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# Principles, Sympathy and Doing What's Right

JOHN HARRIS

Jonathan Bennett set out recently<sup>1</sup> to explore the consciences of a heterogeneous group of characters with Huckleberry Finn in the title role. Bennett's avowed concern is with the relationship between the principles of a bad morality on the one hand and human sympathy on the other; but the interest of his piece is in the arresting *dramatis personae*, and we are invited to contemplate their consciences more, I suspect, for their intrinsic fascination than for any philosophical pay-off.

The chief protagonists are Huck Finn and Himmler, and Bennett's examination of the workings of their consciences reveals that even bad moralities may be hard to keep to because those with evil principles may also have sympathies which tempt them to abandon their principles. The central and crucial question then is: how are such dilemmas to be resolved? It is, as Bennett says, dangerous to trust principles because 'it is obviously incoherent for someone to declare the system of moral principles that he *accepts* to be *bad*',<sup>2</sup> so the best course is always to bring our moral principles under 'severe pressure . . . from ordinary human sympathies'.

The trouble is that our sympathies may not be reliable either. Again as Bennett points out, 'principles, as embodiments of one's best feelings, one's broadest and keenest sympathies . . . can help one across intervals when one's feelings are at less than their best, i.e. through periods of misanthropy, or meanness or self-centredness or depression or anger'.<sup>3</sup>

Bennett concludes that since we cannot doubt our principles and therefore cannot be critical of them, we should better rely on our sympathies while, because our sympathies are prone to abate themselves, we need principles to see us safely through.

Despite the extreme caution of these findings it is clear that Bennett's sympathies are with sympathy and that he shares the view that when the chips are down it is better to rely on feeling than on thought.<sup>4</sup> But the

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Bennett, 'The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn', *Philosophy*, 49, No. 188 (April 1974).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>4</sup> For a further look into the difficulties surrounding this sort of approach to moral problems see Bernard Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge, 1973) and John Harris, 'Williams on Negative Responsibility and Integrity', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 24, No. 96 (July 1974).

relationship between principles and sympathy and the question of how each should influence the other are left unresolved.

Perhaps this is because there is something very misleading about the idea of tempering our principles with our sympathy in Bennett's sense of these terms. We should perhaps have been alerted by the oddity of Bennett's explanatory illustration:

[A] small child, sick and miserable, clings tightly to his mother and screams when she tries to pass him over to the doctor to be examined. If the mother gives way to her sympathy, that is to her feeling for the child's misery and fright, she would hold it close and not let the doctor come near; but don't we agree that it might be wrong for her to act on such a feeling? Quite generally, then, anyone's moral principles may apply to a particular situation in a way which runs contrary to the particular thrusts of fellow-feeling that he has in that situation.<sup>5</sup>

At first glance sympathy and principles seem both to pull in the same direction. The mother has fellow-feeling for her child, she does not want it hurt and so should let the doctor treat it, and presumably her principles yield the same conclusion. But this presents no conflict between principles and sympathy and so it is clear that Bennett has something else in mind.

There are two conceptions of 'sympathy' at work here. One we may think of, crudely, as the name we give to a sensation or group of sensations which we recognize as occasioned by the plight of others and regard as expressive of concern for them. The second conception involves, among other things, caring about others, being actively concerned for their welfare even when not immediately confronted by their distress, and having respect for their wishes. It is an attitude to others rather than a sensation caused by their distress. This distinction mirrors that drawn by Bishop Butler between love of our neighbour considered as a *natural affection* on the one hand and as a *virtuous principle* on the other, and I shall for convenience adopt Butler's terminology.<sup>6</sup>

The mother and child example seems to illustrate more the conflict between sympathy as a natural affection and as a virtuous principle than any tension between sympathy and principles. In clutching the child to her bosom the mother's behaviour is expressive of sympathy, but knowing, as she does, that the child needs the doctor's skill, it could hardly be said to demonstrate concern for the child's welfare.

But now the exhortation 'bring your moral principles under severe pressure from ordinary human sympathy', which is the normative element

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Bennett, 124.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel*, T. A. Roberts (ed.) (London 1970). Sermon 11. I am grateful to Alan Montefiore for pointing out to me the parallel between Butler's distinction and the point I wished to make.

## Discussion

of Bennett's piece, can be taken in rather different ways. It can mean: have a moral system which gives sympathy as a virtuous principle a central place. This would in effect be the advice to adopt a good morality. On the other hand, 'bring your principles under severe pressure from feelings of natural affection' means something like: think twice about acting in ways which make you sick. This is the sense in which Bennett's advice is meant, and he values it because he sees it as a fulcrum which he can use to move bad moralities in the right direction. Bennett believes that natural affection is universally felt and also independent of the content of particular moralities, and he seems to suggest that his advice might prove a categorical imperative that anyone, whatever moral principles he holds to, could obey and by so doing inevitably act for the best. The trouble is that without some sense of the value and point of this sort of sympathy it is just as likely to move good moralities in the wrong direction, as in the mother and child example. While, as we have seen, to encourage people to adopt the virtuous principle of sympathy is just to exhort them to declare their system of moral beliefs (which omits this principle) to be bad.

Finally, it is perhaps worth seeing how Bennett's leading example of the tension between principles and sympathy fares when looked at from this perspective.

Huck's dilemma is as to whether he ought to allow his slave friend Jim to escape, thus cheating Miss Watson of her property, or whether he should turn him in. His sympathy for Jim is in conflict with the principles of honesty and gratitude. But it is difficult to ascribe any moral principles to Huck. He has some fragments of a morality certainly, a few crude principles relating to property rights and gratitude, but these are arbitrarily selective and are not in any event *his*. They are those, as Bennett reminds us, 'of rural Missouri', which Huck has taken over uncritically and probably unconsciously.

Bennett is treating principles in the way that he treats sympathies, as if they were simply natural affections, brute feelings of what is right which tug the conscience and which the agent need neither understand nor accept as his own. To represent Huck as facing a dilemma is misleading, for Huck does not *decide* to give way to the pressure of his conscience, he just collapses under it. But the question which obviously interests Bennett and which also interests me is: how are people who want to decide what to do when facing such dilemmas to resolve them?

No one who treats principles and sympathies as Bennett does is likely to have much success in deciding what to do for the best. This is not the place for a detailed positive account of moral decision making, but I think we can at least see that someone who had some minimum level of self-consciousness about his moral principles might just be able to wonder why no gratitude was owed to Jim, or why he was not just as much bound to keep faith with Jim as with Miss Watson. And someone capable of generalizing his natural

affection into a virtuous principle would be aware that his sympathy for Jim involved the sense that Jim's welfare and his wishes matter, and so could ask himself whether, knowing what is at stake for Jim and what is at stake for Miss Watson, he could be doing right to turn Jim in? This is of course a naive and crude form of moral argument, but at least a moral argument has got off the ground and I cannot but think this a more promising approach to the solution of moral dilemmas than a tug-of-war between an 'unargued natural feeling' and someone else's principles.

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