to him that is straightforwardly praiseworthy or reflective of good qualities of character.

What does all this have to do with Huck's action? Again, the character of Huck has been frequently discussed in the literature on moral worth. It is generally agreed that for an action to have moral worth it must be the right action, and it must be performed for the right motives.[14] Though philosophers generally agree that acting on a purely self-interested motive is not praiseworthy, they disagree about what exactly the right motives are on which an agent should act in order for their action to have moral worth.

Nomy Arpaly famously argues that Huck is an example of someone doing the right thing for the right reasons, despite not knowing what is right. Even though Huck believes that harboring Jim is wrong, he has over time perceived data that amount to the perception of Jim as a full person, like himself. It is this perception, rather than his reflective judgement, that causes him to act to save Jim. Huck is moved by the features that make his action right, so even though he does not know that it is right, his motivations are non-accidentally connected to the action's rightness. The intuition that Huck is morally praiseworthy for his action is widely held amongst moral

[14] The term has its origins in Kant, though much of the subsequent discussion has not aimed at exegesis. For recent discussions, see Arpaly (2003), Baron (1995), Howard (2021), Isserow (2019, 2020), Johnson King (2020a, 2020b), Markovits (2010), Massoud (2016), Sliwa (2016), Singh (2020)

philosophers.[15] More generally, the sense that Huck's action is praiseworthy has been part of the positive celebration of the novel.[16]

I want to put pressure on the idea that Huck is praiseworthy for what he does. Here, I'm not here interested in the debate that has occupied the vast majority of moral philosophers thinking about Huck, namely, what kinds of reasons should motivate an agent to act.[17] Instead, what I want to put pressure on is the idea that Huck's motives really are non-accidentally connected to what makes the action right. Presumably what makes the action right is something about Jim's humanity: Jim is a human being, deserving of the same rights and respect as white people. But what does Huck learn or come to see about this that he didn't already know? After all, Huck has presumably seen and interacted with slaves before. He would have seen them have conversations, suffer, laugh, express love, and so on. None of these observations have been enough, however, to counteract what Huck has been taught about slaves. The further data that Huck gets from Jim comes from the relationship they form. Huck sees Jim suffer pain as the result of decisions he makes, he sees Jim laugh with him, about the same things, he sees Jim act with care towards him and Tom.

But as I have argued, the relationship that Huck and Jim develop—and the data that Huck gathers through this relationship—is conditioned by Jim's oppression. Jim wouldn't be friends with Huck—someone who cared for and laughed with Huck, if he wasn't a slave, and so also someone who didn't have access to better and more equal friendships. Jim wouldn't have strong reasons to overvalue Tom's life at the expense of his own if he didn't inhabit a world structured to systematically overvalue white lives at the expense of Black lives.

[15] See for example Fennel (2002), Gehrman (2018), Goldman (2010), Kleist (2009), Markovits (2010) p. 208, 209, Arpaly and Schroeder (2013) P. 178–9), Taylor (2012). For dissenting views see Schinkel (2011), and Zoe Johnson King (2020) who point to the unreliability of Huck's motives, and his limited moral knowledge. I'll offer a somewhat different explanation for why Huck is not praiseworthy: even in the moments when Huck seems to see Jim as human, however unstable and inarticulable, Huck does not in fact see him as fully human.

[16] As Lionel Trilling insists, in describing the development of Huck's moral character over the course of the novel: "it becomes an heroic character when, on the urging of affection, Huck discards the moral code he has always taken for granted and resolves to help Jim in his escape from slavery. The intensity of his struggle over the act suggests how deeply he is involved in the society which he rejects. The satiric brilliance of the episode lies, of course, in Huck's solving his problem not by doing "right" but by doing "wrong"." (1950, p. 332) Not only is Huck's character seen as heroic, but for many, the story is politically subversive, and functions as a powerful denouncement of slavery. T.S. Eliot remarks that "the style of the book, which is the style of Huck, is what makes it a far more convincing indictment of slavery than the sensationalist propaganda of Uncle Tom's Cabin. Huck is passive and impassive, apparently always the victim of events; and yet, in his acceptance of his world and of what it does to him and others, he is more powerful than his world, because he is more aware than any other person in it." Similarly, David L. Smith argues that the novel is "without peers among major Euro-American novels for its explicitly anti-racist stance" and that "Twain's conclusions do more than merely subvert the justifications of slavery which was already long abolished. Twain began his book during the final disintegration of Reconstruction, and his satire on antebellum Southern bigotry is also an implicit response to the Negrophobic climate of the post-Reconstruction era. It is troubling, therefore, that so many readers have completely misunderstood Twain's subtle attack on racism"(Smith, 1984, p. 5)

[17] Philosophers have defended two broad answers to this question. The first says that an action has moral worth when an agent is moved by something like a concern for duty, that is, by the thought that the action in question is the right thing to do. The agent who acts out of a concern for duty is motivated by rightness *de dicto*: they are concerned with doing the right thing, whatever that is. The second says that an action has moral worth when an agent is moved by concrete features of the action—that it is just, kind, fair—rather than an explicit concern for moral rightness. The agent who acts from concrete moral concerns is motivated by rightness *de re*: they are concerned with some of the features that make an action right. See, for example, Arpaly (2003), and Markovits (2010). Some have defended a more pluralist conception of moral worth, or moral praiseworthiness, according to which acting on either kind of motive can be praiseworthy. See for example Isserow (2020) and Johnson King (2020).

What makes Huck's action right is that Jim is a person, deserving of equal rights and respect. But, I am suggesting here, the reasons Huck acts on are only accidentally connected to this right-making feature. Huck reads all of Jim's actions and behaviors outside of the context of Jim's domination; he simply sees Jim as loyal, kind, caring, brave. These are the qualities that so impress Huck, that make Huck see Jim as more than property, as more than the other slaves he has previously interacted with. But the actions and behaviors that Huck sees are not good evidence of Jim's humanity. In fact, in many ways, they are evidence of the ways that Jim's oppression constrains and shapes his humanity for the benefit of white people.

One way to see that Huck is accidentally motivated to do the right thing, consider a counterfactual. Imagine that Jim, instead of settling for a friendship with Huck, and instead of risking his life to save Tom's, chose the option of protest instead. Imagine he expressed frustration and anger at Huck and Tom for repeatedly failing to treat him with respect. Imagine he refused to express care or kindness towards them, and to treat their lives as more important than his own. It seems likely from what we know about Huck that he would not, in this counterfactual, come to see Jim as more than property, and as someone whose life is worth saving. Again, Huck has presumably interacted with many slaves, and it is only his friendship with Jim that makes him see Jim as any different from these other slaves. A version of Jim that was angry, bitter and resentful would not be a version of Jim he saw as undeniably human, as like himself.

Of course, just because Huck's motives are not counterfactually robust does not necessarily mean that his motives are merely accidentally connected to the right-making features of the action. As Isserow (2019) argues, counterfactual robustness is an imperfect test for whether someone accidentally does the right thing. She compares two cases. In the first case, someone dives into dangerous rapids to save a pet poodle. Isserow argues that just because I would not have jumped in to save a heavier dog—a Great Dane for example—does not mean that I am not praiseworthy for the action I do perform. As she insists, "Facts about my choice of dog breed in other possible worlds do not seem to bear upon the moral worth of my conduct" (p. 259). By contrast, if it was true that I would not have jumped in had no one been watching, then I would not be praiseworthy for my action. The counterfactual would be tracking something relevant to moral worth, namely, that I was motivated by a selfish desire for acclaim rather than by the fact that my dog needed help or that saving her was right. So, Isserow concludes, the kind of non-accidentality that matters for moral worth is that the agent be motivated non-instrumentally by morally relevant concerns.

Huck's case, I want to suggest, is more like the latter case than the former case. In the former case, what dog breed I would have gotten in a nearby possible world, and whether I would have felt comfortable diving into raging rapids to save her, is irrelevant to whether, in this world, I am moved to save my dog for the right reasons. This is because, in the nearby possible world, what would make me unwilling to save the dog would be her size, and my confidence in my ability to rescue her. My dog's being a different breed wouldn't change my perception of her as needing help, or as having a life worth saving. Compare this with a case where someone is faced with the choice of saving a child instead of a dog, and they are moved to save the child because they see the child needing help. Imagine that the child is white, but that in a nearby possible world where the child is Black, they are not moved to save the child: they do not see the child as needing help, or as worth saving. In this case, the person is not praiseworthy, or at least, significantly less praiseworthy than if the counterfactuals were different. This is because the difference-maker—what differentiates this world from the nearby possible world where they do not save the child—is something irrelevant to whether the child is worth saving, namely, their race.

Huck's situation is more like the race case than the poodle case. The difference maker– what differentiates his world from the nearby possible world where Huck does not recognize Jim's

humanity—is that Jim is a version of himself that is palatable to Huck: he seems friendly, caring, noble. Indeed, after Jim saves Tom's life, Huck is in awe, paying him what he believes to be the highest compliment, remarking that Jim really is "white inside".[18] Jim doesn't challenge Huck in any serious way, he doesn't cause Huck to feel any irresolvable discomfort about their relationship. That this is the version of him that Huck finds humanity in is non-accidentally connected to the fact that it is the version of Jim that most effectively serves white interests. Huck is less moved by the right-making features of the action than he is by the ways the world, including Jim's agency, is structured to serve him.

To be clear, I am not here suggesting that Huck deserves no credit for his action. Nor am I suggesting he is blameworthy for his failure to see Jim as a human in a more counterfactually robust way: we may well think he has done the best he can given the poor moral education he has received, and that he is eligible for an excuse to the extent he fails to do better. Instead, what I want to emphasize is how, once we are attentive to the ways that Jim's agency is structured by the oppressive system, we see how Huck's agency too is structured in the service of that system. After all, in many ways it is in Jim's interests to allow Huck to see their friendship as existing outside of the context of Jim's oppression: it is in Jim's interest to allow Huck the fantasy that their friendship is a reciprocal relationship between equals. The result is that Huck is unlikely to get any data from his relationship with Jim that radically challenges how he has come to understand the world and, as such, there is a limit to how morally impressive Huck's achievements can be.

4 | AGENCY

So far, I have suggested that Jim's moral agency is undermined by the structure of his choice under oppression. Whatever he does, he ends up to some degree cooperating in his own oppression. A result, that I will discuss further in §4, is that no action available to him seems straightforwardly morally commendable. There is no way for him to fully express his morally good qualities, whether it be his nobility, his courage, or his self-respect, in his action.

Jim's case is, of course, an extreme one. But my hope, in thinking carefully about Jim's choice, is that it illuminates more generally the ways in which oppression limits the moral agency of the oppressed. Here, I am influenced by Saidiya Hartman's discussion of slave histories in *Scenes of Subjection*. In the book, Hartman reconsiders the history of slavery in America, turning our attention away from scenes of spectacular violence in antebellum America, instead towards: "the ordinary terror and habitual violence that structured everyday life and inhabited the most mundane and quotidian practices" (xxx). By focusing on the ways in which the slave's subjection and domination was reproduced in even the most seemingly benign aspects of daily life, Hartman hopes to "illuminate the ongoing and structural dimensions of violence and slavery's idioms of power" (xxx). One of Hartman's central contentions in *Scenes of Subjection* is that many of the mechanisms of terror and subjugation in the antebellum period carried through into the postbellum period up to the present day. And, Hartman argues, this fact is obscured if we think that the ways slavery inhibited freedom was exhausted by chains and whips.

In what I take to be the spirit of Hartman's work, I have hoped to show that the way Jim's enslavement encroaches on his agency extends far beyond what we might have expected, including to what is possible in his relationship with Huck in moments of love and joy. Jim is free to act in these moments in any way he pleases, and he acts with full knowledge. He is neither coerced

[18] Chapter 40, p. 305

nor manipulated. However the background context of his enslavement means that every option available to him has him acting against himself to some degree. There are no acts of resistance, no moments of joy or pleasure, that don't have an ambivalent or double-edged character.[19]

This is the feature of Jim's situation that extends beyond the context of enslavement, to more contemporary, and ordinary, forms of oppression. Consider the case of Shreya, described by Serene Khader: Shreya is a woman of color attorney who is routinely assigned office "housework" tasks, like bringing coffee and organizing presents. She performs some of these tasks knowing that if she says no, it will not be perceived well; she has reason to think that women are professionally punished for violating norms of feminine behavior. Shreya is in a double bind: if she complies with the oppressive workplace norms, she gains some prudential benefit within the oppressive system. If she resists, she likely incurs some kind of penalty or censure.

As Khader points out, once we see the double bind Shreya is in, it is too simplistic to equate her asserting her self-respect with the option of her resisting the oppressive workplace norm. After all, one way that Shreya respects herself is by caring about her career, and trying to live the life she wants. Engaging in self-subordinating behavior is often the most welfare-maximizing option for oppressed people. As Khader argues, in Shreya's case, and very often in the case of oppressed people, "self-respect as treating one's projects as possessed of equal value is at odds with self-respect as demanding equal recognition from others in any given moment".[20]

I am suggesting that, insofar as none of Shreya's options fully express her self-respect, her moral agency is compromised. More generally, insofar as oppressed people very often face double binds where they are unable to fully express their morally good qualities in their actions, their moral agency is very often compromised. This might strike some as a problematic result. Many non-ideal theorists have worried about arguments that deny agency to oppressed people, pointing out the ways it can justify paternalistic attitudes and interventions.[21] These theorists have insisted on the ways that oppressed people, despite appearances, might strategically accommodate oppressive norms in pursuit of life project, including through strategies and values that are not legible to the dominant group.[22]

I feel the force of this worry. At the same time, I feel the force of opposing arguments that insist if we fail to fully describe the effects of oppression on agency, we risk overlooking some of the harms of oppression, and how it unjustly constrains what is possible for the oppressed. As Hartman explains in an interview in response to the worry her book is overly pessimistic: "Unfortunately the kind of social revisionist history undertaken by many leftists in the 1970's,

[19] As Patterson describes, Hartman stresses the "vexed character of good times", arguing that, "slave performance and other everyday practices involving enjoyment were often a source of profound ambivalence for slaves, since the brief reprieve from the horrors of slavery was so bittersweet, and tempered by the haunting fact of bondage. Viewed within the larger context of plantation life, singing, dancing, and a whole range of everyday acts appear in an entirely different light — as symbolic indices of domination, orchestrated by a powerful slaveholder bent on maintaining order." (1999, p. 684)

[20] Khader (2021), p. 236

[21] See for example, the work of Uma Narayan (2001), Saba Mahmood (2004), and Serene Khader (2012). See also Lugones' discussion of the strategist and tactician perspective and her concerns about fully denying agency to the oppressed (Ch. 10, and Ch. 2 respectively in 2003).

[22] See for example Narayan (2001) on the ways women "bargain with patriarchy" (2001, p. 422). See also Mahmood (2004) on practices of self-making, and Khader (2021) on how self-respect sometimes requires that oppressed comply with oppressive norms while maintain a counterhegemonic perspective. See Caleb Ward for a helpful overview (2024) of the agency dilemma in feminist theorizing. See Khader (2020) for a discussion of a related tension in theorizing about autonomy in contexts of oppression. There are difficult methodological issues here for feminist and social philosophers in what we want from concepts of agency and autonomy. I won't attempt to settle these questions here.

who were trying to locate the agency of dominated groups, resulted in celebratory narratives of the oppressed…as if there was a space you could carve out of the terrorizing state apparatus in order to exist outside its clutches and forge some autonomy".[23]

This tension, between the need to preserve some measure of agency for the oppressed, and the need to fully describe the harms of oppression, including on agency, is a familiar one. I won't attempt to offer a full solution here. However, some of the tension between these two perspectives is alleviated when we distinguish between two ways of being an agent: in capacity and in activity.[24] Someone like Jim is clearly an agent in the sense of having the capacity for agency: he is capable of deliberating and acting on intentions he forms. With respect to his moral agency, he is in possession of the capacities necessary for moral responsibility, and for being an appropriate object of reactive attitudes.

What Jim lacks, on my view, is the ability to take what he has potentially and realize or express it in his actions. For simplicity's sake, think about this in terms of a virtue of character. Suppose Jim has the virtue of courage, and suppose courage is a stable disposition to accurately judge what is and is not appropriate to fear, and a willingness to act on these judgements. What I am suggesting is that, although it is accurate to call Jim courageous in the sense of having the virtue of courage, it is not accurate to call his action of saving Tom fully courageous. He is unable, in his action, to fully express his judgements about what is worth fearing and what is not, because of the structure of the choice available to him. His choice situation prevents him from fully realizing or expressing his courageous nature in his actions. He is fully an agent is the sense of having the capacities necessary for agency. At the same time, I am suggesting, the oppressive context prevents him from fully being an agent in the sense of fully realizing or expressing his agency in the world.[25]

5 | MORAL WORTH

My first goal in this paper has been to show how oppression compromises the moral agency of the oppressed and, to some extent, the oppressor. My second goal in this paper is to suggest how the dominant concepts in moral philosophy cannot fully capture the way that Jim's moral agency is compromised by his oppression. To see this, recall the concept of moral worth. Moral worth is a status that an action has in virtue of being morally right, and having been performed non-accidentally for the right reasons. The second clause is meant to help exclude cases where a person does the right thing but is still not praiseworthy for doing it. For example, a man who rescues a child from drowning in order to impress his date does the right thing, but he acts from purely self-interested motives. Even though he does the right thing, there is a specific kind of

[23] Hartman and Wilderson (2003, p. 186)

[24] This is a distinction we find in Aristotle, between virtue understood as a *hexis* (a settled state of soul) and its exercise. See NE 2.1–4. For a different distinction between two kinds of agency, see Lorenzo C. Simpson (2017) who distinguishes between first-order agency from second-order agency. First-order agency refers to agency understood from the first-person perspective of what is possible; first-order agency can be compromised in non-culpable ways when an agent is systematically deprived of an understanding that would be agency-enabling. Second-order agency involves the ability to acquire the epistemic resources to realize first-order volitions. While this distinction is useful, it does not I think capture what is missing in Jim's case; we can imagine a version of Jim who has both kinds of agency and yet, on my picture, his moral agency is undermined.

[25] See Hirji (2021) for a discussion of how Aristotle employs this distinction to show why virtuous people cannot fully express their virtue in non-ideal conditions, or without adequate resources.

moral praise or credit he does not deserve. Moral worth helps us pick out cases where someone has successfully expressed their moral agency.

Though philosophers generally agree that acting on a purely self-interested motive is not praiseworthy, they disagree about what exactly the right motives are on which an agent should act in order for their action to have moral worth. Philosophers have defended two broad answers to this question. The first says that an action has moral worth when an agent is moved by rightness *de dicto*: something like a concern for duty, that is, by the thought that the action in question is the right thing to do.[26] The second says that an action has moral worth when an agent is movtivated by rightness *de re*: by the concrete features of the action—that it is just, kind, fair—rather than an explicit concern for moral rightness.

As we have seen, Nomy Arpaly appeals to the story of Huck Finn to motivate the idea that it is praiseworthy to be motivated by the right or good *de re*, and not praiseworthy to be motivated by the right or good *de dicto*. The argument that I gave above has very little to say about this debate. Even when we assume Arpaly's picture on which an agent ought to be motivated by the concrete right-making features of an action rather than by rightness itself, I have argued that Huck's action lacks moral worth: he is only accidentally moved by the right-making features of the action. To the extent what I have argued weighs in on the debate about moral motivation, it is simply an argument against the usefulness of this particular example for making Arpaly's point. It is true that if Huck were motivated by a concern for duty to save Jim's life, his concern for Jim would be more counterfactually robust.[27] But for him to be motivated by this concern, he would have to know that Jim was a person deserving equal rights and respect independent of him coming seeing Jim as such. But this is precisely the knowledge that Huck's moral education has not given him.

What I have been interested in instead, in Huck's case, is how, once we take seriously Jim's perspective, the intuition that Arpaly appeals to—that Huck is moved by his appreciation of Jim's humanity—starts to lose some of its force. Once we take seriously Jim's perspective, we can see how much of the data Huck receives is conditioned by Jim's oppression and the power dynamics of their relationship. This of course raises questions about whether, and to what extent, Huck is blameworthy for failing to better see Jim's humanity given the systematically misleading information he is receiving. It also raises questions about whether, and to what extent, he is praiseworthy to some degree for doing better than his peers, and at least coming to see Jim as more than property. I leave these questions to others. To emphasize again, however, none of what I have argued about Huck is meant to challenge how philosophers have understood the concept of moral worth; I have only taken issue with the conclusion many have drawn about Huck.

What about Jim? I have argued that there is a way in which his moral agency seems to be compromised. Once we are attentive to the structure of his choices, we can see how it is difficult for him to perform any action that seems fully courageous, or fully self-respecting: the demands of courage and self-respect pull in multiple directions. The diagnosis I have offered is that Jim is in a double bind: he is in the kind of choice situation where, in virtue of his oppression, any good at stake in his choice is also, at the same time, undermined by that choice. He is forced to cooperate to some degree in his oppression no matter what he does.

What I want to point out here is that the concept of moral worth does not seem able to capture how Jim's moral agency is compromised. Jim, plausibly, meets the two conditions of moral worth:

[26] See, for example, Sliwa (2016).

[27] On an account of moral worth that privileges a motive of duty, Huck would be praiseworthy even in the case where he viscerally hated Black people, but acted against his inclination to do the right thing. I am not myself moved by the intuition that such an agent is especially praiseworthy, but again, I do not mean to weigh in on that question here.

he performs the right action, and he performs it non-accidentally for the right reasons. I suggested it is difficult to determine what Jim ought to do. But again, we can imagine a version of the case where there is a clear answer about what he ought to do.

Similarly, although we don't have much information from the novel about Jim's internal life, we can imagine a version where he is motivated non-accidentally by the right reasons, whatever they are. Perhaps this involves, as Arpaly suggests about tragic conflicts, that Jim cares an appropriate degree about what is at stake in his choice and so feels a sense of internal conflict.[28] Perhaps, as Khader suggests, it involves Jim taking on a "counterhegemonic normative perspective" where he recognizes the ways in which the oppressive system is structuring his choices, and refuses to endorse a perspective that devalues his life.[29]

This is a version of Jim that seems to meet the conditions on moral worth: he is praiseworthy insofar as he does the right thing non-accidentally for the right reasons. And yet, as I suggested in §2, there seems to be some important sense in which Jim is not straightforwardly praiseworthy because of the way his agency is inevitably compromised. The concept of moral worth doesn't capture this because, on the sort of "quality of will" picture endorsed by theorists like Arpaly, moral responsibility centrally lies in our motivations, intrinsic desires and other conative states.[30] We are fundamentally blameworthy (and praiseworthy) for what we care about. But the problem with Jim is not in what he cares about. The problem, instead, is in how what he cares about cannot be reflected in what he is able to do.

Of course, moral worth is only one way that philosophers have thought about praiseworthiness. A voluntarist conception of praiseworthiness, on which moral responsibility is located in deliberate action, might seem more promising. On this picture, we are fundamentally blameworthy (and praiseworthy) for what we deliberately do. What we deliberately do might involve what we are able to bring about with our actions, and this could accommodate the idea that what is going wrong in Jim's case is something about the kinds of options available to him.

Moral theorists have wondered, for example, about how certain forms of luck can influence an individual's praiseworthiness or blameworthiness. Perhaps we can understand Jim's case as a case of either circumstantial or resultant luck.[31] That is, perhaps we can understand what is compromising Jim's praiseworthiness as either bad luck in terms of the opportunities available to him (that, in virtue of his oppression, he finds himself in a double bind), or bad luck in terms of the outcome of his action (that, in virtue of his double bind, his action involves him cooperating in his own oppression no matter what he does).

Zoe Johnson King, for example, develops a dualist account of praise on which agents are fundamentally praiseworthy both for what they care about and what they try to do. Her account is meant to accommodate the intuitions of both a quality of will and voluntarist conception of praise and blame. As she acknowledges, once we allow that part of what matters to someone's praiseworthiness is what they try to do, it is difficult to eliminate the role of luck. Luck effects

[28] What Arpaly thinks is important is that the agent cares in the appropriate degree about what is at stake in their choice and so in a conflict. Tragic conflicts don't compromise an agent's moral worth because they can express their quality of will through responding to the conflict in the appropriate way (including by feeling frustration or regret). For further discussion of how the virtuous agent should express their quality of will in cases of conflict see Stohr (2003), Baxley (2007).

[29] See Khader (2021) p. 238.

[30] See Johnson King (2024) for a helpful overview of the dominant theories of praise.

[31] See Nagel (1979) for the categorization of moral luck into four kinds. For more recent discussions of the moral luck literature see Hanna (2014) and Hartman (2019).

the opportunities that people have to do praiseworthy things. It also effects whether someone's trying is successful. On Johnson King's picture, circumstantial luck influences what people are fundamentally praiseworthy for (such as in furnishing them opportunities to be praiseworthy), and resultant luck influences what people are derivatively praiseworthy for, including the praise someone deserves when their actions succeed at accomplishing what they try to do.[32]

I expect a picture like this can capture the fact that Jim's praiseworthiness is qualified to some degree by his choice situation. What a picture like this will struggle to do, however, is to capture how Jim's situation is different from other kinds of tragic conflicts. Accounts of praise and blame are interested in the relationship between an agent and a particular action. If we only look at Jim's relationship to some particular action, it is very difficult to say why his choice is different in kind from more familiar tragic conflicts or cases of bad luck. What is agency-undermining about Jim's choice is the way it forms part of a matrix of choices in his relationship with Huck and Tom that are structured by white supremacy. This is Marilyn Frye's point with the metaphor of the bird-cage: no one bar seems to significantly reduce the bird's movement. It only once we zoom out, and see how each of the bars are systematically structured to form a cage that we can appreciate how, although the bird is in some sense free to move in any direction, its movements are also systematically limited in every direction.

The worry here is not just that accounts of praise and blame cannot capture how Jim's choices are part of a network of choices systematically immobilizing and reducing him. It is that accounts of praise and blame obscure this fact by focusing our attention on some individual action, and asking whether Jim cared in the rights sorts of ways, or whether he did the best he could. Answering these questions might track what sort of credit or discredit it is *fair* to assign to Jim, or what he deserves. However, answering these questions does not tell us everything we need to know about whether Jim's agency has been successfully expressed. His oppression undermines his agency without undermining his ability to care about the rights sorts of things, or to do the best he can in the situations he finds himself in.

There is, then, a dilemma for theorists of praise and blame analogous to the agency dilemma I described in §3. On the one hand, if we are focused on capturing what credit an agent deserves—what was up to them in some important sense, or under their control, or reflective of who they are—we are unlikely to be able to fully capture how oppression systematically undermines an individual's moral agency. If, on the other hand, we want an account that captures how structural injustice can systematically undermine the agency of the oppressed, we are forced to say that certain people cannot be fully good—cannot fully express their goodness in the world—even if they have a good quality of will and do the best they can.

My hope here has been to describe the challenge, not to offer a positive solution. Perhaps accounts of praise or moral worth can be revised to capture the intuition that Jim's moral agency is compromised. Perhaps, as I suggested in §3 there are resources for theorists in taking seriously that agency is about acting, and that some dimensions of acting require the cooperation of the world around us. I myself wonder about the usefulness of looking to assign praise or credit in cases like Jim's. I fear doing so inevitably focuses our attention on certain features of his circumstance at the expense of other, more pressing, ones.[33] On this, more below.

[32] See Johnson King (forthcoming).

[33] Here, I am sympathetic to Claudia Card's worry that much moral philosophy takes the "administrative perspective", preoccupied with backwards-looking questions of "praise or blame, excuses, mitigation and so on". As Card worries, a

6 | CONCLUSION

On a familiar reading of *Huckleberry Finn*, both Huck and Jim are, in their own ways, morally impressive, transcending the unjust circumstances in which they find themselves in to treat each other as equals. I have hoped to complicate this story. Jim's care and concern for Huck cannot exist outside of Jim's domination. Part of the injustice of his circumstance is that his decision to risk his life to save his friend necessarily involves him to some degree acquiescing to his own oppression. At the same time, if he were to run, he would deprive himself of the one of the most human parts of his life, and this itself is a set back to the goal of resisting his oppression.

Likewise, once we take seriously the structure of Jim's choices, we have reason to question the idea that Huck is really moved by his perception of Jim as human to save him. Huck is, of course, correct that Jim is fully human, like himself. What Huck doesn't see, however, is the ways that Jim doesn't get to fully express his humanity in his friendship with Huck. Huck sees as human the version of Jim that is kind and accommodating and that doesn't challenge his understanding of the world in any deep way, which is to say, the version of Jim that serves white interests. Huck is only accidentally moved by the right-making features of his action.

The case of Jim and Huck is a particularly pronounced case of how oppression shapes moral agency. However, much of what I have hoped to say about Jim and Huck generalizes to more every-day and contemporary cases of oppression. I have focused so much on the case of Huck and Jim in part to make a broader methodological point. The familiar reading of *Huckleberry Finn* where both Huck and Jim are morally commendable is part of how the novel has been celebrated. It is a reading many of us were raised on, and that has come to shape many of our intuitions. These intuitions go on to inform our moral theories, which in turn reinforce this familiar reading of Huck and Jim.

I have hoped to suggest that this reading of the praiseworthiness of Huck and Jim is not only a mistake, but a pernicious one. The intuition that Huck and Jim are praiseworthy is part of a broader lesson many have taken from the novel: that what is required to dismantle racism is for white people to form close relationships with Black people in order to come to see them as fully human. This is a lesson we should be wary of. It risks reinforcing the narrative according to which an oppressed person's best hope for liberation is to be unwaveringly good, to win the respect and appreciation of the oppressor. Jim is able to improve his circumstances only by gaining the love and trust of white people, by acting in the ways that seem noble, but in fact serve white interests. Likewise, it implies that moral success for someone like Huck is to come to see someone like Jim as an exception to the rule about what an oppressed group is like. Huck is praiseworthy, a savior, for coming to see Jim as like himself. But real moral success for someone like Huck would be to see Jim as deserving of equal rights and respects independent of his own interests.

The familiar reading of Huck and Jim's choices in the novel involves a kind of abstraction from the broader context in which Huck and Jim find themselves in, focusing our attention on their individual choices in isolation from structures. This abstraction is facilitated in part by the Twain's centering of Huck, rather than Jim: taking seriously Jim's experience is not something the novel, or its reception, encourages us to do.[34] The result is that moral philosophers looking to the novel for inspiration risk replicating the same dynamic, asking about whether individual agents deserve

preoccupation with something like fairness often involves us, as theorists, taking the perspective of a judge administering justice and executing punishment. See Card (1996, p. 25–26). See Norlock (2018) for a discussion.

[34] For a very recent and necessary corrective, see Percival Everett's (2024) novel *James* that retells *Huckleberry Finn* (2024) from Jim's point of view.

praise and blame in a way that, again, obscures the role of background structures in shaping their choices. I hope the discussion in this paper can serve as a reminder that we, as moral philosophers, are not simply describing the world in the work we do, but actively making it. The concepts, frameworks and theories we develop shape how people understand the world and behave within it. As moral philosophers increasingly turn their attention to the complexities of the social world, we need to be cognizant of ways our theories might work to reproduce the world as it is, rather than to critically remake it.

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