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Frederick A. Olafson

I

At the present time, any inquiry into the relationship between literature and morality is likely to go forward, as do so many other matters in our intellectual and public life, under the auspices of some conception of "values." Whether the universal currency of this notion means that its import is well understood and can therefore be presupposed without any prior scrutiny is, of course, another matter. I suspect that this may not in fact be the case and that inquiries in which an unexamined notion of values plays a significant role will typically yield results that are at best problematic. At least one thing about values does seem reasonably plain, though, and that is that, as they are now generally understood, they always *belong* to someone. In literary contexts, the person to whom they belong may be the author or the narrator or the characters of a fiction or even the reader. Whoever it is, that person's values are thought of as something that he brings along with him and projects upon the various situations with which he has to deal. These situations are thereby construed in terms of an order of preferability and importance that is supposed to express what that person would be disposed to do and not do in them. In the more sociological variants of this conception, such values are typically assumed to be shared with the members of at least some social grouping, and a measure of compatibility in the responses of different people to a given situation is thus assured. When the concept of values takes on a more Nietzschean cast, however, there is no presumption of such compatibility, and the fact that a value is shared may even suggest that its espousal by a given individual is something less than an authentic exercise of a capacity for generating values that are uniquely one's own. What both these conceptions have in common is the notion that the situations on which these values—shared as well as idiosyncratic—are brought to bear are initially indeterminate with respect to any distinction between those features that are to count more and those that count less or not at all. It is, therefore, only as a result of applying some set of values to these situations that anything in them becomes good or bad,

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right or wrong. At the same time, since these distinctions have to be spelled out in terms of the values of a particular individual for which no more general warrant can be assumed, a given situation may be evaluated in quite different ways without there being any prospect of a resolution of the resulting conflict that could claim any more general validity than the original partisan construals could.

When we discuss the question of literature and morality against the background of assumptions like these, certain things are fairly predictable. The writer who takes moral distinctions seriously will very likely be understood to have imported them as his values into the imaginary situations he presents. If, as is likely, there are people in those imaginary situations who do not conform to the standards of judgment that the author applies to them, however implicitly and delicately, the contemporary critic and reader may well conclude that the author's values have been imposed on these people and on occasion may even declare their solidarity with the attitudes and implied values that have thus been overridden. If it is suggested that perhaps not all values are equivalent and that there may therefore be some nonarbitrary basis for judgments on what characters do and do not do, the reply is likely to be that any such claim is ideological in character and, as such, simply a concealed and disingenuous attempt to impose what are really (and can only be) the values of a particular person or group. There is no universal moral consciousness and there is therefore no moral truth, and literature and the study of literature must accustom themselves to this state of affairs.

It is a fact worth noting that views of this kind, which are now widely accorded the status of axioms, are hardly the profound new insights they are often taken to be. They are in fact the theses about morality of the positivism of fifty years ago. It is not possible here to show how crude many of these positivist theses have proved to be on closer examination, but it may be helpful to point out an implication of such views as these that does not always receive the attention it deserves. This implication has to do with the relationships in which one human being stands to another when acting to bring about whatever it is that he or she values. If the values of each such person are in principle completely independent of those of others, it may happen, as I have noted, that these values agree in such a way as to make common judgments and cooperative work possible. In general, however, the presence in our field of action of other human beings with various value attitudes will have no relevant significance for our action that is different from that of any other conditions that may have a bearing on our being able to achieve what we want. Of course, if one of our values happens to be such as to attach special importance to the way other people and their values are treated, there will in such a case be special self-imposed inhibitions governing our conduct vis-à-vis those persons. But inasmuch as this will depend entirely upon a value attitude on our part that is itself contingent, one can say that the same means-ends considerations that govern our action in pursuit of our (valued)

ends will also apply to other human beings insofar as they facilitate or get in the way of whatever it is that we are trying to bring about. What this comes to is that all our relationships to other human beings and all our ways of acting toward them will be "strategic" in the sense of being governed by considerations of means-ends effectiveness of the same type that apply elsewhere.

My use of this word should not be understood as implying that all the conduct it applies to is necessarily coldhearted or Machiavellian, and it is in any case clear that in certain circumstances there need be nothing morally objectionable about using for our own purposes knowledge that we have about other people's intentions and desires. If, however, the use we make of that knowledge is such as to affect the interests of the person in question in some significant way, a purely strategic line of conduct on our part would raise moral questions. The relevant point here is simply that from the standpoint of what I am calling strategic action the condition of publicity and the mutuality achieved in concordant judgments on matters affecting the interests of the parties concerned do not have any privileged status in relation to the concept of value itself. It follows from this that if there do prove to be any more demanding forms of reciprocity among human beings, these can only be contingent applications of a concept of value that is itself constituted independently of any such requirement of reciprocity. As such—that is, as values in this sense—they will express an attitude or preference on the part of those who espouse them and will have no claim to any obligatory acceptance on the part of anyone else.

There is another very different conception of the way relationships to other human beings figure within ethical life.[1] Although its origins lie well back in the history of ethical theory—at least as far back as Kant—it has been formulated more recently in a way that places primary emphasis on the nexus that exists at a very deep level between the ethical and the communicative and thus social dimension of our lives. This is not, however, the kind of nexus between morality and our social natures that is familiar to us in the form of theories of the cultural or social determination of the values that any given individual espouses. As has already been noted, such theories are variants of the very conception of

1. The best known representatives of this position at present are Jürgen Habermas and K. O. Apel. The classic analysis of the way obligations of this kind work is still that of Kant, especially in his *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1949). For all its great merits, the weakness of the Kantian analysis is that it is carried out at a purely logical—and this means also a purely monological—level that does not permit a sense of the dialogical context of justification to emerge at all distinctly. This context is what the work of Habermas and Apel is designed to bring out, but so far it has done so mainly in a way that bears on the large-scale justification of institutional practices of various kinds and not on relationships between individual human beings. A book by a scholar of literature rather than of philosophy that seems to me to cast a good deal of light on these matters, especially in their relation to literature, is Wayne Booth's *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

values about which I want to raise questions, and they simply predict what those values will be on the basis of various indicators like class, educational level, and so on. The focus of the view I have in mind is not empirical correlations of this kind but rather what, for lack of a better word, we must call the logical constraints that are entailed by communicative relationships as such. These constraints are particularly evident in cases of lying and promise breaking where it can be shown that, if these forms of conduct are to be possible at all, those who are involved in them must already stand in a kind of partnership relation to one another. This relation is one that rests on implicit understandings on both sides that are such as to block any easy evasion of the demand for justification when there is a violation on one side or the other. The hypothesis about morality generally that is developed from these relatively unambiguous cases is that analogous forms of constraint can be shown to obtain through a wide range of relationships among human beings that in one way or another rest on communication and on the kind of mutuality that communication entails. What such a conception more broadly implies is thus that we are beings whose relations to one another are pervasively mediated by something over which no one of us exercises any exclusive or arbitrary control—something, in other words, that is in this respect very unlike values as they are now conceived. Where that conception postulates a state of affairs in which the "owners" of such values are in principle wholly independent of one another and stand to one another only in what I am calling strategic relationships, the alternative view interprets morality in terms of relationships of a quite different kind. On this view, the moral character of our relationships to one another is not itself derivative from some prior act of independent evaluative legislation for which each of us is responsible. Instead, values as such or at least moral values have to be understood ab initio in terms of the different modalities of which these relationships are susceptible. It is, in other words, these relationships themselves that generate moral values rather than the other way around.

This very brief characterization of an alternative in ethical theory to the conception of values outlined above must be allowed to stand for now without further amplification. It is intended as only the most general indication of the quarter in which a corrective for the objectionable features of the latter might be sought. Even in this first approximation, however, it seems evident that if this alternative view is correct, then what it says can hardly be completely new or unfamiliar to us as the beings who stand in these relationships. It seems more reasonable to expect that we would already understand what these relationships in fact require of us and, at least in a rough way, how the constraints they entail work. I want to claim that this is indeed the case and that the implicit understanding that we have of such matters has found expression in imaginative literature and, in an especially noteworthy manner, in the novels of Henry James.

In the main portion of this paper I will be concerned with two of James's novels, and, so, a preliminary word about the reasons for my choice of James for this purpose is in order. First, it is important that although he was the "son and brother" of philosophers, he never gave any sign of a disposition to think in philosophical terms himself. It has even been said of him that "he had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it."[2] The advantage this presents when his work is used as a testing ground for a philosophical thesis about literature is that James himself cannot be suspected of having a stake in any such thesis or of having arranged things in such a way as to provide support for it. At a time like the present when the relationship between philosophy and literature is becoming closer and works of literature are being written from what one can only call a philosophical standpoint, the independence of the one from the other in James's case effects a welcome simplification for the purposes of an inquiry like this one. At the same time, there cannot be any real doubt about the centrality of the moral interest in James's novels. Especially in the great novels of his maturity, it is evident that a powerful moral consciousness is at work and that, although not at all philosophical in character, it is characterized by a degree of coherence and purity in the delineation of the moral element in human relationships that far transcends any normal expectations for the treatment of such matters in a work of imaginative literature. Perhaps as a result of its independence from theoretical reflection, the moral consciousness that presides over these novels by James is in no way obtrusive. It does not call attention to itself and rarely if ever invokes the standard moral predicates of praise and blame. This, too, comes as rather a relief in an age in which it has become customary to run up a warning flag whenever one is about to engage in that solemn ritual—the making of a "value judgment." Interestingly, this abstention from express judgments does not have the effect of calling into question the moral character of the central themes in these novels as one might expect it would. Instead, it seems to intensify it and to give it a centrality and an organic relation to the events being recounted that are very nearly unique.

The novels I will discuss are *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl.* I have chosen these novels not only because they represent James's most highly developed treatment of moral themes but also because they stand in quite complex internal relations to one another that have a special interest for my purposes.[3] For these same purposes it will be

2. *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot,* ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975), p. 151.

3. Although it might seem natural to include *The Ambassadors* in this discussion along with the two other great novels of James's maturity, there is no character in that remarkable book to whose thoughts and intentions we are made privy in the way we are to those of Kate Croy and Maggie Verver and who at the same time illustrates the themes with which I am dealing here. The character of Lambert Strether does offer a study of great interest

necessary to give a somewhat fuller account of the events of these novels and especially of the moral relationships between the people in them than is customary in a philosophical essay. When that account has been presented, I will return to my own philosophical thesis and I will try to show how James's treatment of moral relationships bears on the questions about morality and its status within imaginative literature that I have raised.

II

The novels I have chosen to discuss have many points of similarity to one another, but they are also different in respects that are at least equally important. In each of them, there is a relatively small number of characters, and it is the relationships of these people to one another that are the focus of interest. Some of these relationships are unproblematic, like that of Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove* to Susan Stringham, her older traveling companion, or of Fanny Assingham in *The Golden Bowl* to her husband, Bob. By "unproblematic" here I mean simply that no question arises about the way one of these people treats the other. In almost every other pairing of characters who have some significant relation to one another—even in that of Adam Verver, the American millionaire in *The Golden Bowl,* and his daughter, Maggie—such questions do arise. In both novels, moreover, there is a central relationship—in *The Wings of the Dove,* between Milly Theale and Kate Croy, and, in *The Golden Bowl,* between Maggie Verver and Charlotte Stant—and the relationship in each case is one of friendship between two women. It is of great importance that these friendships are marked by certain disparities and inequalities, and the first and greatest of these is the disparity of means. The great wealth of Milly Theale and, through her father, of Maggie Verver puts a distance between them and their friends who are without means of their own and are quite dependent, therefore, on the hospitality and generosity of others. The other notable disparity is at least partly derivative from this one, and it is a difference in the degree of worldliness of these women. Because Kate Croy and Charlotte Stant live close to the edge, they have come to know the seamy side of things and of people all too well, simply as a matter of survival. It is not surprising, therefore, that a certain hard realism is readily detectable beneath the good looks and genteel manners of these women. Because of their circumstances, Milly Theale and Maggie Verver have not had to acquire that kind of knowledge of the world, and neither seems to expect or to be ready for the unpleasant surprises that life has in store for them. There are other differences

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of the kind of person who, though very unlike these women, has to deal with a situation created by people who are much more like them than he is. But, for all the great interest of such a study as a pendant to the topic I am concerned with in this essay, it was simply not feasible to attempt it here.

between these women as well, notably those that reflect the contrasts between Europe and America that interested James so much. It would be a mistake, however, to exaggerate these to the point of obscuring the fact that for all their differences these young women have a good deal in common. They clearly share a quite conventional conception of social propriety, and there is no hint on the part of any one of them of anything like a critical stance toward, not to speak of a principled dissent from, the code of manners and morals in which they were formed.

In both novels there is an intimate linkage between wealth and sexual love that enters deeply into the motivation of the characters and especially of these pairs of women. Kate Croy wants to marry Merton Densher, but because of his lack of means she cannot do so without condemning both to a life of genteel poverty that might be all too similar to that of her sister, Mrs. Condrip. Charlotte Stant is in love with the Prince, but, again, he cannot consider making his life with her because he has to recuperate his family's fortune. In both cases, James is at great pains to convince the reader of how utterly incompatible the situation and prospects of these women are with their high style and natural affinity for a life at the top. What makes things especially difficult for them is the fact that their friends who are free from their disabilities also fall in love with the men they love. There is thus a very direct and profound conflict between what Kate Croy and Charlotte Stant want most in life and the happiness that their friends project for themselves.

There is another very important element that is common to these situations, and that is the element of knowledge and especially the way it is held and either shared or not shared with others. When Milly Theale who had met Merton Densher in America comes to England and meets him again, she does not know that he has any connection with Kate Croy whom she has just met for the first time. Again, the prior connection between Charlotte Stant and the Prince is unknown to Maggie Verver when she meets and falls in love with him. It is important to see that there is initially nothing about this asymmetry of knowledge between Charlotte and Maggie and between Kate and Milly that would give rise to questions of a moral character about it. It is just a matter of something that the one knows and the other does not. But once a friendship forms between Kate and Milly and once Charlotte not only learns of the prospective marriage of Maggie to the Prince but also decides to be a guest at their wedding, that changes. In order to maintain this asymmetry in these circumstances, it would be necessary to withhold the knowledge that one partner in the friendship has from the other who does not, and in the limiting case it would be necessary to mislead the latter or even lie to her. Even so, this might still not pose any very grave moral issue if the matter with which this knowledge is concerned were simply something in the past—something that would, if revealed, cause pain but that has no other bearing on the present state of things. That, of course, is not the case in either of these situations. Charlotte's feelings for the Prince are still very much alive, and Kate and Merton Densher are still as close

as ever. In these circumstances, both women are confronted with a choice between being open with a friend and doing whatever has to be done to keep the knowledge in question from her. Inescapably, moreover, the fact that this situation also presents an opportunity must be evident to the women who control these bits of knowledge. It is, in other words, possible for them to predict what their friends are likely to do if this knowledge is withheld from them, and, as it happens, what they are likely to do would make it possible for Kate and for Charlotte to get what they want. It is equally clear, of course, that they would in that case get what they want at the expense of the friends whose ignorance, maintained by them, has made this outcome possible. Nevertheless, these opportunities are grasped and fully utilized by both Kate and Charlotte, and in each case it is the decision to do just this that precipitates the central events of the story.

III

For reasons that will be explained in due course, it is much easier to follow the course of action of Kate Croy than it is that of Charlotte Stant. This is made possible by Kate's long, increasingly candid conversations with Merton Densher, her lover and accomplice. From these we learn a great deal about Kate's understanding of the situation in which she acts and of the motives and premises of her actions. In the account she gives of herself, the logic of self-interest as it applies to her very tightly constrained situation is expounded with stunning clarity. The strategy she follows turns on several facts about Milly Theale. She is rich, she is likely to die quite soon, and she is in love with Merton Densher. If she were to marry him, the marriage would necessarily be brief, and on her death her fortune would be left to her husband who would then be free (and financially able) to marry Kate in the proper style. These are indeed very solid facts although it should be noted that Kate has gained her knowledge of the second and the third only in her capacity as the friend that she has encouraged Milly to believe she is. By themselves, however, these facts do not make possible the line of conduct Kate proposes. For that, it is also necessary that Milly be given reason to believe that Kate does not reciprocate Densher's love for her and that the field is therefore open for Milly herself. This is, of course, utterly false and so is the claim of friendship by anyone who would lie in such a matter and especially to anyone as vulnerable as Milly. Still, it is essential to Kate's plan that she artfully maintain Milly's trust in her and thus in her assurances on this point. Only in this way can Kate control Milly's behavior in such a way as to achieve her (Kate's) own ends. This is the strategy to which Kate adheres to the end, and, even when Milly has learned the truth about her feelings for Densher, Kate urges him to try to deceive Milly on this point again.

It has to be acknowledged that in thinking in these strategic terms Kate has a lot of company. Almost as though he wanted to be sure that the reader understands this, James devotes a good deal of attention to

the milieu in which she lives as a result of her dependence on Mrs. Louder and to the moral attitudes and the ways of treating people that are predominant in it. This is the world of fashionable London, and it is a world in which everyone is "working" someone—that is, manipulating or using someone else so as to achieve his or her own ends. For Mrs. Louder and those in the loftier strata to which she aspires, people are in fact rather like saleable commodities that command a certain price, and even the special qualities of a Milly Theale have their value in this market, at least for a season and as long as their novelty does not pall. Whatever these qualities may be (and on this point James may not be wholly convincing), they could not possibly appear in their true light in such a milieu as this where everything is estimated in terms of the social or financial leverage it represents. This, then, is the world in which Kate's life chances will be decided, and she is too intelligent not to see how things work. She is herself accustomed to being regarded as a commodity—an asset at the disposal of Mrs. Louder—by virtue of her beauty and her style, and, though she may not like this way of treating people, she appears to accept it as a law of life. As a result, it would simply not answer to her sense of reality to allow moral scruples to block the exploitation of an opportunity like the one that has come her way through her friendship with Milly Theale.

How then, one may ask, does she regard the moral quality of her own conduct vis-à-vis Milly? The closest the novel comes to any explicit reference to morality is in the conversations between Kate and Densher in which she reveals her strategy to him bit by bit. He is taken aback by the cold-blooded logic of what she proposes and especially by the extremely discreditable role he is being asked to play, and he addresses ironic inquiries to Kate—"What you want of me then is to make up to a sick girl?"—that invite a response from her on the moral point.[4] For the most part, she simply turns these implied challenges aside and the suggestion is that she does not like what they are doing any better than he does. There is simply no alternative. Sometimes, however, she offers something like a justification and argues that she—Kate—is simply making it possible for Milly to believe what she in any case wants to believe and that the result will be at least a measure of the happiness—the "life"—she longs for before she dies. Kate's plan is thus brought under the rubric of "kindness," and that description is what makes it acceptable to Merton Densher who has to carry it out. The fact that he is sensitive, although in an ineffectual way, to the moral aspects of this matter is clearly the principal, if not the only, reason why this version of what they are doing is advanced at all. In any case, a kindness that proceeds, as of course it must in these circumstances, in such a way as to offer its

4. Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 231.

beneficiary no opportunity to accept or reject it and that at the same time serves the interests of the ostensible benefactor, must be automatically suspect. In this case, that suspicion is borne out by the fact that when Milly has already been hurt as a result of the lie that was told to her and "kindness" is visibly beside the point, Kate still wants to renew the deception that brought about this state of affairs.

The truth about Kate Croy is thus that she is in some profound sense outside the whole set of considerations and perceptions and feelings that constitute the moral. This is not to say that she is not familiar with the requirements of moral relationships, and it is certainly not to suggest that she repudiates them in principle as if she were a Thrasymachus or a Nietzsche. The case is rather that she simply cannot take seriously the idea of sacrificing what she most wants in life to the demands that a relationship to another human being—a friend—entail. All she can do therefore is to *act* the part of a friend and to develop a considerable virtuosity in getting herself accepted as a friend without finally being one at all. She is in other words inside the circle of implicitly moral relationships resting on trust only for the purpose of being able to turn them to her private advantage—that is, to use them for purposes that are not themselves within that circle or subject to its limits any more than she herself really is. Her beauty and her distinction and her extraordinary strength make her so attractive that they almost hide the coldness that is at the center of her being and that makes it possible for her not to register the pathos of Milly's situation in any way that could interfere with the strategy she is following.

IV

If we turn to *The Golden Bowl* in the expectation of being able to follow Charlotte Stant's private thoughts in the way we do Kate Croy's, we will be disappointed. The person whose thoughts and perceptions we are made privy to in *The Golden Bowl* is not Charlotte but Maggie Verver. This is paradoxical in a way, not only because there are so many points of similarity between Charlotte and Kate, but also because Maggie is the character in *The Golden Bowl* who is usually supposed to correspond to Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove* if only by virtue of their both being victims. It is not, however, in her capacity as the victim of Charlotte and the Prince that Maggie seems to be of interest to James. Or, rather, it is the way she responds to being a victim that makes her the center of the second part of the novel and probably of the novel as a whole. Her response, moreover, is very unlike Milly's. She does not turn her face to the wall, and she does not forgive those who have hurt her as Milly apparently does. Instead, she fights back and in doing so she reveals a formidable strength. The character in *The Wings of the Dove* to whom she corresponds is thus not Milly Theale but Kate Croy, and the way she goes about defending herself has many points of similarity with the strategies that Kate uses.

This aspect of Maggie's character has given commentators on *The Golden Bowl* a good deal of difficulty. They want to sympathize with her because of the wrong that was done her, but they are at the same time somewhat appalled by her methods and by the lengths to which she is prepared to go. Some critics have even seen the way the book ends as evidence of a failure of moral perception on the part of James himself—a failure to grasp that the Ververs are in their way just as bad as the adulterous couple that caused Maggie so much pain. But this conclusion is not only at odds with a great deal of evidence showing that James understands the quality and implications of Maggie's counterattack very well; it also misses the fact that *The Golden Bowl* illustrates the same kind of moral analysis that we find in *The Wings of the Dove* and—what is more—extends it in a most significant way. The point here is that the kind of occluded moral perception that was so noticeable in Kate Croy is by no means limited to people who are as unmistakably in the wrong as she is. It can also be found in those who have themselves been hurt as Milly was but who fight back as Maggie does. Their defense of their self-interest is certainly justified, at least initially, but it can also develop into a way of treating people—especially those who by their own actions have put themselves in the wrong—that is indistinguishable from the way the latter themselves acted. Indeed, such righteous retaliation may be even more likely, just because it is a response to a manifest wrong, to be blind to its own excesses and to the violation of an underlying mutuality that they entail.

The picture that James gives us of Maggie Verver makes it clear that she has neither the high wordly style of Kate Croy and Charlotte Stant nor the magical charm of Milly Theale. Although attractive and intelligent, she is described as a woman who does not assert her presence at all emphatically and who, for all her great opportunities, is apparently most comfortable in her domestic circle and especially in her very close and affectionate relationship to her father. She in fact perceives herself as someone who tends to be taken for granted by the more brilliant personalities around her and who is in any case quite unaccustomed to taking any initiatives of her own that might disturb these assumptions about her. When she begins to suspect that there is an intimacy between the Prince and Charlotte and decides that she cannot simply remain passive in the face of this danger to her own and her father's marriages, she has a sense that she is acting on her own for perhaps the first time in her life. She also quite enjoys the perception that she is producing a certain disarray on the part of the lovers by doing things they do not expect and do not quite understand, and she enjoys the apprehensive attention of which she is now the object. We learn from Fanny Assingham that Maggie has "a feverish little sense of justice," and there can be no doubt at all that she has been made very angry by the way she and her father have been treated by their adulterous spouses.[5]

5. Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 294.

That she has a right to be angry can hardly be in doubt, for she has been used at least as shabbily as Milly Theale was. The only question is what she wants to achieve by the course of action on which she has embarked, and here she is as tightly circumscribed in her alternatives as Kate Croy was. Any sort of open challenge to the lovers is out of the question because it would destroy her own and her father's marriages, but she is not prepared to do nothing even though that would leave everything in place. The only remaining possibility is to break up the relationship between Charlotte and the Prince, but to do so in such a way that everything will appear to be just as it was or rather as it was supposed to have been. The method she adopts is to let the Prince know that she knows of his relationship to Charlotte and to make it clear to him that he must cooperate with her—Maggie—unless he is prepared to sacrifice some quite substantial advantages that would otherwise come his way. What she requires of him is not only that his affair with Charlotte be terminated but that Charlotte never be told that Maggie knows about it. The punishment that is being inflicted on Charlotte is thus the counterpart of the wrong that she did Maggie in withholding knowledge from her. There is this difference between them, however, that Maggie knows that there is already a question in Charlotte's mind as there was not originally in her own and that by sealing her off from her lover and thus making it impossible for her ever to resolve her uncertainty, Maggie is trapping her, without any hope of reprieve, in a situation that is intolerably painful. In this way Maggie will have the Prince to herself and her father's marriage will at least not be publicly dishonored. As it turns out, her father, whom she is trying to spare any knowledge of these matters, apparently somehow intuits both the truth about the situation and the nature of the strategy she has adopted to deal with it, and at the end he cooperates with her by removing Charlotte from the scene. They go back to American City—that is, to what Maggie clearly perceives to be a kind of living death for the sort of person Charlotte is. In some ways, the role of Adam Verver as the collaborator of his daughter is comparable to that of Merton Densher in *The Wings of the Dove,* but unlike the latter he offers no moral counterpoint to the course of action in which he is assisting. The only source of direct commentary on Maggie's actions within the novel itself is Fanny Assingham. Her understanding of what is going on is certainly very lucid, and it implicitly identifies what is morally problematic in Maggie's conduct. At the same time, it is governed by a dominant interest in Maggie's sheer virtuosity in her new role and never takes on an explicitly moral cast.

The resolution that is achieved in *The Golden Bowl* is very different from that in *The Wings of the Dove.* In the latter, Milly's ability to forgive Merton Densher holds out the possibility of redemption for him, and at the very least it pulls down the whole great edifice of lies that has been built up in the course of the story. In *The Golden Bowl,* by contrast, the lies on which all these relationships—these marriages—rest remain in place and are in fact more firmly institutionalized than ever. This result,

moreover, is one in which Maggie takes satisfaction although why, after all that has happened, the prospect of a life with the Prince all to herself should please her may seem hard to understand. He is after all a man who plainly has as little real feeling for her as he has for Charlotte and who, in his distinguished way, is quite amoral. Be that as it may, the reason for Maggie's sense of satisfaction is not really so difficult to make out. It lies quite simply in the fact that she has prevailed and that she has forced all these people to march to her tune. She has deployed a strategy that, like Kate Croy's, turns on the withholding of knowledge, and by means of this strategy she has been able to control the way people behave so as to produce a result that answers to her own interest. James is at some pains to convey to us just how remorseless Maggie's determination to have her way is and how she cannot, for all her professions of sympathy, help enjoying the spectacle of Charlotte in a cage. Because she was the aggrieved party in the original adultery, it is easy to identify Maggie and her actions with what is morally right in this situation, but this misses the fact that she insists on lying to the end just as stubbornly as Kate Croy does and that she does so for no better purpose than to keep two loveless marriages going. It really seems that Maggie is her father's daughter in that she thinks of people as collectibles and is satisfied if she can preside over a museum of such human acquisitions—all of them kept in place (and in line) by the same kind of silken noose that she imagines around Charlotte's neck. There is another figure in terms of which Maggie thinks of Charlotte, and it is that of a wild animal—a "splendid supple shining creature"—that has got out of its cage and is prowling about dangerously.[6] One wonders, though, whether—give or take an adjective or two—this figure might not apply equally well to Maggie herself, who has certainly broken out of the passivity of her former life and proved herself to be a match for even the most dangerous predators around her. In any case, it is evident that in the way she controls other people so as to achieve her own ends she is as independent of any concern with truth as the basis of human relationships as Kate Croy is, and in these circumstances it is hard to distinguish her "feverish little sense of justice" from a quite ruthless exploitation of her own advantages and the vulnerabilities of others.

V

Such then are the relationships and the ways of acting in these relationships that James puts before us. It is plain enough without any further argument that the actions of Kate Croy and of Maggie Verver qualify as strategic in the sense proposed above. Both act in complete independence of any limit on their conduct that might be thought to derive from the relationships in which they stand to those who are affected (and affected in very significant ways) by their actions. It is equally clear that these actions are

6. Ibid., p. 460.

being viewed from an authorial standpoint that is defined by a central interest in moral relationships. The question for the philosophical reader of these books must accordingly be what bearing these relationships (on which James's attention is concentrated) are shown to have on the moral character of these actions. Does James, for example, somehow manage to show us, in a way that bypasses explicit moral reasoning, that these actions are morally wrong?

Any such claim will inevitably run into a strong skeptical reaction on the part of those who espouse the conception of values that was set forth at the outset. It will be said that if the moral ordering of the events of these novels is in fact as it has been described here, then that can only mean that James in his authorial capacity has deployed his own values or at least values that he has made his own for this occasion. These values would presumably be defined in terms of an opposition to anything that smacks of manipulation and a correspondingly favorable attitude toward relationships among human beings that are symmetrical with respect to the kinds of knowledge that relevantly bear on them. And in the final comparison between people who are hurt and can nevertheless forgive and those who are hurt and fight back—that is, in the comparison between Milly and Maggie—it would be said that James simply *likes* Milly and the alternative she represents better than he does Maggie. But if this is so, then all he has shown us is his values as they apply to the situations he has imagined, and however powerful and persuasive his presentation of those values may be, it must fall far short of anything that could justifiably be said to show that Kate Croy and Maggie Verver are morally in the wrong.

The only way in which this line of argument can be met is by going back over these stories and testing it against the situations that are presented in them. The claim is that the events of these novels are in themselves morally indeterminate and as such await the (possibly quite different) moral evaluations that may be projected upon them by this or that observer. But this is just what cannot be shown to be the case for the situations in these novels. On this point I am prepared to argue that it is a measure of the depth and acuity of James's moral perception that he has constructed these situations in a way that exposes just those features that enable us to show how paradoxical and finally incoherent the opposing line of argument would have to be if it were even to apply intelligibly to them. It is my further contention that this can be done without introducing any special philosophical apparatus such as, for example, some species of moral intuition. It is widely assumed that the only possible antidote for value relativism is to postulate something of this kind, but it is clear that no such postulation could find an acceptable place within James's narrative. A novelist simply has no business with a quasi-perceptual apprehension of properties that mysteriously "supervene" upon otherwise familiar empirical situations and thereby confer upon them a degree of moral determinateness they would otherwise lack. What he *is* deeply

familiar with is our relationships to other human beings as we ordinarily understand them (and unenriched by any supervening properties), and what I am suggesting is that these same relationships are the locus of the relevant moral facts about human beings and their actions. But if that is indeed the case, then it will no longer seem paradoxical to suggest that a novelist who has come to understand these relationships as well as James has is in a position to show us their moral aspect with at least as much authority as the sponsor of some special philosophical thesis about moral cognition.

How then does James manage to show that the conduct of Kate Croy is morally wrong and wrong in a way for which some alternative set of values offers no relief? In order to answer this question one must first draw out a little the implications of the fact that Kate is a liar. There are familiar arguments that show how obligations are entailed by the communicative relationships in which we give and receive information from others and how a presumption of truth telling is a necessary condition for the existence of such relationships.[7] Kate manifestly violates that presumption of which she also has to avail herself in order to be believed at all, and like all liars she has to maintain a distinction between her public acceptance of that presumption and her private intention not to abide by it—a distinction that itself has to be kept private. Her conduct thus offers a perfect example of a nonavowable intention—that is, of a policy of action that is in principle not shareable and especially not with those who are to be affected by it. It is in short a form of strategic action that incorporates the beliefs and intentions of others into one's own rationale of action and places them on the same footing with any other relevant "facts." The requirements of strategic action thus override any limits posed by the nature of the communicative relationships in which we stand to such persons. At the same time, however, it is also presupposed that such limits are in place as a condition of the possibility of the very kind of communicative transaction on which the whole enterprise depends. The result is that an action that is strategic in this sense becomes incoherent and indefensible the moment it is subjected to the condition of publicity—that is, as soon as it can no longer remain within the monological auspices under which it is conceived and becomes known to others.

Now what I have just set in the form of an abstract and general model of a communicative situation is also something that we are quite capable of grasping concretely in a particular instance without the aid of any such apparatus. It is, moreover, just such an understanding that

7. Although a rigorous and comprehensive philosophical study of the ethics of truth telling apparently does not exist, Sissela Bok's *Lying* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) is valuable for its discussions of many of the practical contexts in which issues of truth telling arise. It is interesting that although this book was generally well received, the reviews appeared to indicate that the stringency with which the author viewed the obligation to tell the truth was not widely shared. See, e.g., the reivew in *Times Literary Supplement* (August 11, 1978), p. 907.

is at the heart of a story that James tells in each of these novels. There have, of course, been many novels in which the characters tell lies. What sets James apart is that, while working within the same general non-philosophical understanding of moral relationships as the rest of us, he deploys the kind of analytical insight that enables him to show us, in a case like that of Kate Croy, just those features of her conduct that we ordinarily register in a much less tightly focused and global way.[8]

What we are shown is a form of conduct quite explicitly parasitic upon a normative system of relationships among human beings that rests on truth telling. Kate accepts the presumptions of that system publicly, but in her relationship to Milly she violates them privately and this makes her conduct a kind of paradigm of what cannot be justified.[9] It is not after all as though the strategic character of her line of conduct consisted simply in taking advantage for her own purposes of a situation she had, so to speak, simply come upon. As I have already noted, there are circumstances in which there may not in fact be anything wrong with making use of knowledge about other people that just happens to come our way. It is quite a different matter, however, to contribute to the forming of beliefs and intentions on the part of other people and in doing so to shape them, quite independently of any question of truth, in such a way as to make the conduct that serves our purpose more likely. For that, it is necessary that a relationship of trust be fostered so that the false belief will be accepted on the strength of that trust. This is exactly what Kate Croy does in her relationship to Milly, and in order to do this she has to perceive every relevant fact about Milly as a sympathetic friend would in order to be able to convert that perception into something very different—an element in a self-interested calculation. What is finally most horrifying about Kate Croy as James gives her to us is the way she can take in Milly's isolation and her desire for love and her impending death and enter them under quite different rubrics in her own private ledger without any apparent sense of moral incongruity.

8. A full defense of this statement would require a great many textual citations. As samples of what might be so presented, I would draw attention especially to two conversations between Kate and Densher in *The Wings of the Dove,* pp. 340–46 and 398–410.

9. It may be that at some level of his mind James assimilated the distinction between the kind of community in which that distinction is more or less intact and the kind in which it is systematically exploited, to the contrast between America and Europe. Any such assumption would, of course, have been very implausible even in his own time. Even if he made it, however, there is nothing to suggest that this impaired his ability to recognize the fact that, in any actual human community, relationships of trust among human beings are *both* honored *and* exploited. It seems wrongheaded, in any case, to make any such assumption central to James's moral vision in the way Quentin Anderson appears to do in his otherwise admirable *The American Henry James* (London: John Calder, 1958). It should also be noted that the interpretation this critic presents of James's conception of selfhood in the essay devoted to him in *The Imperial Self: An Essay in American Literary and Cultural History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1971) is quite directly antithetical to everything I have to say about the role of moral consciousness in James's novels.

But perhaps it will be said once again that this is all just a question of what values you happen to subscribe to. Well, what would those alternative values have to be in order to change the moral complexion of such forms of conduct? It is certainly not impossible to imagine liking Kate better than Milly or sympathizing with her situation to the point of feeling that her claims on life override those of a dying girl. Translated into the language of values, that would mean ranking a world in which Kate is able to marry Densher in proper style and Milly dies ahead of a world in which Kate has to accept what Mrs. Louder offers her and Milly still dies. But this is not the way in which such options are placed before us. Insofar as we make choices between one future world and another, we do so by deciding to do what has to be done to bring about one of them rather than the other if that appears to be in our power. But even if it is accepted that our value rankings concern not just alternate possible worlds considered in abstraction from the actions that realize them but those worlds as the outcomes of those actions, could not someone say that he just happens to set a higher value on lying than on telling the truth or that his preference for the one outcome over the other settles any question about the means that have to be used to assure it? One could certainly *say* this, but it must be understood that to say this and mean it entails that at every step in any process of decision all possible evaluative options remain open to us and nothing has ever been, as it were, predecided. This would hold for Kate's decisions, of course, but also for those of the critical reader who is trying to make up his mind what to think of what Kate has done. Now if the latter were to take the view of those actions that has just been sketched and to do so on the strength of a different set of values for which lying at the very least does not have any special negative significance, he would find himself, at the level of discourse, in a situation that corresponds to the one in which Kate herself winds up. That is a situation in which the "value" that has been espoused—that of lying to get what you want—presupposes that it has been rejected, at least implicitly, both by others and by oneself, as a condition of the possibility of the action it dictates. That very fact makes that value nonavowable for Kate, but for this imaginary reader it may seem that there is no such limitation because he is not in Kate's situation—is not even in her world—and so can openly espouse a value that she cannot. But what does his endorsement really come to, then? Is it detached from any implication that bears on what he himself would be disposed to do in his own—the real—world? If so, then it is as imaginary as Kate's action itself is, and it really amounts to no more than a fictional reader cheering Kate on in her fictional world. But if it is not so detached, then it must express what this person would be prepared to do in a comparable situation in real life, and in that case, the sponsor of this postulated value would be involved in the same contradictions as Kate herself, although with this rather funny difference that he would already have made them public. By comparison it is an impressive index of Kate's

intelligence that she never talks about her "values" and, apart from invoking "kindness" as a sop to Merton Densher, never tries to suggest that there might be some set of values that could legitimize her actions.

Although the two have not often been compared to one another, the case of Maggie Verver may well seem too different from that of Kate Croy to yield to the kind of analysis that has just been proposed for the latter. It is not in fact difficult to imagine one of the many supporters that Maggie has found among readers of *The Golden Bowl* declaring that his or her values just happen to be such as to make what Maggie does unobjectionable or even positively meritorious.[10] The value that this presupposes on the part of these supporters might be variously characterized, but in one way or another it would presumably come down to something like the claim that Maggie has a right to defend herself in any way she can against those who so gravely abused her trust. Everything turns, of course, on the way one characterizes what Maggie does. What has been suggested here is that she does something very similar to what Kate Croy and Charlotte Stant do and that, if she has the excuse of responding to a prior wrong against her, her action also has long-run consequences of a very serious kind. What Maggie does, in the course of her extremely successful counterattack, is really to adopt and in a sense generalize the policy followed by Charlotte Stant (and Kate Croy). Having been lied to, she in effect arranges things in such a way that all the persons concerned are permanently shut up in a system of lies from which there can be no exit. The poisonous character of the relationships that this strategy projects into the future of Maggie herself and the Prince and of Adam Verver and Charlotte is too plain to need emphasis. Even if it is argued that she had no alternative to this course of action, that could hardly be a reason to set any kind of positive value on the terrible result it produces. Once the character of that outcome is understood, it should rather, it seems, lead one to call into question the assumption that there were no alternatives. In any case, the world that Maggie produces through the exercise of her "feverish little sense of justice" is one that could not possibly be constituted as a value by anyone. This is because it is a world in which everyone is in the position of Kate Croy at the end

10. A remarkable example of this kind of positive evaluation of Maggie Verver's character and conduct can be found in Martha Nussbaum's "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy," *New Literary History* 15 (1983–84): 26–50. The view defended in this essay makes Maggie the heroine of a kind of bildungsroman that celebrates her achievement of full emotional maturity and self-command, and the moral costs of her triumph are hardly noticed. Among the other features of James's rendering of Maggie's victory that can hardly be reconciled with any such view as this, I would cite only the extraordinary moral darkness of the final scenes of the novel and especially of the final encounter of the four main characters before the departure of the Ververs—Adam and Charlotte—for America. For a much more realistic appreciation of Maggie's character and actions, see Sallie Sears, *The Negative Imagination: Form and Perspective in the Novels of Henry James* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968), chap. 4.

of *The Wings of the Dove,* and from this world the possibility of a different kind of life that was offered, at least to Merton Densher, by Milly Theale's utterly different response to the experience of evil is, as far as one can tell, wholly absent. This is what James has shown us, and against his powerful moral dialectic the idea of our always being able to extricate ourselves from the situations our actions generate in our relationships to other human beings seems extraordinarily feeble and implausible.