

## I

## MODERN MORALS

## I

A remarkably intelligent woman of little means is in love with a talented man of equally few means and no prospects. Both are eager for what a life of wealth will make possible for them. (Great wealth will of course make possible what it always has: a certain kind of freedom – power. But in the modern, secular, competitive society that they inhabit, the prospects for an interesting or even minimally free life without means are rapidly dwindling.) They meet a dying, very young American heiress, herself already infatuated with the young man. The woman conceives the idea that her boyfriend should pursue and marry the heiress. When she dies, after he inherits her fortune, they will then be free to marry; they will have their great wealth and their good life. No one will be hurt.

The plan almost works. But the heiress learns that her new friend and her supposed lover are engaged. In bitter disappointment, she “turns her face to the wall,” to life itself, and succumbs to her illness. But before dying, she makes an extraordinary bequest, leaving the young man a fortune, despite everything. The young man, who has never been enthusiastic about the deception, cannot, he says, simply now take the money and execute the plan. Instead, he proposes to his fiancée that they return the fortune and marry “as they were.” But both seem to realize, and the fiancée ends the novel by asserting, that they cannot ever be “as they were.” Acting as if no great moral complication would shadow their life is apparently unacceptable to Merton Densher; but accepting such a complication and the need to redeem themselves puts the fiancée, Kate Croy, in the wrong, would thereby change everything in their relationship, and would make

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any marriage of equal respect and mutual authority impossible. The money, it seems, is in some way morally unacceptable to him, and stands between them in a morally significant sense. Returning it is for him an attempt at expiation, the only way they can at least try to set things right.

So it would seem. The question of the meaning of Densher's renunciation of Milly Theale's bequest and its role in our overall judgment of what has happened turn out to be quite complicated. For one thing, the fiancée plausibly disagrees with this interpretation of the act (as an attempt to set them right again; as if it can prove something, retrospectively, about their motives then or their status now). She thinks it is only motivated by love, not morality; it is a way of keeping faith with a memory he has fallen in love with, of proving that his motives had become finally purer, not merely deceptive. (The fiancée has all along been clever at interpretations that avoid the weight of moral judgments, so we immediately suspect the motives behind her criticism. Despite this, this may be the right reading of Densher; it may also be the best defense she could make to his implied charge; it may be both.) A reader might also see the young man's proposal as an attempt to reject a woman he has fallen out of love with, perhaps as an expression of contempt for what she has come to stand for, perhaps a way of asserting a kind of power over her that he had lost in her grand plan. It (not taking the money) is also disconcertingly consistent with his all-too-passive behavior throughout, with his (disastrous, failed) attempts merely to "keep still" and thereby, he seems to have hoped, to avoid the entanglements his very passivity only deepens. This renunciation might be only a last, consistent act of self-deceit in a whole series. In such a context, with so many very plausible possible psychological interpretations of his rejection of the fortune available, a natural question would be whether that act could ever be said to be rightly understood primarily in moral terms (his or anyone's), whether there ever genuinely are such moral motivations, or, if there are, whether the principles acted on or the good sought is real, has some real claim on us (or is only and always a psychologically valuable weapon). Although such moral considerations are often spoken of as idealizations, what we ought to aspire to base conduct on, even if never unqualifiedly a motive force in action, the other possibilities seem so much more real. The moral dimension and a possible moral motive, without a religious foundation or much resonance left in the world they live in, with so many powerful psychological and self-interested forces at work, seem by

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contrast always suspicious, as if more a convenient afterthought than the center of things. (And Densher is a man who often invites such suspicion.)

Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* is, of course, a novel, and James is known as a novelist of manners – an analytical, psychological novelist. So, its being wrong to have deceived and manipulated Milly Theale looks at first like something that seems wrong (in whatever sense it does) to Merton Densher (and especially and interestingly, not to Kate Croy), a *donnée* within his mental and emotional life, of importance in James's brilliant treatment of what such an experience would mean for a man like that, and why, under what psychological conditions, it would take place.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, because the novelist in question is James, it is likely that we are also being presented with a more ambitious treatment, one wherein the possibility and meaning of that evaluation itself (its being wrong) is also being explored, that James wants us to see what other gears in a complex life that particular wheel turns (let us say, provisionally, in this case, one's entitlement to treatment as a free subject, to a life that is one's own) and what goes missing, disengages, and disrupts other gears, if it is missing or broken. This would involve a way of showing what makes the act wrong, would express in a literary way views about the nature of Milly's entitlement not to be so treated.

There is, of course, no particular reason that Henry James need have such larger views, or that they need play some role in the aesthetic dimensions of the novels. There is no particular reason such views, if they exist, should be independently interesting, apart from our aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment. And the notion of "views" is itself very ambiguous; everything is only implied in how characters explain and defend themselves, and in what ways our sympathies and judgments seem to tip and turn in the face of such evidence about motives and purposes. And the novels have all sorts of exemplary aesthetic and formal virtues on their own. But in some sense, James does have such views, and they are quite interesting.

The former is likely, for one thing, because the theme itself – deception (and a host of related faults: lying, promise breaking, egotism) and the nature of our experience of such things as wrong (or the problem of what is in some way lacking when it is not experienced as wrong) – is at the center of interest in his greatest works. The problem of such a judgment – the problem of its possibility and meaning and authority in such a secular, non-religious, self-interested society – simply seems to have fascinated him.

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This is already clear in the way Densher's reaction is described. What Densher seems to experience at the end of *The Wings of the Dove* is not just a feeling of deep sympathy with Milly, or a worry about his reputation, or long-term concerns about what treatment of him under such a principle would be like. He does not just realize that "one doesn't do such things," that he hasn't "gone on" as "they do." Milly, he comes to realize, simply as an individual subject with her own life to lead, just *was* entitled to considerations she did not receive, and so was treated wrongly. Likewise, the "deceived heiresses" in *Washington Square*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Golden Bowl*, and other works are his paradigmatic characters not just because of the melodramatic, fairy-tale, and mythic possibilities such a type opens up, but because the phenomenon allows him to raise for his readers the question of the moral reaction without which the novels would not work aesthetically in the first place, would not create the allegiances and revulsions necessary for our engagement. (There always being such a question, though, and its being so difficult, the possibility that such judgments are vestigial or sentimental or finally empty is partly why the moral issues do not just ring down some judgmental curtain at the finale, didactically or programmatically. Offstage, James is more scratching his head, let us say, than wagging his finger.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see, that complexity and tenuousness have their own moral dimension.)<sup>3</sup> The same (intense attention and the question of possibility) is true in many other permutations on the issue of deception and lying (for example, the narrator's falseness in *The Aspern Papers*) or the frequent themes of sacrifice, renunciation, forgiveness, and the problem of "goodness" in characters like Christopher Newman, Fleda Veatch, Isabel, Milly, and Strether.

In other words, James is as aware as we are nowadays that moral categories can be ideological, reflections of the requirements and interests of social position and power, or can be understood psychologically, as a reflection of needs and desires and especially anxieties, never a part of but always behind and motivating the great work of interpretive consciousness that is so much his theme. Moral categories are often and just weapons in this sense. But this is certainly not always or exclusively so in James's fiction, and he also has something to show us about the nature of the moral claim itself, the subjects who cannot but make use of it, the social and historical world within which it fits, and its unique indispensability in an unprecedented historical transition.<sup>4</sup>

This last, historical dimension is quite important and, until recently,

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somewhat neglected in criticism on James.<sup>5</sup> In exploring such a “moral reaction” (like Densher’s), in trying to figure out its status, what makes it possible and effective, James wants to frame the problem in a self-consciously historical and social way. His own characterizations of this “epochal” problem make it reasonable, though a bit grand and somewhat too abstract to be Jamesean, to designate it within the complex of issues usually summarized as the problem of Western modernization. That is, as with most novelists, morality is first of all treated by James as a matter of mores, and that means as a matter of essentially social and historically specific practices, institutions, and largely implicit rules and expectations. And the reactions and judgments he is interested in belong in a certain new historical world (and uniquely in that world). What is most distinctive about this emerging new form of life is apparent immediately: While these individuals always represent and evince aspects of their social position, the interrelation and meaning of such social positions, functions, roles, the depth of meaning in convention and tradition, and so on, do not any longer provide these characters, in this increasingly anomic and disunified social world, with much of a basis for interpretation and assessment. Types and kinds and classes and social position and “blood” and family and races and institutions and social forms and even appeals to “human nature” will no longer function in making possible such mutual understanding, and neither will too hasty a reduction of possible motives to some set of the low, the base, the selfish, or the “natural.” (In James’s mythic landscape, the name for such a collapse of the reliability of traditional form, such uncertainty and new vacancy as well as radical possibility, is simply “America.”)

In this context, James presents his characters as having a very difficult time simply trying to understand what they most need to understand in order to make such evaluations – that is, their own and others’ intentions or motives, the right description of the action itself: broadly, the meaning of their own and others’ acts and interactions. It is extraordinarily difficult for them to do this precisely because so much of what had made possible such interpretation – the conventions and background assumptions, forms of life in general – has lost a great deal of its cultural authority, at least for the characters James examines, leaving only a kind of void or vacancy. (Here, James’s views parallel many others’ for whom modernization is a kind of trauma and disorienting loss, not mainly a liberation and discovery.) Precisely what makes necessary understanding an individual somewhat abstractly, even theoretically, as an “agent” or “person” – the unre-

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liability of or lack of common authority for fixed, predictable social norms, the lack of authority for any presumed common good or goods sought by anyone – also makes that attempt intensely problematic. There is often very little to rely on, little way to predict, expect, assume, little basis even for a minimum trust, little clarity about what a “person” is or can be expected to do.

Without much reliability and coordination in mutual expectations and commitments, the question of whether a young man’s dalliance in Europe with an older married woman is acceptable or not, the question of just how to describe what he is doing, becomes more and more elusive. The same is even true for Kate Croy’s clearly manipulative and deceptive plan, since James also invests a great deal of space convincing us that she is likely the most complex, socially capable, and intelligent character in the novel. (She is representative too: “She was just the contemporary London female, highly modern, inevitably battered, honorably free” *WD*, 40.<sup>6</sup>) Whatever anyone in such a context might settle on as a meaning and evaluation of such an adventure or such a character would have to fit in, play some expanded role in a structure or network of commitments and inferences shared by others, would have to be recognizable by others as right because it could then play some consistent, regular role in further expectations, accounts, and assessments. Such understandings and evaluations must play some role in a whole of some sort if they are to be possible at all. If there isn’t much of such a commonality, or if what there is is arbitrary, vestigial, narrow-minded, and inadequate to all it must deal with, if the traditional authority of conventional classifications has begun to break down (“he’s been seduced by a fortune hunter,” “he’s sowing his wild oats,” “he’s neglecting his responsibilities at home,” “she is a selfish egoist,” “he is a self-deceived weakling”), then everything, at least to characters of insight and awareness, is left unresolved and indefinite. Hence the constant question that is made so explicit in the ghost, secret, and mystery tales: Am I imagining this (this ascribed meaning or intention or possibility or presence) or is it there?

Of course, being able to distinguish dedication to one’s work from greed or egoism, or being able to distinguish concern for a friend from nosiness and manipulation, can often be difficult in any context. But things are much more difficult when the various social conventions and assumptions and traditional categories that might have helped one think through and explore such questions are unavailable; when questions like what one owes

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a parent or a child, or what it is to marry, or what keeping faith with an old friend whose child seems to need saving amounts to, must all, it seems, be confronted in some historical void, as if anew, on the sole basis of one's sensibility, taste, and especially on the basis of the interchanges and conversations with others; when there is no fixed, agreed-on predictability about such things, only confusion about what examples, paradigm cases, further implications, and so on could be called on to explain and think through such questions. In the modern world described by James, being able to settle on some interpretation cannot now be like discovering some hidden fact of the matter, finding some "truth-maker" in the social and psychological world, even when the fact might be something like "what we think (used to think) about such things." (There is no longer such a "we.") What it (some settling of interpretive possibilities and judgment) is like forms my question in the following. Given the way James presents his historical assumptions about modernity, and given the manifest uncertainties and absences in that world, why isn't James a moral skeptic? What does he think still makes what Densher and Croy do wrong?

## II

This resistance to skepticism, I want to show, is an extremely suggestive response on James's part. His response raises questions both about the nature of the problem as he sees it and the degree of his worry.

In the first place, he introduces what look like a number of serious doubts about various central elements of the moral point of view. Many of these have to do with the uncertainties and unavoidable vagueness of the human condition, uncertainties that mean that even with the best of will, we simply cannot often evaluate or reason well about a possible course of action, cannot come to terms with it until well into the future, and then only retrospectively. These are not considerations the moral point of view usually takes much account of, holding people instead to strict account for the maxims and motives they acted on, however limited and finite the conditions of understanding. To have acted well in a moral sense is usually understood to have acted with the proper sort of deliberation (or attempt at deliberation) and proper attempt at justification. (This is particularly true of one form of justification: justifiability to all those affected by one's deeds, or adopting an impartial criterion that does not privilege one's own case.) This means, among many other things, to have taken the proper

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account of the results of one's conduct on others (whether in the sense of the brute consequences or in terms of the entitlements of others), to have estimated the value and ill effects of those results, and to have evaluated a course of conduct undertaken now with respect to those future effects and implications and with proper regard to whether we can justify our bringing about those results to those whose lives we change. Anything that might occur because of what I did, but not because of what I intended to do, is regarded as exempt from moral blame.

As Bernard Williams especially has shown,<sup>7</sup> this can present a severe and inhumane picture of what we can claim to stand apart from. Moreover, deeper into the problem as Williams sees it, we, as moralists, often tend to exaggerate the extent of the future events we can anticipate, we presume a capacity to justify what we propose to do in the present on the basis of unrealistic assumptions about our control and knowledge of the future, and, especially, we discount unfairly the ways in which chance future events can affect or effectively determine our sense of what was, or would have been, justified.

These sorts of worries about contingencies in how we determine what is justifiable or not – and so therefore about the role of “moral luck” – are frequently raised in James, and are clearly part of his worry about the rigidity and judgmental rigor of the moral point of view. Kate and Merton consider and justify their actions and plans one way on the assumption that Milly will die before any part of Kate's plan is revealed. And James clearly wants us to consider – especially by making Kate's predicament so sympathetic – what everything would have looked like if Milly *had* died before she found out about them, and perhaps even died blissfully happy and content with Merton. (Of course, the fact that the plan had to be kept secret reveals that their susceptibility to such moral luck, and their attempt to avoid or deny this fact, is not the only thing wrong with it.) The same worry arises in Isabel's retrospective analysis of what she could or should have known about Osmond (much of which she could only have known after having married him), or in the open-ended question of Chad in *The Ambassadors*. (We just won't know how valuable his dalliance will be for some time, and acting as if there is no question about that, as if we know with moral certainty that he ought to return home and keep to his obligations, makes clear what the rigorism objection to morality amounts to.)

These issues and the doubts they raise about the putative “uncon-



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ditionality” of moral evaluation are familiar enough in many novels. (Williams’s example is a fine one: Anna Karenina and how much the question of whether she would have been in any way justified is affected by what happens later, events she could not have anticipated when she had to decide.) But in some ways, James’s worries go even deeper. Not only does he appreciate how much justification and evaluation has to be post facto (something that, given the great, uncontrollable contingency of future events, decreases our confidence about what we can hold people to and blame them for when they decide ex ante). But there also appears to be considerable skepticism about the terms of the analysis itself, about any determinacy in the meaning of such terms, or in our being able to assure ourselves that we share such terms of evaluation and share some sense of their claim on us. It is one thing to have to wait to see what will happen to Chad before we can know whether what he is putting his family through was worth it (and to have to make a decision about that beforehand, in such uncertainty); it is another to suspect an indeterminacy and unreliability in the issue of what his being better off might amount to at all, how it might ever be able to count for us as being better off. When we ask about, are prompted by disagreements and misconceptions with others to raise questions about, the content of the judgment that Strether is trying to form – is Chad better off – or when we ask about “what” Maggie is trying to save in trying to “save her marriage” or what the harm is that would have been done to Milly had she not known, we are asking, among other things, about the “circulability” or “shareability” of normative terms, whether such assessments can be given and accepted as reasons or justifications in a community whose members are committed to the authority of such notions but must sometimes interpret and apply them in altered circumstances.

This would all be clearly possible if we all, with various degrees of insight and distortion, “saw,” or came to know something about, the same objective qualities and states of being in the universe, some of them moral qualities, and so could share such assessments in the way we share knowledge (or fail to share them because of distortions and ignorance, along the model of “missed” opportunities to know). But James seems to have more idealist views about the reality of these moral terms (more on this in a moment), seems more inclined to make them depend somehow (for their sense and authority) on the communities that institute such commitments

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and sustain them, and that finally begin to alter, shift, abandon, and revise these commitments, often not collectively or all at once, but in confusing periods of transition and renegotiation.

We are – I believe that James believes – in one of the most confusing and complex periods of such transition, but, as already indicated, he does not believe that this means we just don't know what we're about, have lost any shareable assessments, and should be moral skeptics. We might be such skeptics if we held that all such moral assessments depended on several fixed assumptions and principles. Williams often raises doubts about “morality” when morality is understood in some such way – as a futile attempt to transcend and master luck, to put myself in a position where I cannot later be blamed because I took care of all that was in my power to take care of, my deliberation and my own intentions, and so tried to act without privileging my point of view, impartially, as any rational agent, counted equally, one among many. This might, Williams often argues, solve the moral luck and indeterminacy problems by fitting all deliberation into a model almost designed to resolve just such anxieties, but it also leaves me wondering what this stance might have to do with me or my agency, or why I should care about or be committed to such a model or how the relationship between moral and non-moral deliberation should (could ever) be understood.<sup>8</sup>

But taking others into account, giving them their due, need not involve adopting, somewhat mysteriously, some impartial and so alienated a point of view. In the cases that James explores and that will be the focus in the following, the worries about contingency and indeterminacy (which James treats as historical phenomena, ever more a part of the modern social world) need not prompt some attempt at methodological purification, a reaction that looks to impartiality and an assessment tied to a strict attention to an agent's own reasons at a time for acting. The nature of others' claims on me might not be linked so to the requirements of justification and reason, some requirement of impartiality and universality just so that it *be* reasoning. As I suggested earlier, this altered situation of indeterminacy and contingency might itself reveal an altered social state, one wherein those claims are experienced differently, mean something new, are more directly necessary for me to lead my own life, to give it sense, to assess, and judge.<sup>9</sup> The key issue in morality might not be the rational justifiability with which I treat others, but the proper acknowledgment of, and enactment of, a dependence on others without which the process of