

1 Introduction

Philosophers often distinguish between doing the right thing, and being praiseworthy for doing the right thing

- e.g. when someone does the right thing for self-interested reasons they are not praiseworthy, or their action does not have “moral worth”

I’m interested in the “moral worth” of actions under oppression

I argue: in oppressive contexts, agents are often in situations where, even when they do the right thing for the best reasons available, they are not straightforwardly praiseworthy for their action. This is not because of any failure on the part of the agent, but because of the nature of the choices available to them

2 Huckleberry Finn

An action has moral worth when it is:

1. Morally desirable i.e. the right action
2. Done non-accidentally for the right reasons

Classic test case for moral worth: Huck Finn saving the slave Jim

- Huck does the right thing believing that it is wrong. He is motivated by seeing Jim as human.
- It is often thought that Huck is praiseworthy for his action; part of why the novel has been celebrated

I want to question whether Huck is praiseworthy by thinking more about Jim

3 Jim

Consider a scene later in the novel where Jim saves Tom Sawyer’s life. Is Jim praiseworthy?

Does Jim do the right thing in saving the child’s life?

- On the one hand, it is generally morally impressive to risk one’s life to save the life of a child, and moreover, Jim has a friendship with Huck and Tom

- On the other hand, Jim's oppression gives him reasons of self-respect to not overvalue a white child's life at the expense of his own, and moreover, we should question what kind of friendship is really possible between them

When we ask whether Jim is praiseworthy for saving Tom, our intuitions likely pull in different directions

4 A Diagnosis

Consider again whether Jim is really friends with Huck and Tom

In an ideal world, they would not be friends. But Jim's oppression makes it the case that he has reasons to be friends with Huck and Tom

Now consider Jim's choice to save Tom's life

Jim is in an "oppressive double bind"

- An "oppressive double bind" is a choice situation where no matter what an agent does, they end up to some degree cooperating in their own oppression
- If Jim saves Tom he cooperates in system where he overvalues white lives at the expense of his own. If he saves himself, he loses the only meaningful human relationships he has

Whatever he does has a kind of ambivalent character. His oppression makes it the case that even when he does the best thing available, he is not straightforwardly praiseworthy

5 Moral Worth

So far I've argued that not matter what Jim does, his action is not straightforwardly praiseworthy because of the way oppression structures his choices

What about Huck?

- Despite what he has been taught, Huck comes to see Jim as human
- But the data Huck is perceiving (their friendship, and Jim's apparently impressive qualities) are features that are conditioned by Jim's oppression. They are not good evidence of Jim's humanity
- Huck is not acting for the right reasons, and so his action is not straightforwardly praiseworthy

6 Upshots

What do we learn?

- Oppression harms oppressed people in their capacity as moral agents
- Oppression also shapes what the oppressor is able to see, and morally respond to
- A metaphilosophical lesson: the stories we tell and the perspectives we center shape the questions we think are important, and the answers we think are intuitive