

Symposium: Robert B. Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life**

Comments on Pippin on James

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There are a large number of people in the world today whose sense of who they are is bound up with novels that they read when they are young. When they think about the sources of the ideals they cherish, and of their sense of what a perfect human life might be, they remember the worlds into which certain novels introduced them, and the people who inhabited those worlds. If they are asked to talk about their moral development, they are more likely to mention novels than to mention religious or philosophical books.

Literary tradition and influence are of course largely national affairs. But certain novelists have become objects of adoration by cults whose membership is not restricted to nations or regions. Members of these cults are bound to one another, despite differences in ethnicity and nationality, in the way that Christians from Brazil and from Denmark, or Muslims from Morocco and Indonesia, are bound to one another. When they are thrown together in foreign parts, they rejoice to find a fellow-worshipper, someone who cherishes the same texts that they do themselves.

Two novelists of this sort are Henry James and Marcel Proust. By many people, including myself, the books of these two authors are remembered as central to our process of maturation. They helped make us the people we are, and our gratitude remains intense. Jacobites and Proustians are inclined to think that the moral and spiritual education of the young might better be entrusted to novels than to religious traditions or to works of moral philosophy. For they believe that anybody who has been caught up in the work of either author is likely to be exceptionally sensitive to the dangers of egotism.

More specifically, readers of these men become aware how easy it is to describe other people in ways which suit our own needs, rather in ways that respect theirs. These readers are both more likely than most to be aware of the needs of others, and more likely to aspire to the sort of experience sometimes

* Robert B. Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, ISBN 0-521-65230-8. \$55.00. Unprefixed page references are to this work except where clearly indicated otherwise.

called 'a higher state of consciousness'. For the moments of understanding and revelation that occur more and more frequently as novels like *The Ambassadors* and *The Guermantes Way* reach their climaxes are analogues, in these readers' lives, of the sort of life-changing experiences that James's brother William described in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

The analogy with religious experience differentiates James and Proust from such novelists as Dickens and Balzac. All four have, of course, been made into cult figures. But the Dickensians are a different sort of cult from the Jacobites. Both cults are made up of people who love to revisit their favorite characters and scenes from the novels, to allude to their favorite passages, and to discuss the relative merits and demerits of the various characters. But most Dickensians would not say that Dickens had *changed* their lives. He merely *enriched* their lives.

Proust and James, by contrast, are often thought of as people who turned our souls around. They are described in the same terms as we describe Socrates, St Paul, or Nietzsche. For they force us to experience vivid doubts about ourselves. Such doubts may of course arise in reading any novel in which we encounter a character in whom we recognize some of our own worst traits. But the sorts of doubts aroused by reading James and Proust often go deeper than that. Their books make us wonder about whether we can ever escape the fundamental lack of concern with others, the deep selfishness, of which we suspect ourselves.

Just as those who have had what they describe as religious experiences are rarely able to spell out what new truths they learned by having them, so worshippers of Proust and James are usually baffled when asked what truths they picked up from these men's novels that they might otherwise have missed. It is the experience of reading the novel that makes one into a rather different sort of person, not the utility of a belief acquired in the process. Just as Christians will say that their relationship to Jesus is not with the author of the Sermon on the Mount, but to an intimate, so readers of James and Proust will insist that what matters is their relation to the novelist himself rather than to any set of beliefs for which the novels might be cited as justification.

John Bayley, in his introduction to James's *The Wings of the Dove*, says that in James's greatest novels he was 'investigating the incalculable, things intimated by the deepest processes of living which, for that reason, can never be fully known'. Bayley goes on to say that:

James's later mode of artistic inquiry is a way of overcoming loneliness, of extending an almost tactile intimacy to the potential reader through the mode of words. Consciousness seems shared between author, characters, and reader, and the participation of the last has its own special rewards and fascinations, which can arise out of bafflement itself. Intimacy is never a matter of being told what to think. It is like the secret converse of lovers, whose understanding is not dependent on a single authority.

This sense of intimacy is found as often among readers of Proust as among readers of James, but not so often among readers of Dickens, Balzac, Mann, or Musil. Just as readers of devotional literature sometimes find themselves suddenly exalted, caught up in almost orgasmic ecstasy, so readers of James and Proust find themselves caught up in the sort of suddenly shared enlargement of the imagination, and the suddenly shared intensity of the passing moment, that may occur when two lovers find their loves reciprocated. Proust and James offer their readers redemption, but not redemptive truth, just as the lover's reciprocated love redeems the lover but does not add to his or her knowledge.

To have watched Proust recontextualize and redescribe the behavior of each of his characters, or to have lived through James's account of the constantly altering relationships between the central figures in *The Golden Bowl* or *The Ambassadors* is to have learned something about what can be done with and for other human beings. But what one has learned is no more easily describable than what one learns from falling in love, or falling out of love, or having one's heart broken by unreciprocated love. Nevertheless, many recent writers have done their best to say why James and Proust have the power they do, why they have assumed the role in relation to the novel that Galileo and Newton assumed in relation to physical science, or that Locke and Kant assumed in relation to systematic philosophical reflection.

In recent years, there has been a burst of discussion of this topic within Anglophone philosophy, much of it stemming from Martha Nussbaum's pathbreaking book *Love's Knowledge*. Robert Pippin is the second distinguished and influential philosopher to write extensively on James. His *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* is a different sort of book than Nussbaum's, but it is animated by the same insistence that James is a figure whom philosophers would do well to take into account.

Though I admire both of these books, I am troubled by a sense that both Nussbaum and Pippin try too hard to fit James's achievement into a specifically philosophical context. I react to their attempts somewhat as Kierkegaard reacted to Hegel's claim to have given philosophical content to Christian doctrine. Christianity, Kierkegaard protested, is an alternative to philosophy, not something that philosophy can subsume. Analogously, I think that the greatest novels offer an alternative to philosophy, and that putting them into philosophical contexts may diminish them.

As I shall be saying in more detail shortly, I think of these two men's novels as spiritual exercises for the sort of intellectual who is unable to take either religion or philosophy seriously as a guide of life. Such novels thus form a sort of successor genre to philosophy, in the way that philosophy became, in the Enlightenment, a successor genre to religion. They fulfill the need of secularist and unphilosophical intellectuals to strive for 'something higher', to transcend their present condition, to find something like redemption.

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Robert Pippin's books, including the one we are discussing here, are part of a very ambitious and original philosophical initiative. Pippin takes as his topic 'the nature of modernity', and offers us readings of Hegel designed to show that this philosopher took modernity to be a philosophical problem, and proposed idealism as a solution to this problem. Pippin has no hesitation in cutting across the grain of most contemporary Anglophone moral philosophy, but his approach is equally remote from that of most so-called 'Continental' philosophers. His understanding of German idealism is very different from most post-Nietzschean and post-Heideggerian accounts of the historical role of this movement, and his treatment of modernity is equally far from both Foucault's and Habermas's.

I find Pippin's books absorbing and stimulating, and his treatment of the authors he discusses invariably illuminating. In point of originality and daring, Pippin is comparable to Cavell, whose readings of Austin and Wittgenstein are both unlike anybody else's and parts of a larger project of retelling the story of modern philosophy. Pippin's readings of Kant and Hegel are equally original, and form part of a project conceived on a similar scale.

Despite my appreciation of their ambition and originality, however, I find both Cavell's and Pippin's projects very puzzling. Just as I have never felt that I had a grip on the thing that Cavell calls 'the ordinary', I have always been uncertain about the thing that Pippin calls 'modernity'. Indeed, the more I read Pippin, the more dubious I become about the utility of the term 'modern'. So I had much the same sort of reaction to *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* as I had to *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*. I found Pippin's readings of James's tales and novels very intelligent, admirably non-reductive, and highly plausible. Pippin is, I think, exactly the sort of reader James was hoping for. Yet as I read through the book I felt I had less and less grip on what was meant by the term 'Modern Moral Life'. I was less and less convinced that there was such a thing.

Pippin says that he wants to show that:

James believed that a vast historical alteration had been taking place in Western European and American societies for some time, that this involved a change in basic mores and sensibilities, that it was especially visible in the privileged (reflective, intensely self-conscious, freed-from-the-necessity-of-labor) classes, though not limited to them, and that this had now, as it came to a head – even to a sort of historical crisis – greatly complicated our moral assessments of each other, the way we hold each other to some account for what we do. (p. 11)

I do not think he has shown that James believed this, but I may be prejudiced by the fact that I do not think that anybody should believe this.

I think that the privileged classes have always contained people whose

intense self-consciousness leads them to find moral assessment much harder, a much more complex matter, than it seems to those without leisure for reflection and a taste for books. Where Pippin sees a crisis involving all classes of society, I see instead a gradual shift among leisured intellectuals from religious and philosophical books to novels, along with a gradual increase in the proportion of the population that has enough leisure and literacy to make the complexification of moral assessment seem desirable. I doubt that there is a greater degree of self-consciousness among the intellectuals of our day than among those who lived in the Middle Ages or in the Enlightenment, but I do think that we, the latest of the sons and daughters of time, have many advantages that our ancestors lacked. The ability to read Proust and James is not the least of these advantages.

At the beginning of his collection of essays, *Idealism as Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Pippin says that he ‘interprets the problem of modern philosophy as the problem of freedom’ (p. 2). He says that ‘Hegel’s basic claim’ is that ‘the modern epoch represents some sort of rational culmination of perennial and unavoidable human aspirations, an unovercomable self-consciousness and so a kind of collective freedom’ (p. 16). I have no problem with the Hegelian suggestion that the way to tell an upbeat story about human history is to construct a narrative of increasing freedom. But I do have trouble seeing ‘freedom’ as a philosophical problem.

I think of increasing spiritual freedom, as opposed to physical freedom, as a matter of more people being able to wield more and more alternative descriptions of things, of people, of institutions, and of the course of history. More people have more spiritual freedom in the modern world, because there is more wealth and literacy and leisure now than there used to be. I see a practical problem about how to maintain this fortunate situation, but I cannot see a philosophical problem about the conditions of possibility of freedom. Nor do I know how to think of our times as a ‘rational culmination’ of past aspirations, if such a culmination is supposed to be different from the result of various lucky breaks that have made it possible for some of the dreams of our ancestors to come true.

At the beginning of his book on James, Pippin says that the theme of ‘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 [James’s] greatest works’ (p. 3). That seems right to me, but I am puzzled by Pippin’s next sentence, which reads: ‘The problem of such a judgment – the problem of its possibility and meaning and authority in such a secular, non-religious, self-interested society – seems to have fascinated [James].’ I am not sure what it would be like to worry about the possibility and meaning and authority of such judgments. I am also unsure why Pippin

thinks that such judgments are more puzzling in a secular than in a religious society, and why he thinks that modern society is more self-interested than previous societies.

Pippin goes on to say that ‘what is most distinctive about this emerging new form of life – the modern world that James was writing about – is that:

while 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. (p. 5)

My problem with this passage is that I have no confidence that contemporary Los Angeles or Tokyo is more anomic and disunified than was London in the time of Shakespeare or Athens in the days of Socrates and Euripides.

It is certainly true that lots of people in those latter times and places got all their bases for interpretation and assessment from the interrelation of their social positions, functions, and roles. But I would bet that many other people – the ones who, like the characters in James’s novels, were lucky enough to have the leisure and wealth to permit them to read a lot of books – were feeling pretty anomic. Conversely, the vast majority of people in James’s day, like the vast majority of people in Shakespeare’s and Socrates’ day, thought of the way they were brought up, the meanings they got from convention and tradition, as all they could possibly need in the way of interpretation and assessment.

In short, I suspect that what Pippin calls ‘modernity’ is just the situation of the intellectual – a type who turns up everywhere in recorded history, and who does not need to wait upon changed social conditions to have doubts about convention, tradition, and the formulae of praise and blame invoked by those who brought her up. Nowadays there are, Heaven be praised, more intellectuals per capita than in ancient and medieval times. But this is simply because there is a bigger pie to be divided, and thus more widely distributed opportunity for leisure, education, reflection, and use of the imagination.

As I suggested earlier, the best answer I can think of to the question of what James and Proust did for young intellectuals who took their novels to their bosoms is that they provided a secular counterpart of what the religious tradition calls ‘spiritual exercises’. Like such exercises, these novels offer tips about how to overcome egotism – how to keep oneself open to outside influences rather than closing oneself off behind the walls of one’s own preferred vocabulary.

For religious people, overcoming egotism takes the form of opening oneself up to the divine. This process of opening may take the form of putting aside the false self – the self that lives in a world of appearance – and substituting the true self (the Buddha nature, for example). Or it may take the

form of asking God to take away one's individuality and absorb your self into His Divine Self. Or it may involve, as it sometimes does among Christians, seeing union with God as possible only through living for others – seeing openness to God as possible only through openness to, and love for, other human beings.

I suggest thinking of James and Proust as the heirs of this latter tradition of Christian spirituality – as helping us avoid egotism by giving us example after example of ways in which people wall themselves off from one another – ways in which they diminish themselves by refusing to put themselves in others' shoes, and by refusing to understand the descriptions that others use of them. Reading these men's books helps us replace unquestioning assurance about our criteria for judging others with curiosity about the criteria these others are using to judge us. After the love of God ceased to be a live option, and after moral philosophy began to look like a scholastic exercise, the intellectuals continued to worry about getting trapped behind the barriers thrown up by inherited vocabularies of moral assessment. They worried about freezing out other people as a result of the need to bolster their own egos. James and Proust responded to such worries.

Pippin says that 'James, like many other late-nineteenth-century writers, understands his historical context as undeniably empty of the large moral frameworks and categories and typologies with which intelligible human engagement and understanding were formerly possible' (p. 35). Perhaps he did, but if so I think that he was projecting his own state of mind out upon his epoch. So I would rephrase Pippin's description of James's situation as follows: James, like many other late nineteenth-century intellectuals, was not able to get much out of either religion or philosophy. He was exploring the possibility that imaginative literature could take over the educational role previously played by argumentative writing. T. S. Eliot had a good point when he praised James for having a mind so fine that no idea could penetrate it. This kind of mind has come to seem more useful, for purposes of one's own moral development as opposed to one's participation in public affairs, than the kind that tries to formulate universally valid moral principles.

Pippin says that James's novels exhibit

some great sense of stopped time, a historical *nunc stans*, that some, most radically Kojève, think of as the definitive mood in modernity, the absence of the frontier, of adventure, wars that mean anything, quests, Holy Grails, revolutionary aspirations, and so forth. With James, we have begun to settle down in the only wilderness left, 'inside', but without a sense of teleological, progressive, developmental states of success or any road map or goal. (p. 36)

I think that Kojève's view on this matter, as on most others, was weird and, as Derrida says, 'pataphysical'. I find it hard to imagine how anybody could believe that the only wilderness left nowadays is inside the individual soul.

The socialist movement that flourished among the intellectuals of James's time seems enough to show that the inward turn exemplified in James's novels exhibit is as compatible with ardent social hope as was the inward turn exemplified in Wordsworth's *Prelude*. Turning inward is an option that some people will, with luck, be able to exercise, no matter what is going on in the political world. But that world is as filled with 'wars that mean something' as ever.

I have had the opportunity only to mention a few passages in Pippin's book which aroused my doubts, and so have been unable to do justice to its contribution to an understanding of James's work. I can summarize my doubts by saying that I would like to put aside Pippin's distinction between the premodern and the modern. I would propose to replace it with a distinction between a time in which it still seemed reasonable to most intellectuals that all human beings should seek to lead what Aristotle called 'the good life for man', and a time in which most of them agree with Nietzsche, William James, and Freud that one size does not fit all. In this latter era, the task of moral education is neither to achieve the sort of purity urged by religious moralists, nor to find a universally valid moral principle to clasp to one's bosom, but rather to avoid letting one's own enterprise of self-creation make one indifferent to the needs of others engaged in the same enterprise.

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