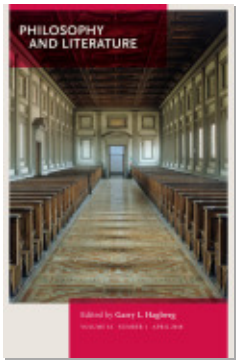
The Character of Huckleberry Finn

Kristina Gehrman



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Abstract. Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn is morally admirable because he follows his heart and does the right thing in a pinch. Or is he? This essay argues that the standard reading of Huck woefully misunderstands his literary and moral character. The real Huck is strikingly morally passive and thoroughly unreliable, and in a pinch, he fails Jim completely. His true character emerges when, with Iris Murdoch's "justice and love," we attend to Huck's youth and his history of unmitigated abuse and neglect. Huck's case reveals how (and how much) developmental and experiential history matter to moral character.

I

Ever since Jonathan Bennett wrote about Huckleberry Finn's conscience in 1974, Mark Twain's young hero has played a small but noteworthy role in the moral philosophy and moral psychology literature. Following Bennett, philosophers read Huck as someone who consistently follows his heart and does the right thing in a pinch, firmly believing all the while that what he does is morally wrong.[1] Specifically, according to this reading, Huck has racist beliefs that he never consciously questions; but in practice he consistently defies those beliefs to do the right thing in the context of his relationship with his Black companion, Jim. Because of this, Huck is morally admirable, but unusual. Perhaps he is an "inverse akratic," as Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder have proposed; or perhaps, as Bennett argues, Huck's oddness reveals the central and primary role of the sentiments (as opposed to principle) in moral action.[2]

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But the standard philosophical reading of Huckleberry Finn seriously misunderstands his character (in both the moral/personal and the literary sense of the word) because it does not take into account the historically contingent, developmental nature of persons and their character traits. In Huck's case, this means failing to take into account the fact that he is a child—a child, moreover, with a history of severe, unmitigated abuse, neglect, and moral miseducation. A developmentally attuned reading of Huck reveals that, far from following his morally true heart against his morally corrupt principles, the real Huck is strikingly morally passive and thoroughly unreliable. Far from rising above his socially inculcated racism, Huck protects and shores up his racist ideology by making an unreasoned exception for Jim, whom he loves. And when the real pinch comes, Huck fails Jim completely, in a way that seems all but inevitable when we view things in the full context of Huck's past life experiences and developmental trajectory.

On the standard reading, Huckleberry Finn's interest to moral philosophers stems primarily from his unusual "inverse" moral constitution. But the Huck who is revealed from a perspective of developmental attunement has a very different significance. He is not a good example of inverse akrasia, nor of the primacy of sentiment over principle in moral life—not only because he is too young to model these things but also because his moral development has been severely blighted by his traumatic and neglectful childhood. Instead, on a developmentally attuned reading, Huck's case demonstrates, at a number of levels (ontological, epistemic, ethical, and methodological), the salience of developmental status to questions of character. In what follows I first give a developmentally attuned reading of Huck's character, and then discuss the philosophical implications of his case.

Regarding the methodological implications of Huck's case, however, some preliminary remarks are in order. First, we must bear in mind that Huckleberry Finn is a fictional character, however realistically he may be rendered. And it is therefore perfectly possible that he instantiates traits that no living human being could. For this reason, I do not see how sound practice would use his case as evidence for conclusions regarding, for example, the cause-and-effect relationships between particular developmental experiences and particular traits, or the rates of compresence of different traits of character, or other similar things. In my view, his case is illuminating not because it proves that certain traits or combinations of traits obtain (or could obtain) but rather because it summons to mind certain human phenomena that are independently

familiar to each of us from our life experiences, and because it provides a common, concrete illustration of those phenomena for discussion.

In using Huck to illuminate moral character, I am inspired by Iris Murdoch's emphasis on the centrality of attention to moral life. Murdoch observed that humans "are obscure to each other, in certain respects which are particularly relevant to morality, unless they are mutual objects of attention or have common objects of attention."[3] The method of developmental attunement pays close, sustained, holistic attention to Huckleberry Finn while conceiving of him explicitly as a person who has developed and is developing over time. It presupposes that Huck's formative experiences must be understood if we are to correctly construe and interpret his motivations, intentions, value judgments, and other morally significant features of what Murdoch would call his "inner life." Thus the comparative explanatory strength of the developmentally attuned reading over the standard reading of Huck speaks to the former method's appropriateness when it comes to understanding character in general.

II

For those unacquainted with the novel, I begin with a brief synopsis.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn[4] is set in the slave state of Missouri about 30 years before the American Civil War. Huck Finn is the White, prepubescent, only son of the abusive town drunk; Huck's mother is dead. Huck is briefly adopted by a well-intentioned, conventional, White woman of the town who aims to "Civilize" him, but his father, Pap, kidnaps him, so Huck elaborately fakes his own death and runs away. He immediately stumbles across an acquaintance, a Black man named Jim, who has escaped from slavery. Huck and Jim travel down the Missouri River together, eventually encountering a pair of White con artists who sell Jim back into slavery under false pretenses. Coincidentally, the person to whom these con artists sell Jim is the uncle of Huck's hometown friend and idol, Tom Sawyer—who, also coincidentally, shortly arrives for a visit. Hijinks ensue as Huck and Tom try to free Jim from his makeshift prison. For fun, they contrive to make Jim's escape a narrow one, and Tom is shot in the leg during the escape. When the wound becomes infected, Jim chooses to reveal himself rather than allow Tom to die, and he is once again imprisoned. But when Tom recovers, he reveals that Jim was actually free all along: his "owner" in their hometown died after Jim and Huck escaped, and freed Jim in a will. The novel ends on a lighthearted note.

Three passages from the novel are often cited in support of the standard reading of Huck. In the first of these passages, we see Huck struggle with, and eventually overcome, his racist reluctance to apologize to Jim for playing a "mean trick" on him. In the second passage, shortly thereafter, Huck decides to turn Jim in to the authorities, but changes his mind when the opportunity arises, and instead tells a clever lie to protect Jim. And in the third, climactic passage, when he finds that Jim has been betrayed and sold by the con artists, Huck bravely decides to help Jim escape from slavery, choosing, as he thinks, to condemn his own soul to hell, rather than notify Jim's "owner," the slaveholder Miss Watson, of Jim's whereabouts.

These passages appear to show a clear moral progression in Huck's sentiments and actions, from unthinking, careless identification with his socially inculcated, racist value system (and the corresponding "mean trick") to sincere identification with his feelings of love and friendship for Jim (and the corresponding sacrifice of his soul for the sake of Jim's freedom). This progression is possible thanks to the qualities of Huck's character: he may have racist *beliefs*, and feel bound by racist moral principles, but his "sensibilities," as Bennett puts it, are "broad and kind" (Bennett, p. 132). As Schroeder and Arpaly put it, in Huck's case, "It is not simply the agent's action that is commendable . . . it is also the agent's character. One does not only think helping Jim was a good thing for Huckleberry to do, but regards Huckleberry's action as saying something important about Huckleberry's self. . . . Huckleberry is, in an important sense, a good boy, a boy with his heart in the right place" ("PBWS," p. 163). Huck, on the standard reading, eventually comes into his own as a morally good person, albeit one with a significantly false view of his own character and the ethical status of his own actions.

But the standard reading of Huckleberry Finn faces an insurmountable difficulty. The trouble is that Huck, following his brave decision to go to hell for Jim's sake, *does not actually help Jim* escape from slavery. Quite the contrary: Huck allows Tom Sawyer to hijack his rescue effort completely, ultimately conspiring with Tom to sabotage the rescue altogether, all for the sake of make-believe and high adventure, and (in Huck's case) for the sake of pleasing Tom. Although Jim could be freed easily and in a matter of hours, he is instead made to eat sawdust, to keep a journal in his own blood, and to share his prison with rats, snakes, and spiders (all introduced by Huck and Tom in order to make the cabin prison seem more like a real dungeon).[5] For weeks Jim is subjected to these and various other demeaning measures that Tom devises. When the

hour for the rescue finally arrives, Huck and Tom write an anonymous tipoff letter to Tom's uncle, ensuring that a search party will be in hot pursuit, lest after all their "hard work and trouble" the escape should "go off perfectly flat" and "amount to nothing" (p. 370).

Huck's complicity with Tom's schemes in Jim's hour of great need is ugly and very hard to bear. It is also just simply very hard to understand. By this point in the novel, Jim has become like a father to Huck, and they are supposed to be allies against the cruel and dangerous world. Huck has heard—and emotionally comprehended—Jim grieving for his wife and children left behind in slavery. And, unlike Tom, Huck does *not* know that Jim is already legally free. Tom is blithely sabotaging a rescue effort that he knows to be unnecessary, whereas Huck is complicit in doing what, as far as he knows, will actually jeopardize Jim's freedom, if not, in all probability, his life.[6] Perhaps most perplexing, Huck never seems to waver in his strong desire for Jim's freedom, nor does he cease to feel a sense of urgency and anxiety about Jim's escape. In short, Huck seems to have every reason in the world to free Jim as quickly, safely, and efficiently as possible. And yet he does nothing of the sort. This is no victory for Huck's good heart. This is a personal failure of great magnitude.

III

The standard reading of Huck cannot explain—indeed, does not seem to be aware of—Huck's catastrophic failure to do what he ought to do in the final hour. But a developmentally attuned reading can easily make sense of what the standard reading does not even see. For Huck's failure to come through for Jim is rooted in the fact that he is a child who has the characteristic practical, social, and ethical limitations of a victim of child abuse. These traits explain Huck's actions, as opposed to any morally significant progress he may make toward becoming less racist. (Indeed, contrary to the standard reading, Huck does not become less racist over the course of the novel. Instead, confronted with Jim's humanity, Huck learns to make an unreasoned exception for Jim, in an oh-but-you're-different move that is one epitome of racist patterns of belief and action.[7])

Of course, Mark Twain was not a twenty-first-century developmental psychologist, and we now know a great deal more than he could have known about precisely *how* various sorts of childhood abuse and neglect interfere with the development of practical, social, and moral capacities.

In a real child, for example, the particular kind of psychosocial harm that results from neglect depends a great deal upon when in the process of development the neglect occurs; a child who is neglected before she learns to smile will be impaired in different ways than a child who is abandoned at the age of four.[8] Thus, we should not expect that Huck's impairments will be correlated with precisely the sorts of abuse and neglect that would most likely cause them in a real child. But that sort of verisimilitude does not matter for the purposes of the present discussion. What does matter is that, in Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain has rendered certain of the traumatic *effects* of gross maltreatment with devastating realism. I will briefly describe some typical impacts of neglect and abuse on real children,[9] which will allow us to see how Huck fits the pattern.

Typically, a victim of protracted early childhood trauma, like a traumatized combat veteran, learns above all to be vigilant. As Huck does, any abused child lives in a virtually constant state of dread, with a keen sense of her own powerlessness and vulnerability. His most powerful motivation is to assuage fear, and his primary goal is his own survival and security. But unlike a traumatized combat veteran, a severely neglected and abused child does not know any other reality. The child does not learn to recognize love and respond in kind, since she never sees it. She does not learn to trust, for the same reasons. He does not learn to expect that the social future will resemble the past, because he has never experienced interpersonal constancy or security.

The practical impacts of such life lessons are, by and large, unsurprising. A child who lives in a constant state of heightened anxiety will be most effective in crisis situations, where she is forced to choose some course of action. Because it makes no sense to her to trust, when she acts, her usual strategy is to manipulate and deceive. Otherwise she will tend to be passive, easily paralyzed, and lacking both initiative and follow-through ("laying low," as Huck often puts it). Although this child may have difficulty determining the moral significance of reasons for and against various behaviors—after all, she was never *shown* the moral significance of most of the reasons that well-nurtured people easily recognize—she may still be kind; may still be able to see and to care about the suffering of others. Not having been properly loved, that is, does not necessarily make a child hateful. The experience just leaves him totally unequipped to bring his perceptions of others to bear in socially normal, stable, and reliable ways.

To see how Huck fits this profile, let us first consider Huck's interactions with his father. Here, we see evidence of both the constitutive causes

and the effects of child abuse and neglect. Pap beats Huck constantly ("Pap got too handy with his hick'ry, and I couldn't stand it. I was all over welts"). He humiliates and terrorizes Huck ("He took up a little blue and yaller picture of some cows and a boy, and says: 'What's this?' 'It's something they give me for learning my lessons good.' He tore it up, and says, 'I'll give you something better—I'll give you a cowhide'") (that is, a beating). Pap locks Huck into their wilderness hideout and leaves him alone for long periods of time ("Once he locked me in and was gone three days. It was dreadful lonesome. I judged he had got drownded, and I wasn't ever going to get out any more. I was scared"). Not until Pap tries to kill Huck in an episode of alcohol-induced psychosis does Huck elaborately fake his own death and run away (pp. 28–41).

Now, with this grim picture of Huck's life trajectory in mind, let us return to the three passages mentioned above, and look again at Huck's relationship, not with his father but with Jim. For it is in the context of this relationship that Huck's character and its limitations are principally revealed.

In the first passage usually cited in support of the standard reading, Huck plays a "mean trick" on Jim, then apologizes and resolves not to do so again. At the time of the trick, Jim and Huck have been separated on the river, and Jim is afraid that Huck has drowned. When Huck returns to the raft, Jim is asleep, and Huck fools Jim into thinking their separation was all a dream. Jim rebukes Huck strongly for this: "My heart wuz mos' broke bekase you wus los', en I didn't k'yer no' mo' what become er me en de raf'. En when I wake up en fine you back ag'in, all safe en soun', de tears come, en I could 'a' got down on my knees en kiss yo' foot, I's so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin' 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. That truck dah is *trash;* en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed" (p. 119). Here, Jim tells Huck that he loves him. He scolds Huck with pointed disapproval, sorrow, and disappointment. He asserts his own basic humanity and his need to be loved and respected by Huck. After this speech, he withdraws into their shared dwelling on the raft, creating distance between them, but without any threat of abandonment. In doing all of this, Jim is simply treating Huck like the naughty child that he is. Jim's reaction is parental; it is a gesture of concern, an authoritative reproof, and also at the same time an act of moral and social education.[10]

Huck, for his part, is astonished by Jim's response. To someone who knows what Huck's life has been like up to this point, his astonishment is

not surprising: the reader is probably witnessing the first time that Huck has experienced anything like a normal, loving, parental rebuke. But in spite of his astonishment, Huck sees both that his prank was hurtful, and why. He feels shame and great remorse. He struggles with both his wounded pride (he has been shamed) and his racism (Jim has just laid down a powerful new conception of their relationship: father-son rather than Black slave–free White). And eventually, Huck overcomes his pride and overrides his racism to apologize sincerely, saying, "It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger; but I done it, and I weren't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd 'a' knowed it would make him feel that way" (p. 120).

What do we learn of Huck's character from this passage, when we read it with Huck's developmental status and past experiences in mind? Recall that on the standard reading, Huck's apology to Jim is supposed to be character *revealing*. The apology shows Huck's true heart, which is fundamentally good, kind, just, and loving, and which will influence Huck's actions and motives more and more over the course of the novel. But this reading is implausible when we consider the apology against the backdrop of Huck's cruelly neglectful childhood. At this point, Huck's apology is no more character revealing than a beginner's first in-bounds tennis serve reveals a developed talent for the sport. Instead, the apology and overall exchange with Jim are, at best, character *building*. Huck is practicing doing something he has never had the opportunity to do before: namely, relating in a stable and loving way. Nor is Huck struggling here with something I should like to call principle. His frank admission that it took him "fifteen minutes to work himself up to humble himself to a nigger" reports the sulky reluctance of a wounded ego—and a child's self-centered ego at that—not the conscientious scruple of inverted or warped integrity.

And yet, when we conceive of Huck's apology as practice, or as an exercise in character building, then this episode may strike us as hopeful: the apology to Jim shows that it is at least *possible*—though not easy—for Huck to respond appropriately to socially normal gestures of parenting. He is not, so to speak, so far gone as to be entirely immune to Jim's influence. Perhaps, then, under Jim's influence he might eventually learn to relate in a more permanently trusting, trustworthy, and stable way. *Perhaps* in time, under Jim's influence, Huck might even become less racist in some respects. But these hopeful thoughts are a far cry from the conclusion of the standard reading, which is closer to *Deep*

down Huck is not really racist, or *Deep down Huck is already a person with a strong instinct for justice*.

What's more, although Huck demonstrates here that he is capable of certain kinds of character building, his sense of self and sense of the world have unfortunately already been substantially formed, under quite different influences than Jim's. Therefore, we cannot expect this one remedial act of good parenting to have the effect that many such acts would have had at the right stage in Huck's development. Sure enough, in the very next chapter, having just sworn never to subject Jim to any more "mean tricks," Huck paddles away to betray Jim to the authorities.

In this passage, Huck tells the reader that he goes to give Jim up because his conscience starts to bother him; he thinks he is about to be complicit in stealing a person who is someone else's property. And the standard reading, taking Huck's view of things at face value, says that the Huck of this passage has begun to struggle with, but has not yet abandoned, his socially inculcated racism. Thus, Huck's decision not to turn Jim in at the last minute is interpreted as another, greater victory for Huck's good heart. But again, a developmentally attuned perspective suggests a very different explanation of Huck's vacillation at this crucial juncture. Rather than indicating a blossoming discomfort with racism or slavery, Huck's inconsistent behavior is best explained in terms of the hallmark patterns of behavior that stem from neglect and abuse; and that explanation begins and ends with Huck's *fear*.

As a rule, Huck has not learned to trust adults, nor has he developed a sense of the world as orderly and reliable. Nor should he have: trusting his own father would literally have been the death of him. And yet Jim *has* protected and loved Huck, so separation from Jim would in itself be a great loss of heretofore-unimaginable security and stability for Huck. Now, as Jim nears freedom, he begins to talk of his family, and to plan their escape from slavery, and to rejoice about goals and dreams that do not involve Huck at all.[11] Huck begins to perceive Jim for the first time as a human being who leads his own life and makes his own decisions. And though the contemporary reader will have noticed that Jim is a just and kind man who is very unlikely to abandon Huck, Huck himself is in no position to know this about Jim; indeed he is in no position to be able to perceive this sort of thing about anyone.

At the same time that he begins to be aware that Jim has his own life to lead, Huck begins to be terribly afraid that if Jim does reach freedom, the cosmic forces of "Civilization" and "Providence" (always capitalized in Huck's anxious narrative) will punish him for violating their sacred

right to *property*—here, the property rights of slaveholders. Of course, Huck is intimately familiar with the importance that his society places on property rights; Pap sees Huck as his property, and Huck has often been in trouble for stealing food (which frequently would have been his only means of obtaining it). He says, "It hadn't ever come home to me before, what this thing was that I was doing. But now it did; and it stayed with me and scorched me more and more." In short, Huck is facing an all-too-familiar crisis of impending, total, life insecurity and uncertainty, and he is filled with dread, anxiety, and guilt. "Well," says Huck, "I just felt sick" (pp. 106–8).[12]

In the face of this anxiety, the little that Huck has only very lately begun to learn from Jim of unconditional familial love is utterly overwhelmed. He desperately wants to do whatever will bring him greater security from future harm, and he experiences conflict, not, as the standard reading has it, between his "good heart" (in Bennett's phrase) and his morally despicable principles, but rather because he is terribly unsure which is the safer path. Should he stay with Jim and incite the wrath of Providence and Civilization, possibly only to be abandoned by Jim when they reach the border? Or should he turn Jim in, depriving himself of Jim and putting himself back at the mercy of Civilization just as surely, albeit by a slightly different route?

True, when Huck has the opportunity to give Jim up, he doesn't do it. Instead, he lies, creatively and well. (And as we will see, he later credits himself with saving Jim in so doing.) But the lie Huck tells is *not* unambiguously calculated to protect Jim; far from it. Instead it functions as a sort of test. When Huck encounters two White bounty hunters who want to board the raft, he implies that his father on the raft has smallpox. This lie guarantees that the bounty hunters, Civilization incarnate, *will* find Jim, if they are merciful to the likes of Huck. For if they are merciful toward Huck and his sick (White) father, they will board the raft to help. When the bounty hunters turn out not to be merciful and flee, they make Huck's choice for him, and he stays with Jim.

Here again, attending to Huck's past and his developmental status affords quite different insights into his character, as compared to the standard reading. Huck's lie to the bounty hunters is really an ingeniously manipulative and strikingly morally passive intervention in the course of events. He has forced Civilization to reveal its true (indifferent and untrustworthy) nature. In these respects his lie is both typical of the coping mechanisms and patterns of behavior of abused and neglected children, and consistent with Huck's behavior throughout the novel. In

this particular instance, therefore, Huck seems to deserve both less praise for *doing right*, and less criticism for *thinking wrong*, than the standard reading would give him. For if, on the one hand, dread really is what moves him, and not conscience, then there is no particular reason to think Huck endorses the corrupt moral rules that he is afraid to defy, in the way that a fully responsible, self-aware adult agent might. This isn't quite *his* morality, so to speak—or anyway, not yet. On the other hand, his fear-driven actions are no real victory for Huck's good heart. He is not acting out of a stable, if inarticulate, disposition to be just; or out of a blossoming discomfort with racism; or even out of real friendship or care for Jim. Instead his action, per usual, is a desperate, deceptive act of short-term self-protection in an incomprehensible world.

And indeed, in one of the novel's many moments of irony, Huck warns the reader not to greet his behavior with too much enthusiasm, explaining that "a body that don't get *started* right when he's little ain't got no show. When the pinch comes, there ain't nothing to back him up and keep him to his work, and so he gets beat" (p. 127). With this remark, Huck means to explain why he failed to do the right thing and betray Jim. On the standard reading, the irony of his remark stems from the fact that Huck actually does exactly what *is* right in getting "beat." But on the developmental reading the remark has a quite different, ironic significance: Huck is predicting with painful accuracy both *that* he will fail Jim down the line, and *why* he will do so. And, sure enough, when Jim is kidnapped and sold back into slavery, Huck lacks the practical skills and stability he needs to back up his resolve to free Jim, and in spite of himself, he gets "beat."

Above, I characterized Huck's failure to free Jim as a personal failure of great magnitude. And this is certainly true; if there is one thing of value in Huck's life, it is his relationship with Jim, and if he has learned anything about proper human relationships and morality, he has learned it in the context of his relationship with Jim, from Jim. Huck's failure to return Jim's love and loyalty in kind is a betrayal of the only person who has ever loved him, and it is at the same time a failure to embrace the humane, just, and loving life path that Jim has modeled for him. In this light, the final chapters of the novel are heartbreaking, and the veneer of lighthearted frolicsomeness takes on a gruesome quality.

Still, from the perspective of developmental attunement a great deal more can be said about Huck's character and its influence on his actions in the final crisis than that he simply fails. When he returns to the raft to find Jim gone, Huck perceives the catastrophic loss as a punishment

from Providence for failing to do the "right" thing by turning Jim in, back when he had the chance: "Here was the plain hand of Providence, slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in Heaven" (pp. 294–95). (This is a particularly poignant proof of the fact that Huck thinks God is like Pap.) This guilty thought comes to Huck, as usual, out of a welter of dread, anxiety, helplessness, and insecurity. In this respect, not much has changed since Huck narrowly escaped betraying Jim to the bounty hunters.

But this time around, Huck is much better able to keep his relationship with Jim in mind while he is deliberating. He says, I "got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time . . . we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. . . . I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; . . . 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 them we had smallpox aboard . . . and then I happened to look around and see that paper" (that is, his letter to Miss Watson). And in this moment, with Jim squarely in the forefront of his mind, Huck is able to defy, however briefly, his terrible fear of Civilization, Providence, and even Pap. He tears up the letter and says, "All right, then, I'll *go* to hell" (p. 246).

Above, I argued that Huck's apology to Jim for his "mean trick" could be read as grounds for hope that Huck might one day learn to relate in a stable, trustworthy way. In this scene we see that hope partially realized, in the sense that Huck's potential for personal growth has been (partially) confirmed. Over time, Huck's relationship with Jim has indeed shaped his inner life in ways that are beginning to manifest in his actions and deliberations. Most striking in this regard is the simple fact that Huck actively makes a choice to save Jim, rather than "laying low," remaining passive, and manipulating the situation to see how it will play out and affect him. In this respect he stands in sharp contrast to the Huck who just a few weeks before told his clever lie to the bounty hunters.

In fairness to the standard reading, then, this moment can be read as a sort of victory for basic human decency and love. But if so, the victory belongs not to Huck but rather to Jim. In Huck's brave gesture, we see the impact that steady love and affection like Jim's can have, even on a child as damaged and limited as Huckleberry Finn.[13] And at the same time, knowing Huck as we do, we can now see why his brave decision to go to hell for Jim's sake is *not* the sort of moral victory that reveals

the steady, stalwart presence of a good heart finally breaking free from a cruel and twisted, socially given moral code. Sadly, Huck is not free; his habitual fear and moral bewilderment and the resulting manipulativeness and moral passivity are, so to speak, only in remission, and only for a moment. Huck is still equipped primarily with the woefully dysfunctional practical capacities he acquired from life with Pap. And that is why, in the face of Tom's petulant frivolity, Huck cannot follow up his choice to save Jim, sincere though it was, with the acts that would bring it to fruition. Instead, he reverts to his usual, dysfunctional modes of operation, letting Jim down horribly and thwarting his own ends perfectly in the process.

IV

We are now in a position to consider the picture of character, and its philosophical study, suggested by this reading of *Huckleberry Finn*. I begin by examining how the developmental account of Huck's character compares to the canonical Aristotelian conception of virtue and vice. One thing to be gleaned from Huck's case is that character traits need not look much like Aristotelian virtues and vices at all in order to be morally significant, abiding features of persons, which partially explain the actions of those persons. This possibility is realized in the case of Huck's kindness.

According to Aristotle, a person does truly excellent or virtuous things "first, if he does them knowingly, secondly, if he decides to do them, and decides to do them for themselves, and thirdly if he does them from a firm and unchanging disposition" of excellence.[14] Against this standard, Huck fails utterly to possess the character trait of kindness. His disposition toward kindness is anything but firm; it is rather frail and confused, infected by racism, and wholly susceptible to being overwhelmed by fear and external influence. Huck also totally lacks the self-awareness and deliberateness that, for Aristotle, characterize the decisions of a truly kind person. It is therefore wholly appropriate to say that Huck lacks kindness in a robust Aristotelian sense. After all, the frailty of his character (and of his kindness in particular) is precisely what the standard reading misses.

The frailty of his disposition toward kindness notwithstanding, we would be doing Huck an injustice if our assessment of his character ended here. For Huck's inner life *is* importantly marked by abiding qualities of kindness in practically and morally important ways. For one

thing, Huck *recognizes* kindness, and recognizes its value, when it occurs in other people. Take the action of tearing up the letter to Miss Watson and defying his terrible fear of punishment. This act is performed in a moment of vivid recollection of Jim's unwavering kindness and concern for him, and it is done in deep emotional responsiveness to that kindness. Huck reflects on how good Jim always was, and he retrospectively places his own morally ambiguous action (lying to the bounty hunters) in a morally positive light, which is shone on it by Jim's lovingkindness. What's more, Huck not only recognizes kindness, he takes pleasure in it whenever he finds it, much as a person with the full Aristotelian virtue of kindness does. By taking pleasure in kindness and abhorring cruelty, Huck is being affected "when one should, at the things one should, in relation to the people one should" (1106b21–4). When Huck tears up his letter, it is (imperfect) kindness and love of kindness, *as opposed to* (for instance) fear, or whim, or love of mischief, that shape and lead to the action.

To be sure, Huck's recognition of kindness and his celebration of its value cannot move him all the way to action except in rare instances, and he has particular trouble distinguishing between kind and unkind actions in himself. Even when he is affected by kindness, he is still confused and easily paralyzed; he is thus not often affected "for the reasons one should, and in the way one should" be affected (1106b21–4). Still, while Huck's lack of "firmness" in the Aristotelian sense shows that his kindness does not amount to virtue in Aristotle's sense, once we know the story behind that lack of firmness we can see that kindness is nonetheless a morally significant feature of his attitudes, emotions, deliberations, and actions. This suggests that even frail or fragmented traits of character can still be just that: chronic, persistent qualities of persons that shape and lead to (and thus explain) our actions.

Finally, even though Huck's lack of firmness is a real flaw in his character, it does not follow that Aristotle's notion of a "firm and unchanging disposition" should remain the standard for excellence of character. Huck's character is *not* unchanging, nor should it be. Huck's experiences with Jim alter his inner life over time, resulting in small, but meaningful, changes in the quality of his deliberations and actions. For instance, Huck's gesture with the letter shows a slightly increased ability to act on his recognition of Jim's kindness, compared to his behavior in the smallpox scenario. True, Huck's experiences with Jim have not empowered Huck to simply defy Tom and free Jim expeditiously. But that fact does not undermine the genuineness of the small change that has occurred.

In Huck, the dynamic quality of personal traits like kindness is perhaps easier to see because he is a child (albeit a sadly blighted one), and he is therefore at a comparatively quick, or plastic, developmental stage. But adopting a developmentally attuned perspective reminds us that, even though certain kinds of development cease, or taper off, even adults are never entirely static as long as they continue to live, have new experiences, and respond to those experiences with actions and evaluations. After all, even becoming more rigid and less plastic is itself a change in one's personal qualities, which no doubt shapes one's actions. One's character is therefore quite literally never fully formed until one dies; character is what we might call persistently developmental—not in the sense of "developmental" at use in, say, the phrase "developmental psychology," but in a more general or colloquial sense that means simply growing; not static.

As Julia Annas says, virtue is "an essentially developmental notion. We do not go suddenly or in a simple move from being pre-virtuous to being virtuous (pre-brave to being brave, for example), being then able to stop, as though we had acquired a static condition. Virtue is not a once for all achievement but a disposition of our character that is constantly developing as it meets new challenges and enlarges the understanding it involves."[15] To this I propose adding: *any* disposition of character, virtuous or vicious, or confused and impaired like Huck's kind tendencies, is persistently developmental in this way. And depending upon the challenges and circumstances that one encounters, a given disposition might atrophy, or come to lack integrity, or acquire other flaws and signs of disease; the development need not always constitute progress, though it will do so in a (developmentally) normal case.

Naturally, one's conception of another person's character shapes one's interactions with that person. Whether or not we recognize the developmental character of character therefore has ethical significance. As an illustration, consider a contrast between Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer.

In the final part of the novel, Huck and Tom both actively participate in dragging out Jim's imprisonment and ruining his chances of safe escape. But when the two boys are digging a tunnel under the bottom log of Jim's cabin prison with penknives rather sawing through the log with a handy saw blade, Huck's action can be truly described as *trying to free Jim*, and Tom's cannot (p. 339). This difference is not due merely to the difference in their respective epistemic positions (because Tom knows Jim is free already). It is also a moral difference; a difference in

their characters. Huck cares about Jim very much and wishes fervently not to hurt him, whereas the frighteningly callous Tom is moved by no such consideration. Because of this difference, Huck is both admirable and pitiable for his futile digging, in a way that Tom is not. Also because of this difference, in doing what he does, Huck fails in a way that Tom cannot fail; that is, there is no distance between what Tom values and what he does, whereas there is a great distance between these things for Huckleberry Finn.

Now, an adult who knows Huck and Tom and their stories would be able to perceive these differences between the two boys, and would therefore be able to judge Huck well. When she thinks of Tom and Huck digging under Jim's wall with penknives, she will be able to tell that the same action, in the same circumstances, by very superficially similar individuals, is actually evidence of nascent kindness in one child, and evidence of callousness in the other. But this developmentally attuned adult would also be capable of having very different sorts of interactions with Huck—more just, more loving, more suited to who he is and to what he needs—than she would be capable of otherwise. If, for instance, she were blind to the fact that Huck is inadvertently betraying Jim in failing to free him expeditiously, she could never admonish Huck for doing so, and she could also never forgive him. She could never help Huck to see his own actions in the proper light, or challenge him to do better, or find reasons to be patient with him if he fails to make the kind of progress on this front that one might expect a normal child of his age to make.

In fact, the practical implications of this adult's developmental attunement go beyond her relationship with Huck. Her insight into Huckleberry Finn might lead her, for instance, to emulate Jim's style of parenting, or to thank him for his positive interventions in the life of a difficult child. If she is a White person of Huck's time and place, her developmental perspective on Huck might lead her to a more accurate and more just perception of Jim, thus challenging her own socially inculcated anti-Black racism. Thus, the moral quality of her own actions is substantially affected by her having adopted a developmentally attuned perspective. In general, the greater her intimate familiarity with the characters of those around her, the more finely tuned and just (that is, wise) her interactions with them may be.

Much the same is true of the epistemic quality of her moral judgments and evaluations. If character is, as I have put it, "persistently" developmental, then we must be aware of this fact simply to understand

another person's character, however we evaluate it. I tried to achieve such awareness in the case of Huck by using something like Murdoch's just and loving attention to honor Huck's formative experiences and his temporally extended and dynamic nature. From this perspective, Huck's lie to the bounty hunters becomes morally ambiguous, and his apology to Jim becomes practice in maintaining proper moral and social relationships. When we follow Huck's gaze and see how he attends to Jim's kindness when he tears up his letter, dwelling on an "object of mutual attention" makes both the act and the boy whose act it is morally intelligible. And when we notice that Huck is blind to the broad, antiracist implications of Jim's evident humanity (when we see, that is, that an issue of great concern to the contemporary reader is not an object of much attention on the part of the protagonist), then we are able to perceive that Huck's racism is not in fact successfully undermined by his relationship with Jim. And so on.

Above I said that, in giving an in-depth, developmentally attuned reading of a literary character, I meant to model the method that I think best to use more generally when attempting to understand character. Now, when it comes to real people, our epistemic position will necessarily be somewhat different in one important respect, because we become intimately acquainted with real people primarily and fundamentally by relating to them over time, whereas we have learned about Huckleberry Finn by reading (and reading between the lines of) a fictional self-report. But the highly particular, "inner" nature of character means that we are forced to work with examples like Huck's in trying to give an account of character, simply because no single living person exists with whom everyone is sufficiently intimately acquainted.

This methodology respects, I think, the intense particularity of character, which we saw illustrated above with the example of Huck's pockmarked and shaky propensity toward kindness. But it leaves a question for each of us to settle: does the method of developmental attunement yield similar insights into the character of real persons with whom we are intimately acquainted? I am optimistic that we have all had experiences of understanding others in this way, such as when we get to know someone better over time and thereby come to think better (or worse) of them because our deeper knowledge of their story casts their actions in a different light. We might also think of the experience of gaining fresh perspective on someone with whom we are already very close—as Murdoch's mother, M, does regarding her daughter-in-law, or as one sometimes does when one matures and comes to see one's parents as

full persons, with their own pasts, and their own lives to live, with their own life goals and projects that are vulnerable to success and failure, and future selves still to be cultivated and developed ("IP," pp. 16–17). But regardless, honoring the developmental character of character turns out to place certain limits on a general theory of character. Truly, as Aristotle said, some things can be theorized only "roughly and in outline," and precise knowledge of them must be gained in other ways (1094b20–1).

V

The stark differences between the standard and the developmentally attuned readings of Huckleberry Finn show that character can be genuinely accessed only through the sustained, painstaking, intensely intimate "just and loving" attention that Murdoch describes. Our insight into Huck's character is fallible, endlessly perfectible, and limited in many ways. Nonetheless, precisely because it respects the chronic, diachronic, dynamic nature of character, the developmentally attuned approach affords more just and loving, but also more descriptively and evaluatively accurate, insights into character and its influence on action.

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE, KNOXVILLE

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1. Jonathan Bennett, "The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn," *Philosophy* 49 (1974): 123–34. Though it entered the moral philosophy literature with Bennett, the standard reading of Huck is not attributable to Bennett per se. It is part of the dominant popular American reading of the novel. For an important dissenting argument, which takes issue with key features of the standard reading, especially with respect to the novel's position on race and racism, see Frederick Woodard and Donnarae MacCann, "Minstrel Shackles and Nineteenth-Century 'Liberality' in *Huckleberry Finn,*" in *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on "Huckleberry Finn,"* ed. James S. Leonard, Thomas A. Tenney, and Thadious M. Davis (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 141–53. See also Kristina Gehrman, "Twain's Last Laugh," in *Mark Twain and Philosophy*, ed. Alan H. Goldman (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), pp. 52–64. Rosalind Hursthouse is one philosopher who is mindful of Huck's youthfulness and immaturity in her discussion of him, and I have drawn much inspiration here from her consistent emphasis on the moral importance of childhood,

development, and upbringing. See Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 150–53.

2. Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Moral Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder, "Praise, Blame, and the Whole Self," *Philosophical Studies* 93 (1999): 163, hereafter abbreviated "PBWS."

3. Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 32; hereafter abbreviated "IP."

4. Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1917), accessed through https://books.google.com; hereafter cited by page numbers.

5. "But Jim, you *got* to have 'em—they all do. So don't make no more fuss about it. Prisoners ain't never without rats," says Tom (p. 300).

6. In support of the claim that Jim and Huck are allies, see, for example, their interactions at pp. 136–37 or pp. 235–36. Regarding Huck's emotional comprehension of Jim's predicament, he says, "I went to sleep, and Jim didn't call me when it was my turn. He often done that. When I waked up just at daybreak, he was sitting there with his head down betwixt his knees, moaning and mourning to himself. I didn't take notice, nor let on. I knowed what it was about. He was thinking about his wife and his children, away up yonder, and he was low and home-sick; because he hadn't ever been away from home before in his life; and I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n" (pp. 179–80). Finally, sure enough, some of the search mob want to lynch Jim when he is apprehended (p. 325).

7. Says Huck, when Jim decides to give himself up to save Tom, "I knowed he was white inside" (p. 341). For a detailed discussion of racist patterns in practical reasoning, see Tommie Shelby, "Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory," *The Philosophical Forum* 34 (2003): 153–88. See also Gehrman, "Twain's Last Laugh."

8. For example, attachment disorders are thought to occur as a result of neglect in infancy, prior to two years of age. For a comparative review of the impact of neglect at different stages of life, see Kathryn L. Hildyard and David A. Wolfe, "Child Neglect: Developmental Issues and Outcomes," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 26 (2002): 679–95.

9. For a comprehensive, practically oriented overview of the psychosocial impacts of abuse and neglect on children, see the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Understanding the Effects of Maltreatment on Brain Development" and "Acts of Omission: An Overview of Child Neglect," available online through the Child Welfare Information Gateway (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, 2012). Since 1997, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has been conducting a massive longitudinal study on the impacts of "adverse childhood experiences," some results of which can be found on the CDC website at http://www.cdc.gov/ace/findings.html.

10. For a reading of Jim as moral educator, see Jung. H. Lee, "The Moral Power of Jim: A Mencian Reading of Huckleberry Finn," *Asian Philosophy* 19 (2009): 101–18. However, to the extent that Twain *does* portray Jim as a moral educator, he may be correspondingly open to the criticism leveled—by, for example, Woodard and MacCann—that his portrayal of Jim is in keeping with an implausibly, cheerfully self-sacrificing "minstrel"

stereotype. After all, why should Jim take Huck's moral education upon himself? Surely his first obligation is to himself and to his own children, whose freedom he has not secured.

11. Jim envisions buying his wife out of slavery and, if necessary, hiring an "Ab'litionst" to steal his children (p. 107).

12. See Pap's drunken speech at pp. 37–39 for his assertion of his property rights over Huck, right before his enraged attempt on Huck's life.

13. I am presenting what I take to be the textual and authorial implication of the passage. Of course, whether or not love can heal trauma in real children is a separate question; however, some good, empirical evidence shows precisely this effect in studies done on children with reactive attachment disorder. The standard therapy for this disorder involves carefully creating a stable, permanent, and loving bond between child and adult. For example, a 2006 report from the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children remarks that "generally accepted theory suggests that because attachment patterns develop within relationships, correcting attachment problems requires close attention to improving the stability and increasing the positive quality of the parent-child relationship and parent-child interactions. Indeed, in a review of more than 70 studies of interventions designed to improve early childhood attachment, those interventions that most increased parental sensitivity were also the most effective in improving children's attachment security." Cited in Mark Chaffin et. al, "Report of the APSAC Task Force on Attachment Therapy, Reactive Attachment Disorder, and Attachment Problems," *Child Maltreatment* 11, no. 1 (2006): 76–89 (77–8).

14. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* trans. Christopher Rowe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 1105a31–b1; hereafter cited by Bekker numbers.

15. Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 38.