

The Compensation Principle

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Abstract

In "Should Race Matter?," David Boonin proposes the compensation principle: When an agent wrongfully harms another person, she incurs a moral obligation to compensate that person for the harms she has caused. Boonin then argues that the United States government has wrongfully harmed black Americans by adopting pro-slavery laws and other discriminatory laws and practices following the end of slavery, and therefore the United States government has an obligation to pay reparations for slavery and discriminatory laws and practices to those who have been harmed by them - in particular, to contemporary black Americans. Here I argue that the compensation principle is false because it violates the control principle, the foundational principle of ethics that states that moral responsibility requires control; for an agent to be morally responsible for something, whether or not she does that thing must be within her control. If the compensation principle creates a moral obligation for an agent to compensate a harmed party, failure to do so will result in that agent's being morally blameworthy for failing in her obligation. Because some harms cannot be compensated for, agents who wrongfully harm others will be required to do something that is outside of their control.

Introduction

In "Should Race Matter?," David Boonin proposes a moral principle, the *compensation principle*:

[I]f someone wrongfully harms another person, then he incurs a moral obligation to compensate his victim for the harms that he has wrongfully caused. (43)

On the back of this principle, Boonin constructs the compensation argument - an argument he believes shows that the United States government has a moral obligation to pay slavery reparations to contemporary black Americans. This argument fails for two reasons: First, I argue Boonin's account of the compensation principle is inconsistent with a host of commonsense, foundational principles concerning the nature of moral responsibility. Second, the compensation argument rests upon two problematic assumptions:

(i) that people are morally entitled to their relative's wealth, and (ii) that governments are morally culpable for the foreseeable harms of the laws they create.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first section is an ethical analysis of the compensation principle, the second section is a critique of the compensation argument.

1. On the Compensation Principle

To have a *moral obligation* to do a thing, x , is to be the appropriate object of moral blame if one doesn't do x , and the appropriate object of moral praise if one does x . Although we sometimes talk about agents succeeding or failing in regards to their moral obligations, this talk should not be understood to imply that there is an element of chance in whether one is morally blameworthy or praiseworthy. It wouldn't make sense to hold people morally accountable for matters of chance or luck. If one has a moral obligation to do a thing, x , then whether or not x occurs must be up to them. This concept is illustrated in the following principle:

The Control Principle - To be morally responsible for a thing, x , is to have control over whether x occurs. (CP from now on).

While CP concerns moral responsibility, a parallel principle - what David Boonin characterizes as the the principle that "ought implies can" (81) - concerns moral obligation:

The "Ought Implies Can" Principle - If an agent a has a moral obligation to do x , it is within a 's power to do x . (OICP from now on).

Because having a moral obligation to do x means you are blameworthy if you fail to do x , OICP follows from CP. To have the moral obligation to do x and fail is a moral failing, which is to say that it was up to you whether you would x or $\sim x$, you freely chose the latter, and that you are blameworthy for that choice. Moral responsibility requires control in the form of legitimate alternate possibilities - if one couldn't actually do otherwise, one can't be responsible for her actions. This leads to the following principle:

The Principle of Alternate Possibilities - If an agent a is morally blameworthy for some act y then a could have done otherwise. (PAP from now on).

The Compensation Principle

Because moral responsibility requires control, it is impossible to find yourself in a situation where all of your possible options are blameworthy. Michael Otsuka (1998) captures a key feature of PAP in the following principle:

The Principle of Avoidable Blame - If an agent *a* is morally blameworthy for some act *y* then there is some alternative act *z* that *a* had the power to do, and had *a* acted to bring about *z* rather than *y*, *a* would have been entirely morally blameless. (PAB from now on.)

According to PAB, to be blameworthy requires the opportunity to act in a blameless manner. But consider the following case:

Ethics final- Having completed all of her coursework except for one final class - Philosophy 241 Ethics, Susan enrolls in this course and promises her parents that she will graduate. Susan freely decides to disregard her coursework and focus her attention on enjoying her final semester playing video games all day. An hour before her Ethics final exam, Susan decides to check her email for the first time in the semester and finds that she will fail the course (and fail to graduate) unless she does well on the final exam. Unprepared to take the exam, Susan believes she has only two options - cheat, or not cheat and fail the exam, fail to graduate, and break her promise.

Both options are *prima facie* morally bad and we might be tempted to say that she's blameworthy if she goes with either option. The important feature about this case, though, is that her blameworthiness can be traced back to her prior free choices to focus her attention on enjoying her final semester, instead of completing the coursework. Suppose that Susan chooses not to cheat. We might say that Susan is morally blameworthy for failing the test and breaking her promise, but any responsibility for this would be derivative moral responsibility, where an agent is *derivatively morally responsible* for *x* if and only if she is truly morally responsible for *y* and *y* was appropriately connected to *x*. Susan's moral failing here is her decision to disregard her coursework, and she could have behaved in a manner in which she would be entirely blameless in this case - she could have freely chosen not to disregard her coursework!

Consider David Boonin's compensation principle:

The Compensation Principle - When an agent *a* wrongfully harms another agent *b*, *a* incurs a moral obligation to compensate *b* for those harms.

Boonin says "If I wrongfully damage your car by vandalizing it, for example, then I incur a moral obligation to repair the damage that I caused or pay the costs involved in having someone else repair it on my behalf." (43) At first glance, this principle has some intuitive force - if one harms another, it seems only fair that she should try to undo that harm. It even bears some similarity to the "you break it, you bought it" policy you might expect your local stores to have... although that policy is more strict, as you are responsible for anything you break, even if your breaking it was morally acceptable.

The problem with this principle is that it is inconsistent with CP. Consider a case where compensation is impossible:

The priceless vase - Jack and Jill visit the priceless, one-of-a-kind vase display at their local museum and notice that one vase in particular is poorly mounted behind the glass. Jack contends that if they were to jump up and down and make enough vibrations, the vase would fall from the mount and be shattered. Jill disagrees, contending that there's no way jumping up and down would cause such a result, citing several books she had read on the subject. Jack maliciously begins jumping up and down, hoping to break the vase, while Jill begins jumping up and down to prove her point, believing that doing so will not break the vase. The vase breaks.

According to the "you break it, you bought it" policy, both Jack and Jill seem to be equally on the hook for breaking the vase... but the vase is not for sale, and there is no way they can replace the priceless, one-of-a-kind vase. If Jack and possibly Jill acquired the moral obligation to replace the vase, CP, OICP, and PAB are false. Jack and Jill would be morally obligated to replace the vase, but replacing the vase would be outside of their control; it's something that they just can't do. Although both Jack and Jill might have a list of alternate possibilities (lying, running away, apologizing, suicide, etc.) because none of these possible futures will result in adequate compensation, Jack and possibly Jill will fail in any moral obligation to compensate the museum, and will thus not be able to avoid blame for this moral obligation.

There is another problem with the compensation principle. One of the virtues of the compensation principle is that it explains our intuition that Jack has a moral obligation to try to clean up his mess because he intentionally created the mess; however what about Jill? It strikes me that Jill should feel bad about what happened, and that if it was possible to replace the vase, she would want to do so. If the compensation principle is supposed to explain why Jack incurs a moral obligation to replace the vase, shouldn't it also be able to explain why Jill might believe she has an obligation to replace the vase?

The Compensation Principle

Suppose, for a moment, that Jill didn't have this intuition after breaking the vase. Suppose a security guard approaches just as the vase breaks, and Jack laughs and runs away hoping to avoid getting caught. Imagine the guard asks Jill what she has to say for herself, and that Jill replied "I'm sorry for the museum's loss. Of course had I known that jumping up and down could lead to the vase breaking, I would never have done it. But I didn't know this, and my actions were completely innocent - I freely engaged in an action that I was justified in believing would have no bad consequences, and therefore it is not my fault that the vase broke and I have no reason to compensate you for your loss, despite the fact that I caused it." I imagine you'd find this response unsatisfactory.

If it makes sense to say that Jill would have some feeling of responsibility with regards to the vase, then the compensation principle is unsatisfactory because it seeks to explain Jack's obligations with regards to the vase, but not Jill's. Suppose that the intuitive force behind the compensation principle and the "you break it, you buy it," policy has nothing to do with the agent and their intentions, but rather with the actual harm produced:

The plain vase - Jack and Jill promise their neighbors that they will water their plants while they are gone. One day, while doing so, they notice a plain, ordinary vase - the kind one could find at any flower shop for a low price - perched precariously on the edge of the kitchen counter. Jack contends that if they were to jump up and down and make enough vibrations, the vase would fall from the counter and be shattered. Jill disagrees, contending that there's no way jumping up and down would cause such a result, citing several books she had read on the subject. Jack maliciously begins jumping up and down, hoping to break the vase, while Jill begins jumping up and down believing that doing so will not break the vase. The vase breaks.

Suppose that after breaking the vase, Jill has the intuition that she should replace the vase, and she does so because of this. Her goal here is to make up for the harm that she has inadvertently caused to her neighbors, not to pay for some moral debt that she has incurred.

Jack willfully and maliciously sought to break the vase, so it makes sense to say that he's blameworthy for this action. Boonin's compensation principle contends that because his wrongful actions harmed his neighbors, he incurs a moral obligation to compensate them. The problem is that Jill also believes that she has an obligation to compensate them, despite her actions not being malicious. This suggests that the wrongful nature of Jack's action has nothing to do with our intuition that he ought to replace the vase.

Suppose, though, that rather than a traditional moral obligation, we're to understand the incurred debt of Boonin's compensation principle is a means to free one from one's blameworthiness. In both of the vase cases, Jack has acted in a *prima facie* immoral way - he willfully and maliciously sought to destroy the property of someone else. In both cases, Jack could have done otherwise - he could have refrained from activity designed to destroy the respective vases. In both cases, this was within his control, and in both cases, had he refrained, he would have been morally blameless. When Jack acts to destroy the vases, in both cases he is morally blameworthy. If Jack were to replace the vase in the latter case, he would negate the harm caused by his wrongful act. Maybe the intuition behind the compensation principle is that by providing compensation we are absolving ourselves of our previous wrongdoing. Although Jill has harmed others in these cases, she has not done so intentionally. Therefore she is not morally culpable for breaking the vases, and therefore even if she did compensate the museum or her neighbors for her actions, this would not absolve her of any moral wrongdoing because she hasn't done anything wrong!

If the moral obligation at play in the compensation principle is of this nature, then it isn't a moral obligation in the traditional sense because failure to live up to the obligation doesn't create an additional moral stain on the agent. This account of the compensation principle would, then, be compatible with CP and OICP. We might call this a derivative moral obligation, where one has a derivative moral obligation to perform some action x if and only if x will erase their responsibility for some previous action y. The concept of a derivative moral obligation is appealing because it will allow wrongdoers to actually make up for their previous wrong actions. However, consider the following case:

Destroying Pie - Frank wants to do something nice for his friend Carol, and spends all afternoon baking her a pie for desert. Frank gives Carol the pie, then inexplicably Frank takes the pie back and throws it into the garbage, sets the garbage on fire, and throws the garbage bag into the trash - utterly destroying the pie.

Because of the apparent symmetry between praise and blame, this might be what we could call a derivative moral freedom, where one has a *derivative moral freedom* to perform some action x if and only if x will erase their praise for some previous action y. It makes sense to say that Frank's actions actually undo the praiseworthiness for his previous actions.

The primary problem with the concepts of derivative moral freedom and derivative moral obligation is that they ask us to consider distinct moral actions in unison. Frank's pie baking is *prima facie* morally praiseworthy, but

The Compensation Principle

his pie destruction erases the good created by his pie baking. We're expected to evaluate the actions together, rather than separately, but this easily leads to an unintuitive picture of morality. If the concept of derivative moral obligation makes sense, then immoral actions can be done with impunity and later removed from our moral records to restore virtue. Suppose that every day at noon Jack freely and maliciously breaks his neighbor's lawn gnome, and every day at 2pm he replaces the lawn gnome with a copy from the local garden shop. On this account of the compensation principle, Jack is blameworthy from 12pm-2pm, but blameless from 2pm-12pm. This is absurd! Jack acts in a villainous manner without regard for the property of others and this is *prima facie* morally blameworthy even with compensation! If the compensation principle is true, then his neighbors, upon discovering his routine, should not judge him morally blameworthy after 2pm! But this would throw property rights out the window. Anyone would have full and unfettered access to anyone else's property, morally, so long as it doesn't result in any permanent harm!

Another possibility is that derivative moral obligations don't completely wipe away moral blame. If Boonin were to vandalize his neighbor's car, for example, he may incur the derivative moral obligation to pay for someone else to fix it, but he might also retain some aspect of his original blameworthiness - for examples, his neighbors might be justified in still blaming him, but they shouldn't blame him as much as if he were had vandalized the car and not had it fixed. However, if this is case, I'm not so sure we want to say that one incurs a moral obligation, derivative or otherwise, to repair the harm one has caused from one's misdeeds, rather we might say that an appropriate punishment for one's previous action is, in part, to repair the harm. I suppose one could talk about a moral obligation to accept one's moral punishment gracefully, but that is a radically different principle than Boonin's compensation principle seems to be.

It is also unclear how this solution will adequately explain the intuition that Jill has that she should try to compensate for the harm she caused. The benefit of derivative moral obligation talk is that it seems to allow us to get around CP, OICP, and PAB. It's a matter of luck whether Jack will be able to compensate others, but compensating isn't praiseworthy; rather it's blame-erasing. Because Jill isn't blameworthy for her action, compensation can't erase any blame. Still, if Jill believes she ought to compensate her neighbors for breaking their vase, it seems she would be best described as believing she has a moral obligation to do so, not a derivative moral obligation. This leads to several odd parallels between Jack and Jill, most notably that Jill would incur a moral obligation that Jack doesn't by acting in a morally responsible manner (by unexpectedly and unintentionally breaking the vase, where Jack intentionally and maliciously broke the vase).

The compensation principle doesn't seem to pick up on a steadfast moral principle, rather it strikes me that it's best understood as a rule of thumb to govern appropriate responses to either advertent or inadvertent harm.

*The Compensation Principle** - When an agent *a* causes a harm to another agent *b*, *a* incurs an *ad hoc* moral obligation to compensate *b* for said harm if and only if (i) it is possible to compensate *b*, (ii) *b* did not act in such a way as to deliberately allow *a* to harm *b*, and (iii) compensating *b* does not constitute an overwhelming burden to *a*.

Rather than dealing with moral obligations at large, this principle is concerned with *ad hoc* moral obligations, understood here as moral obligations dealing with compensating harm to others. Immoral actions might also produce additional moral obligations unrelated to compensating either actual or possible harm. Here I've introduced qualification (i) to ensure that this principle is compatible with CP. Furthermore, because a moral principle should not encourage or incentivize immoral actions, (ii) prevents unscrupulous shopkeepers from placing their vases precariously on the edge of tables under the sign "You break it, you bought it." Finally, (iii) strikes me as a reasonable limitation to account for cases like this:

The expensive vase - Jack volunteers to water his neighbor's plants, and after he does so, he notices his neighbor's have a nice looking vase. Upset at the volume of plants he has to water, he willfully and maliciously takes his frustrations out on the vase, throwing against the wall, shattering it. He immediately regrets his actions, giving into his frustration, and offers to replace it when his neighbors come home. His neighbors tell him the vase costs more than Jack makes in a decade.

My intuition is that in this case Jack is morally blameworthy for his action, but despite his moral intuition that he should compensate his neighbors, he lacks a moral obligation to do so because to compensate them for the broken vase would constitute a significant burden to Jack vastly disproportionate to his immoral action. Even if Jack acted to destroy the vase knowing it was expensive, and to purposely deprive his neighbors of the vase, my intuition is he would not have even an *ad hoc* moral obligation to replace the vase. In such cases, full compensation would be too much of a moral burden. However, it strikes me that in some cases, full compensation might be insufficient. When Jack breaks his neighbor's cheap lawn gnome, he might incur the obligation to replace it, but he might be obligated to do more as well.

The Compensation Principle

What makes an action morally wrong is its epistemic nature - actions done intentionally to cause harm, or without regard to the welfare of others are *prima facie* wrong, and their wrongness can be directly traced back to the beliefs and desires the agent acted on and with. It is unsurprising that malicious or negligent actions can have actual, harmful consequences. However, as illustrated by the difference in harm between the priceless vase case and the plain vase case, the consequences of one's actions are not necessarily, or even often, reflective of the immorality of the action in question - in both cases, Jack acts immorally, and Jill morally, and yet both cause harm, and far different harm in the former case than the latter. To tie moral responsibility, or even *ad hoc* moral obligations such as the ones the compensation principle deals with, to the actual value of a contingently replaceable item would be both arbitrary and, in cases like the expensive vase case, inappropriately harsh. Keep in mind the interpretation of the principle I sketch above would create moral obligations for agents, like Jill, who are entirely morally blameless for the harm their actions cause.

The compensation principle is an odd moral principle, reflecting our moral desire to not harm others, rather than offering a substantive account of what makes an agent blameworthy or praiseworthy for their actions. Compensating victims is not a get-out-of-jail-free card, as Boonin's interpretation might lead one to believe; rather the obligation to compensate others for the harms one causes seems to come more out of fear and disgust at the harms themselves, rather than being a form of moral penance. Jill offers to replace the plain vase not because she broke it, but because she is sorry that it was broken. Jack ought to offer to replace the plain vase to lessen the actual harm created by his independently blameworthy action. To fail to do so is to fail to appreciate the harm caused - and this would be an additional, separate moral failing on Jack's part, independent from his blameworthy actions.

2. On the Compensation Argument

For Boonin, the compensation principle serves as the backbone for what he calls the compensation argument:

The Compensation Argument

1. *Boonin's Compensation Principle* - If a party wrongfully harms someone, that party incurs a moral obligation to compensate that someone.
2. The United States government wrongfully harmed past generations of black people by allowing slavery and discrimination.
3. These harms continue to harm black Americans today.
4. The government's obligation has not been met, and persists. (53-54)

Conclusion:

Therefore, the United States government has a moral obligation to provide compensation to currently living black Americans.

Before evaluating this argument, it'll be useful to evaluate two, simpler arguments that Boonin might have advocated immediately after the abolition of slavery.

The Individual Compensation Argument

1. *Boonin's Compensation Principle*
2. Slavers, slave owners, and many individuals wrongfully harmed current and past generations of black people by enslaving them and treating them as property rather than with the respect they deserve.

Conclusion:

Therefore, these individuals have a moral obligation to compensate *at least*¹ current generations of former-slaves for the harms committed.

The Government Compensation Argument

1. *Boonin's Compensation Principle*
2. The United States government wrongfully harmed current and past generations of black people by slavery and discrimination.

Conclusion:

Therefore, the government has a moral obligation to compensate *at least* current generations of former-slaves for the harms committed.²

Which of these arguments is more persuasive? It strikes me that the former is more persuasive than the latter - Slave owners uncontroversially owed a substantial moral debt to their former slaves, and this is a debt so massive that it cannot be fully paid. There is no adequate compensation for slavery; retroactively paying slaves even the most generous of wages would fail to adequately compensate them for the loss of their autonomy.

The unforgivable and uncompensatable nature of slavery serves to remind us that Boonin's compensation principle is false because of its inconsistency with CP and OICP. Slave owners can't adequately compensate slaves for the harms inflicted on them, therefore they can't have the obligation to do so! There is another principle that might offer a better explanation of the slave owners' obligations:

¹ Proponents of this argument would advocate for some form of compensation for previous generations as well; however with regards to evaluating this argument I will set aside this issue because it's not clear how such compensation would work.

² Note that the government did attempt to provide some former slaves with some compensation, but this was clearly woefully inadequate compensation given the grievous injustices of slavery and discrimination.

The Compensation Principle

The Theft Principle - When a steals x from b , x belongs to b , not a . x , and/or all proceeds derived from x belongs to b , not a .

The rationale for the theft principle is clear - it is uncontroversially true that stolen property does not become the property of the thief, regardless of how it looks to ignorant third party observers. Theft can be understood as unjust restriction of access to the personal property of others. Second, it is uncontroversially morally true that moral principles should never incentivize immoral activity. If proceeds from ill gotten gains belonged to the thief, the thief would have practical incentives to steal and invest wisely. When caught such a thief could return the stolen goods, offer herself up for punishment, and then walk away with the proceeds.³ The theft principle builds in the idea that proceeds, too, belong to the victim - there is no more appropriate party to benefit than the wronged party.

Slavery includes the theft of the slave's labor and property. This leads to the following argument:

The Theft Argument

1. *The Theft Principle*
2. Slavers and slave owners stole the labor and property of black persons.

Conclusion:

Therefore, these individuals do not own the goods they stole, nor do they own the wealth built on the back of these goods. Their former slaves own this wealth.

The theft argument strikes me as a more plausible argument than the individual compensation argument, if only because it is consistent with CP and OICP. Nothing can properly compensate former slaves for the harms that have been inflicted on them, but it is at least fair to recognize that their tormenters do not own the property they claim to own, and to return fair access to this property to the former-slaves it was stolen from, or built from.

It would have been relatively easy to follow through with the conclusion of the theft argument when slavery was abolished. Unfortunately, however, property rightfully owned by many former slaves was not returned. Applying the theft principle today is more challenging since neither slave owners or former slaves are still alive.

Boonin's compensation argument is designed to show how the debt in question has not been swept away by the ravages of time. First, he contends, like in the government compensation argument, that the government has an obligation to those harmed by their unjust social practices. Second, he

³ A similar argument can be made for the moral support of abortion in rape cases.

contends that the present day economic inequality of black Americans compared to white Americans is the result of slavery, past discrimination, and the failure to appropriately compensate past generations of black Americans.

Boonin contends that the relative lack of welfare for black Americans today is evidence that they have been harmed by the government. (17) The analysis seems to go something like this - if past black persons had been adequately compensated for slavery, they would have likely had substantially more wealth to pass on to future generations. Thus, the United States government has harmed present day black Americans by failing to compensate past generations whose wealth they would inherit, and thus depriving them of the wellbeing they would likely have had if the government had acted morally. What is odd about this position is that it *seems* to say that children are morally entitled to the wealth of their parents, but surely this is not correct.

More troubling, though, is the rationale Boonin has for the origin of the government's debt. He contends that a government has wrongfully harmed a party if the harm is a foreseeable consequence of the government's social policies - in this case, the government allowed slavery, and allowed discrimination, and thus is morally culpable for that. According to the compensation principle, the government incurs a substantial moral debt - the debt to repay *all* injustices that were legally committed by its citizens. Set aside, for a moment, the tremendous moral debt from slavery, Native American relocation, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and various laws and practices that currently, or in the past, allowed for discrimination against women or any other group based off of arbitrary social practices. Consider the harm created by the government's protection of free speech. It is uncontroversially true that allowing free speech causes substantive moral harms - for example, sexist and racist attitudes are often affirmed, and these views can contribute to significant social inequality as well as provoke moral outrage. However, it is equally uncontroversially true that free speech plays an important social regulatory role, and that to infringe upon it is to cause far worse injustices. Boonin's application of the compensation principle to the government would hold it accountable for the harms created as a result of free speech, despite the moral righteousness of allowing free speech. As such, Boonin's compensation principle would be at odds with the PAB - he would hold that the government can act in a morally responsible manner, and still be morally blameworthy for the negative consequences of its justified action.

One might object that the government doesn't wrongfully harm people through free speech, individual speakers do. The problem is that the same can be said for slavery laws - the government doesn't wrongfully harm individuals by allowing slavery, the slavers wrongfully harm those

The Compensation Principle

individuals. What makes the pro-slavery laws unjust is not that people are harmed by their existence; it's that they are laws that allow other people to act in blatantly immoral ways, usurping the liberty and property of others without fear of prosecution or penalty. Such laws would be unjust even if no one in the United States had ever owned slaves.

Finally, even if you were persuaded by Boonin's compensation argument, I've argued that the compensation principle is inconsistent with our most foundational moral principles - CP and OICP. Even the revised compensation principle I advocated in the previous section would fail to show that the government owes the substantial economic debt Boonin's argument would imply the government owes to black, Japanese, Native, women, and disabled Americans, among others.

There is hope, though, for reparations-advocates. The conclusion of the theft argument is that slavers and slave owners did not own their ill-gotten gains. If this is true, they could not morally bequeath them onto their heirs. This suggests that a good portion of the wealth owned by descendants of slave owners rightfully belongs to past generations of slaves. Because the past generations of black Americans would probably have passed it on to their families, it seems fair to recognize that ownership of this wealth rightfully belongs to their relatives. Note, though, that because one is not blameworthy for the actions of their ancestors, it may be inappropriate to give the proceeds subsequent generations have made on the back of this ill-gotten wealth to the ancestors of the slaves in question. Instead, it seems fair that the wealthy heirs of former slave-owning families should pay a modest, *ad hoc* interest on the money they inadvertently borrowed. To recognize the appropriate ownership of wealth in such cases will likely cause strife to the wealthy descendants of slave owners, but the injustice to them was done on the part of their ancestors who wrongfully deeded them what did not belong to them.

It is worth noting that the wealth that should be returned to the families of former slaves is far from being adequate compensation for slavery - there can be no compensation for such a horrible crime, and the returning of this wealth would do little to rectify the social inequalities that have resulted from slavery and discrimination. However, this should not come as a surprise, as immoral actions tend to create harm. Acting in accordance with the theft principle doesn't negate all of the harms caused by the injustices black Americans have faced - it only returns whatever it can to rightful owners.

Conclusion

Here I've argued that Boonin's compensation principle is inconsistent with the control principle, creating a moral obligation that in many cases can never be paid. According to Boonin's compensation argument, the evidence that the

United States has not properly compensated black Americans for slavery is their relative lack of welfare compared to white Americans - but even elevating black Americans to well beyond the economic status of white Americans would fail to adequately compensate these people for the injustices they and previous generations have faced. Such injustices taint America's history, and reparations of the kind Boonin advocates are insufficient, inappropriate, and misplaced. However, the theft principle offers a commonsense approach to dealing with one particular injustice that is a result of slavery - the theft of the labor and other property by slave owners. By returning these goods, and the financial successes built upon these goods, to the descendants of former slaves, one acknowledges the property rights of black Americans in their person and labor. The moral blight of slavery can never be removed from the history of the United States, but the continued denial that former slaves owned the fruits of their labor can, and should, be ceased.

References

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