

HOW TO BE GOOD IN “HOW TO BE GOOD” BY NICK HORNBY, AN ETHICAL VIEW TOWARDS PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Nick Hornby's novel, *How to be good* (2001) is a great example of a novel which has different moral attitudes inside, it represents unhappy marriage of a couple, Katie Carr and her husband David. Hornby provides the reader with a complicated question of what it means to be good and represents different understanding of goodness by each character in the course of novel. Work within the frame work of Ethical theory, this study aims to examine the notion of moderate moralities proposed by Frances Kamm in *How to Be Good*. It investigates the modern understanding of goodness and maps the relation between family life and moral obligation. In so doing, this paper includes the analysis of moderate or ordinary morality and its application in the novel and the ways in which the notion of what means to be “good” represented in the novel.

KEYWORDS: Moderate Morality, Trolley problems, Fat Man, Trade off

INTRODUCTION

In modern concepts of morality there are different understandings of moral obligation for example in *The Limits of Morality*, Shelly Kagan (1989) offers three definition for extremist, moderate and minimal moralities. According to him, the position of the “moderate” is characterized by her acceptance of three things: a *pro tanto*, reason to promote the greater overall good, *constraints* on what may be done, either for the sake of promoting the greater overall good or for the sake of promoting personal good, and *options* (sometimes called ‘prerogatives’) *not* to perform the action which will result in the greater overall good” (Baltzly, 2001,7).

One of the features that makes Nick Hornby's *How to Be Good* (2001) a suitable novel to investigate in terms of moral theories is that, Hornby represents what is wrong and right in the context of family life. Although, today many believes that the moral theory forms part of a wider social theory but Hornby offers a familial context for a practice of goodness, the novel is full of internal and external conflicts and the writer represents different definition of how to be good. So, work within the framework of Ethical theory, this descriptive study aims to examine the qualification of the notion “moderate morality” proposed by Frances Kamm (2000) in *How to Be Good*. It will investigate the modern understanding of goodness and will map the relation between family life and moral obligation. It will suggest that each character shows different reaction when they face different moral situation.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A critical understanding of morality requires understanding of values that can explain our case judgments and can help us to recognize whether these values are worth respecting or promoting. "Moral norms are necessary to help people living together" (Leist, 2013,5). Frances Kamm (2000) seeks to address moral cases in order to gain insight into our fundamental moral concepts and principles.

She attempts to formulate principles that explain and justify our judgments in these and other moral cases. In her book *Morality, Mortality, Vol. 1: Death and Whom to Save From It* (1993) and in her other work in moral theory and applied ethics, Kamm meticulously and imaginatively analyses moral cases in order to gain insight into our fundamental moral concepts and principles. The tenacity with which she pursues this aim springs from her personal engagement with the issues she investigates—an engagement reflected in her dedication of the second volume of *Morality, Mortality* to ‘the love of morality’. At the center of Kamm’s work lie her development and defense of a nonconsequentialist ethical theory.

Alex Voorhoeve in his article "Conversations on Ethics" (2009), compares and analyses Frances Kamm's ideas, he compares consequentialism and nonconsequentialism in this regard: Consequentialism holds that the rightness or wrongness of our conduct is determined solely by the expected goodness or badness of the consequences of our acts or of the rules to which these acts conform. According to consequentialism, to act rightly is to act in ways that bring about the best possible expected consequences. To act wrongly is to fail to act in such ways. Nonconsequentialists deny this. In support of this denial, many nonconsequentialists argue that our intuitive judgments of moral cases are inconsistent with consequentialism.

Outside of North America, *trolleys* are more usually known as *trams*, non- American trolleys being, amongst other things, the big baskets on wheels used in supermarkets for carrying shopping, not people (Kamm, 1999, 186). Trolley problems are moral dilemmas that were originally introduced by Philippa Foot (1967) and Judith Jarvis Thomson (1996) to get at intuitions about the moral status of actions and omissions, intentions and side effects, agents and bystanders, and so on. Kauppinen in his book *Essays in Philosophical Moral Psychology* defines trolley problems as follows:

(Switch) A trolley is about to run over five people on the tracks and kill them. John happens to be walking by and notices that he could save the five people by hitting a switch that turns the trolley on another track. However, there is someone on the other track as well, so saving the five would mean bringing about the death of the one. Should John hit the switch?

(Fat Man) A trolley is about to run over five people on the tracks and kill them. John happens to be crossing a footbridge where a fat man is standing over the tracks. If John were to push him over the edge, his heft would suffice to stop the trolley before it reached the five people. In fact, trolleys do not run on tracks but on wheels, but I will follow the philosophical tradition and pretend that they do! However, this would mean the death of the fat man. Should John hit the switch? (Kauppinen, 2007,79)

According to consequentialism, because "pushing the large stranger into the path of the trolley would ensure the fewest number of deaths, you should push him" (Voorhoeve, 2009,3). Kauppinen also writes about trolley problem:

In short, on this sort of view, moral judgments are caused by automatic, non-rational affective reactions. The reasoning system is activated as a rule only in interpersonal contexts of attitude modification, in which people are called to 'rationalize' their intuitive judgments post-hoc, by appeal to reasons and principles that have little or nothing to do with their original judgments but have currency in their social environment (Kauppinen, 2007,74).

As Haidt in his article 'The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment' (2001) argues, "moral reasoning does not cause moral judgment; rather, moral reasoning is usually a post hoc construction, generated after a judgment has been reached" (Haidt, 2001, 814).

In the first volume of *Morality, Mortality*, Frances Kamm considers a case in which one has to choose between saving either a doctor's or a janitor's life with an organ transplant. This appears to support the principle "Don't treat people only as a means!" (Voorhoeve, 2009,3)

Rawls in his book *A Theory of Justice* (1971) suggested that "normative ethics could be seen as in part articulating the tacit principles that guide everyday moral judgments" Hauser and his colleagues in their article 'The Role of Conscious Reasoning and Intuition in Moral Judgment' (2006) argues that, "When people give explanations for their moral behavior, they may have little or nothing to do with the underlying principles. Their sense of conscious reasoning from specific principles is illusory." (Hauser et al, 2006,45)

The best explanation for why they nonetheless make sophisticated distinctions, according to Hauser, "is that (normal) individuals possess a moral grammar, a system of tacitly known rules, concepts, and principles that enables them to determine the deontic status of an infinite variety of acts and omissions" (Kauppinen, 2007,76)

Another concept that Frances Kamm proposes is The Principle of Permissible Harm (PPH). Kamm claims that a case by case approach to ethical decision making can be taken. "PPH argues that an agent can take an action that would usually not be considered to be of "good will", if the agent is acting out of a desire to prevent a much greater harm, the agent does not directly cause the imminent harm, and the situation is one in which harm will be done with or without the agent's action" (Voorhoeve, 2009,5).

Frances Kamm then adds to her argument:

Imagine a case in which a runaway trolley will kill five people if a bystander does not divert it onto another track where she foresees that it will kill one different person. You have to imagine this case in detail. For example, you have to ask yourself, 'Which way is the side-track going? Is there a loop in the side-track, so that if you diverted the trolley away from the five, it would rush

around and run into the five from the other side were it not that the trolley will hit the one person (thereby killing him) and grind to a halt?' You have to sink into these details, not just say immediately, 'Oh, it is one versus five, so of course you have to sacrifice the one', or, 'Oh, the track is going around, so...' Just *situate* yourself in the case (Voorhoeve, 2009,9).

On the other hand, some of the anti-number advocates such as John Taurek argues that "there is no reason to save the greater number perse, because none of the individuals on either island can claim that it is any worse for him to die than it is for the others" (Taurek, 1977,3). As Taurek explains, "Five individuals each losing his life does not add up to anyone's experiencing a loss five times greater than the loss suffered by any of the five"(Ibid,4) .As a possible solution, Taurek suggests that perhaps one could flip a coin to decide whether to save the one or the larger group (Ibid,5)

Frances Kamm in her book *Intricate Ethics* (2007) maintains that '... an entity has moral status when, in its own right and for its own sake, it can give us reason to do things such as not destroy it or help it' (Kamm, 2007, 229). Kamm deals with the question, Whom should we save from death if we cannot save everyone? She considers whether and when the numbers of lives we can save matter in our choice, and whether the extra good we achieve if we save some lives rather than others should play a role in deciding whom to save.

Frances Kamm says that "giving greater weight to the negative of harming than to the positive of benefiting represents the priority morality gives to the inviolability of the person over his status as recipient of such benefits as length of life." (Kamm, 2007,45) Warren in his book *Moral Status* (2005) makes a similar recognition when he writes that "morality, in granting to each person primary say over what may be done with his body, mind, and life (rather than giving primary control of these things to the community, as items to be exploited in the service of its greater overall good), "recognizes [each person's] existence as an individual with ends of his own – an independent *being* ... (Warren, 2005,2).

Another interesting concept of morality called trade-off which Kamm discusses and points out, by adopting such a morality, we are not actually sanctioning these violations, even as we foresee that they may occur. She writes:

If morality permitted minimizing violations of persons by violating other persons, then each of those saved as well as those persons used to save others would be less inviolable. It is the permission, not any actual violation of persons, that makes this so. If more violations of constraints actually occur because violations are not permitted, this does not mean that morality endorses the correctness of these harming. More people are harmed, and so the chances of each of us being harmed may well be greater; but the conception of each person that is morally endorsed involves a high degree of inviolability. We may all lead harder lives, but our dignity is greater. We may actually prefer this trade-off (Kamm, 2007,34).

Kamm deploys aggregation argument to justify trading a life for more lives:

If (1) it is worse if B and C die than if B dies alone, and (2) it is equally bad if A alone dies or B alone dies, then (3) by substitution it should also be worse if B and C die than if A alone dies. (4) Kamm is herself sensitive to a number of particular criticisms that might be made of this argument, but she does ultimately endorse it explicitly on *deontological* grounds. She sees the situation as presenting a conflict of interest and asserts "that as outsiders to a conflict of interest, we always move back to an impartial perspective *outside* that of any of the contestants." (5) When we do this, "we still do abandon someone, yet from the point of view outside that of each of the personal points of view, we see that as much is gained in helping one as in helping another and in this sense they are equivalents." The result is "the relation between candidates for help is established in matching or balancing, which involves some sort of substitution of equivalents (who are not identical)." (Voorhoeve, 2009,8)

Results and Discussions

In an attempt to try to identify some of the areas in which Nick Hornby's novel can be read through Frances Kamm's notions, the relation of David and his family and the amount of value that he puts for his children and homeless children should be investigated. Love is a small word with a big meaning. It is felt and shown to people in many different ways. It is not an easy thing to quantify and measure, especially when it is felt and shown in such a variety of ways. Acts of charity and donations are also different aspects of love for others. Good people usually show their loves towards their neighbors and friends. Even in religious context it has been asked to love our friends as ourselves. This sounds strange but it ultimately means human beings have been asked to put their friends' needs before their own, to be selfless not selfish.

Within the Hornby's novel, this type of equal love can be found in action in the friendship of David and Good News. However, this kind of altruism in terms of trolley problem is an ethical dilemma for David. He is the father of two children and a husband. They are four in the family. The problem with the trolley problem is then the following. The received morality is granted by, more or less, intuition. As Kamm (1992) argues moral actions are by instinct and analysis of the situation is usually as after thought. One just has to situate himself in the case. In the novel, David does everything he possibly can to help and support homeless children. His selfless scarifying for his friends even leads to his problem with the family. David is about to a great change. Good News always support and encourage David to get involved in charity acts:

‘You shouldn’t worry too much about it,’ GoodNews tells them cheerfully. ‘You did the right thing. No matter how much you’ve lost. He could have taken everything you own, every last penny you’ve got, and you could go to sleep tonight knowing that your conscience is clear. More than clear. It’s . . .’ GoodNews struggles for a moment to find a word that means ‘more than clear’, and then gives up and settles for a beaming smile that doesn’t seem to offer Ed and Wendy as much consolation as he might have anticipated (Hornby, 2001,160).

In general everyone has circles of favorites, family, friends, allies, and they mutually protect one another, even when such devotion disadvantages them personally. Katie feels good with charitable actions, because these actions give her self-esteem and pride. She gives a try to donation and a sense of satisfaction fills her completely:

‘I am aware that I cannot go around giving eighty quid to every homeless person. I just wanted to do it that one time. See how it felt.’

‘And how did it feel?’

‘Good.’

I don’t get any of this. ‘When were you ever interested in being good?’

‘I wasn’t talking about being good. I was talking about feeling good.’ (Hornby, 2001, 58).

The most obvious ethical dilemma in *How to be Good*, is felt by Katie. She also goes on to consider the level of natural care that one has towards others by her job definition, she reasons that doctors’ affections and emotions may differ towards people but they care about them although in their own way. Trolley situation also happens for Katie. She asks so many questions but, there is no solution except extreme anguish. The time and effort and money she spends on problems of her patients are not enough to convince her of being good person.

“Listen I’m not a bad person. I’m a doctor. One of the reasons I wanted to become a doctor was because I thought it would be a good – as in Good, rather than exciting or well-paid or glamorous – thing to do. I liked how it sounded: ‘I want to be a doctor’, ‘I’m training to be a doctor’, ‘I’m a GP in a small North London practice’. I thought it made me seem just right – professional, kind of brainy, not too flashy, respectable, mature, caring. You think doctors don’t care about how things look, because they’re doctors? Of course we do” (Hornby, 2001, 6).

It seems that, at the beginning of the novel when David becomes familiar with Good News, he totally sacrifices himself for homeless children, the numbers of saved children are very important to him, he is willing to help more and more children to the extent that he ignores his own children. When everything is about love, people’s world views get dangerously divorced from economic and political realities. David could not anticipate economic turmoil that may harm the future of his children, Katie warns him:

‘Let me ask you something: is this worth wrecking your family for?’

‘I don’t intend to wreck my family.’

‘I know you don’t intend to wreck your family. But two of us are very unhappy. And I don’t know how much more I can take.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘That’s all you can say?’

‘What else is there to say? You’re threatening to leave me because I’m trying to do something for people who can’t do much for themselves. And I . . .’

‘That’s not true, David. I’m threatening to leave you because you’re becoming unbearable.’

‘What can’t you bear?’

‘Any of it. The . . . the sanctimony. The smugness. The . . .’

‘People are dying out there, Katie. I’m sorry if you think that I’m being smug.’ (Ibid,157).

Actually, in this part David represents Consequentialist' view that favors numbers of saved people. A number of ethical issues come up when discussing David's charity work. David's priorities are emotional, not ethical. David focuses on giving too much on chronic needs such as food and shelter to homeless people while he ignores other's aspect of donation, for example, need for education and providing job opportunities go short. Ethical philanthropy would require the donor to respect the capacity and aspirations of the people it seeks to help, in the text, there is a part in which, GoodNews somehow misuses the opportunity that David give him:

“After much heart-searching, GoodNews has been given three months to find somewhere to live. He says he appreciates that he has been a burden on us; we are, after all, a middle-class nuclear family, he knows that, and he should respect our, y’know, our nuclearness. We know we are being insulted, but we don’t care very much – or at least, I don’t. David agonizes about it every night just before we go to sleep, wonders aloud whether we want to be nuclear, whether we should become a denuclearized zone, but much of his conviction has gone” (Ibid,238).

Kamm (1992) deals with the question, "Whom should we save from death if we cannot save everyone?" In her view one must situate himself in a case in order to judge about the right decision, within the Hornby's text there are lots of situation in which characters have to select between right and wrong decisions and this causes moral dilemma for them, one of the thought provoking dilemmas in the novel is Kati's definition of goodness:

“I’m a good person. In most ways. But I’m beginning to think that being a good person in most ways doesn’t count for anything very much, if you’re a bad person in one way. Because most people are good people, aren’t they? Most people want to help others, and if their work doesn’t allow them to help others then they do it however they can –....It’s no good me telling you that I’m a doctor, because I’m only a doctor during weekdays. (Hornby, 2001,48).

Kamm (2007) 's idea of trade-off can be applied to Katie's behavior. The principle of minimising harm and violations and maximizing benefits is clear in the text by Katie's act. Katie by the end of novel could make a right decision, when she puts herself in different situation, even she experiences an affair with someone other than her husband, asking her husband for divorce.

However, at the end she could reach to the realization that she is able to live a new life again:

“When David’s asleep, I can turn him back into the person I still love: I can impose my idea of what David should be, used to be, on to his sleeping form, and the seven hours I spend with that David just about gets me through the next day with the other David (8).

And me asking for a divorce was the panic, but very soon I get to this stage of looking around at what I’ve got. And what I’ve got turns out to be two lovely kids, a nice house, a good job, a husband who doesn’t beat me and presses all the rig buttons on the lift . . . I can do this, I think. I can live this life” (Hornby, 2001,20).

Conclusion

This paper examines moderate morality with the use of theories from Frances Kamm. She has some ideas about moderate morality among which trolley problem or number problem and the idea of trade off are very prominent.

About Trolley problem the case is the dilemma that exists in this concept, saving the lives of five people or just one. Frances Kamm believes that you must situate yourself in the case. In real life you would be able to decide better. However, consequentialists believe that the number is important and you have to save the lives of five peoples. Trade off concept explains about the evaluation of harmful and beneficial acts and decisions. Frances Kamm believes that morality allows minimizing harmful actions by maximizing beneficial actions.

Nick Hornby's novel *How to be Good* (2001), represents different types of characters, a couple, two children and a friend. David situates himself in a position that helps homeless people without caring about his own family. David can be considered as a form of anti-number character. He helps countless number of homeless children and forgets about his own children.

The problem with this moral philosophy approach is that it fails to distinguish between reasoning and choices, and thus interprets any inconsistency of choice as evidence of inconsistency of reasoning. But from the ethical perspective people are seen as reasoning about which principles are relevant and how much they should count in these two different cases in order to come to judgments about what one should do. There is no point in trying to identify the formula the participant is using to decide what to do, because there isn't one. It seems that David and his daughter Molly decide based on their instincts. He is not able to analyze the situation; he donates his whole life for homeless people.

Although the act of David is considered right as a charity action, but the consequence of his behavior is much important. He sacrifices the well-being of his family for the sake of helping others.

Katie is successful at representing a character that fits a good trader off. She is able to use her reason. She overcomes her doubts and leads her family well in time of turmoil. The outcome and consequence of her actions turns well in reuniting the separated family.

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