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THE MORALITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN HENRY JAMES

By ROSS LABRÉ

In The Golden Bowl, Fanny Assingham makes the following dry-eyed observation about morality: “But stupidity pushed to a certain point is, you know, immorality. Just so what is morality but high intelligence?”¹ In Washington Square (1880), in response to his sister’s question as to whether he would prefer goodness to cleverness in his daughter, Dr. Sloper answers sharply: “You are good for nothing unless you are clever.”² In The Ambassadors, Maria Gostrey comments with measured disdain on the distortion of Mrs. Newson’s picture of Chad’s Parisian situation by insisting that:

“She imagined, stupidly.”
“She imagined meanly.”
He had it, however, better. “It couldn’t but be ignorantly.”³

In “The Art of Fiction,” James seems to take a similar view of morality:

There is one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together; that is in the light of the very obvious truth that the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. . . . No good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind; that seems to be an axiom which, for the artist in fiction, will cover all needful moral ground.⁴

Both James and Fanny Assingham express views of the moral which are closely related to the condition of the mind. In the passage from “The Art of Fiction,” James draws an antithesis between a “moral” and a “superficial” mind, inferring an equation between moral and perceptive depth.

There is a categorical moral imperative embedded in the Jamesian world which demands that the characters be as fully

¹ Henry James, The Golden Bowl (New York, 1904), I, 90.
² Henry James, Washington Square (New York, 1880), 15.
⁴ “The Art of Fiction,” Longman’s Magazine, IV (September 1884), 520.
conscious as they possibly can. Fullest consciousness means maximum ability to do good; undeveloped consciousness means maximum ability to do evil. The moral question in James is reserved for those characters who can develop their consciousnesses. An examination of a few novels written in different phases of James's career will help to apply these considerations. To be considered are *Washington Square* (1880), *The Bostonians* (1886), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), and *The Awkward Age* (1899).

In *Washington Square*, Dr. Sloper is contemptuously aware of his daughter Catherine’s limited powers of perception: “What she could not know, of course, was that she disappointed him, though on three or four occasions the Doctor had almost been frank about it. She grew up peacefully and prosperously; but at the age of eighteen Mrs. Penniman had not made a clever woman of her.” It is difficult to imagine how Mrs. Penniman could have made a “clever woman” out of anyone, but it is true that she had not made one out of Catherine Sloper. Catherine is a good person in the ordinary sense, possessing a moral outlook of a fairly rudimentary though not altogether helpful kind: “Where my father is concerned, you must not be sure. He is full of goodness,” she tells a somewhat skeptical Townsend (p. 73).

Dr. Sloper is aesthetically oriented, and his struggle with Catherine marks yet another encounter between the two major kinds of consciousness. Morris Townsend is an inferior practitioner in the world of aesthetic forms, an appropriate subject for the Doctor’s scalpel: “He is not what I call a gentleman; he has not the soul of one. He is extremely insinuating; but it’s a vulgar nature. I saw through it in a minute. He is altogether too familiar — I hate familiarity. He is a plausible coxcomb” (p. 59).

Although Townsend’s strategy to woo control of Catherine’s money is quite transparent to Dr. Sloper and to the reader, the girl doesn’t catch on:

> “Ah, we must be prepared,” Morris rejoined; “you especially because for you it must come hardest. Do you know the first thing your father will say to you?”
> “No, Morris; please tell me.”
> “He will tell you I am mercenary.”

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“Mercenary!”

“It’s a big word, but it means a low thing. It means that I am after your money.”

“Oh!” murmured Catherine, softly (p. 78).

In telling her father of her engagement to Townsend Catherine reflects: “I feel very old — and very wise” (p. 82). She is, of course, neither, and her father’s response is prophetic: “I am afraid that before long you will feel older and wiser yet” (p. 82). When her father strengthens his opposition by threatening to disinherit her if she marries Townsend, Townsend himself suddenly cools in his affection, and agrees to her going off to Europe with her father.

There are two major blows which Catherine suffers. Both tend to fix the course of the rest of her life, and both come with the belated arrival of consciousness on her part. Her first blow is the discovery of her father’s true attitude towards her. In this connection she tells Townsend:

“You can tell when a person speaks to you as if — as if—”

“As if what?”

“As if they despised you!” said Catherine passionately. “He spoke that way the night before we sailed. It wasn’t much, but it was enough, and I thought of it on the voyage all the time. Then I made up my mind. I will never ask him for anything again, or expect anything from him. It would not be natural now. We must be very happy together, and we must not seem to depend upon his forgiveness. And, Morris, Morris, you must never despise me!”

This was an easy promise to make, and Morris made it with fine effect. But for the moment he undertook nothing more onerous (pp. 197-198).

Her father’s attitude towards her is more complex than she understands, though simpler than her needs require, as is dramatized in a scene in which they argue over Townsend:

... her tears overflowed, and she moved towards her grimly consistent parent with a pitiful cry. Her hands were raised in supplication, but he sternly evaded this appeal. Instead of letting her sob out her misery on his shoulder, he simply took her by the arm and directed her course across the threshold, closing the door gently but firmly behind her. After he had done so, he remained listening. For a long time there was no sound; he knew that she was standing outside. He was sorry for her, as I have said; but he was so sure he was right. At last he heard her move away, and then her footstep creaked faintly upon the stairs.

The Doctor took several turns round his study, with his hands in his pockets, and a thin sparkle, possibly of irritation, but partly also of something like humor, in his eye. “By Jove,” he said to himself, “I
believe she will stick—I believe she will stick!” And this idea of Catherine “sticking” appeared to have a comical side, and to offer a prospect of entertainment. He determined, as he said to himself, to see it out (pp. 139-140).

Dr. Sloper’s aesthetic pleasure at the prospect of Catherine’s “sticking,” due to the unexpected tenacity shown by his usually limp daughter, helps to offset the uniform glumness of her circumstances. Nevertheless, life is all spectacle and combat to the doctor, all a matter of performing ably, and his daughter simply doesn’t measure up. He sees her suffering for a while, but ultimately it bores him, and then he ceases to see it.

Estranged from her father, Catherine puts herself completely in the hands of Townsend, unwittingly setting herself up for her second major blow. As it becomes more and more evident that the doctor will never relent, Townsend finally throws her over and goes away. She is left in painful isolation:

She hardly knew what had happened; ostensibly she had only had a difference with her lover, as other girls had had before, and the thing was not only not a rupture, but she was under no obligation to regard it even as a menace. Nevertheless, she felt a wound, even if he had not dealt it; it seemed to her that a mask had suddenly fallen from his face. He had wished to get away from her; he had been angry and cruel, and said strange things, with strange looks. She was smothered and stunned; she buried her head in the cushions, sobbing and talking to herself (pp. 220-221).

She does not immediately reach a state of complete despair, though, and she writes to Townsend asking for some sort of explanation. The scene is illuminating from the point of view of the morality of consciousness in James:

Morris was not in a writing mood, for Catherine had addressed him two short notes which met with no acknowledgment. These notes were so brief that I may give them entire. “Won’t you give me some sign that you didn’t mean to be so cruel as you seemed on Tuesday?” — that was the first; the other was a little longer. “If I was unreasonable or suspicious on Tuesday — if I annoyed you or troubled you in any way — I beg your forgiveness, and I promise never again to be so foolish. I am punished enough, and I don’t understand. Dear Morris, you are killing me!” (p. 225).

James adds the following significant footnote to her anguish: “Her punishment accumulated; she continued to bear it, however, with a good deal of superficial fortitude” (p. 225). Cath-
erine pays a kind of homage to the morality of consciousness in the Jamesian world when she laments that she has been “punished enough” and that she doesn’t “understand”; it is her lack of understanding which has contributed to her punishment. When James goes on to observe that her “punishment accumulated,” he endorses her dim sense that she has violated some sort of moral law. It is not a moral law in the ordinary sense, because in the ordinary sense she is a good person: “she was excellently imperturbably good; affectionate, docile, obedient, and much addicted to speaking the truth” (p. 16). One is reminded of Madame Grandoni’s view of Hyacinth Robinson in *The Princess Casamassima* that he was “much too good for his fate.”

Catherine’s only major failing — and it is one which characterizes her behavior throughout the story — is her unfortunate lack of adequate awareness. In this connection J. A. Ward has commented that evil in the Jamesian world “derives from the fundamental human condition of limited perception.”

Catherine’s perception of Townsend is obviously clouded by her desperate emotional needs and by her reaction against the contempt which her father exhibits towards her. That she has the ability to understand both Townsend and her father is indicated by the fact that she finally comes to understand and to repudiate both of them. She could have been more aware than she had been; this is why her “punishment accumulated.”

Often, James’s characters do not want the fullest consciousness possible, because this might block certain goals which they have set for themselves. This would seem to be the case with Olive Chancellor in *The Bostonians*. She interferes with the efficiency of her consciousness, because she wants more than anything else to control Verena Tarrant.

James sketches in the background for this drama of perverted sexuality with a prosaic, clinical authority. There is Olive’s reaction to her parents: “She knew what her mother would have done, and that helped her decision; for her mother always chose the positive course.” In line with Olive’s implicit reaction against her father and for her mother, it is related that she “had been looking for so long — for a friend of her own sex with whom she might have a union of soul” (I, 122). Clearly,

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Olive directs at Verena all of those energies and impulses which would normally have been directed at a lover; as the following extract languidly suggests: "She came to her slowly, took her in her arms and held her long — giving her a silent kiss" (II, 226).

Verena's initially inhibited response to Ransom's mating call, together with the inner conflict which ensues, reveal how strong and perverse a hold Olive had on the girl's affections. In contemplating a change of allegiance, Verena reflects with unconscious aptness: "She had lent herself, given herself, utterly, and she ought to have known better if she didn't mean to abide by it" (III, 134). Verena's involvement with Ransom often reminds her matter-of-factly of her relationship with Olive. In the face of Ransom's intensity, she recalls that she "had had no such sensation since the first day she went in to see Olive Chancellor, when she felt herself plucked from the earth and borne aloft" (III, 27-28). Olive had felt that Ransom belonged to a "sex to which she wished to be under no obligations," and she impresses this attitude upon the tractable Verena (I, 34). As a rule, Olive "considered men in general as so much in the debt of the opposite sex that any individual woman had an unlimited credit with them; she could not possibly overdraw the great feminine account" (I, 215). Unhappily, Verena doesn't feel as vindictive as Olive might wish. Olive compensates for this curious failure in Verena by drawing heavily on "the great feminine account."

Olive obviously has a greater capacity for awareness than Verena, and so the responsibility for their relationship rests ultimately with her:

Verena wanted to know the truth, and it was clear that by this time she believed Olive Chancellor to have it, for the most part, in her keeping. Her insistence, therefore, proved, above all, that she cared more for her friend's opinion of Henry Burrage than for her own — a reminder, certainly, of the responsibility that Olive had incurred in undertaking to form this generous young mind, and of the exalted place that she now occupied in it (I, 233).

Verena's dependence is rather similar to that of Francie Dosson in The Reverberator, who gladly places her destiny in her sister's hands: "Francie was not guilty of any particular irreverence in regarding her sister rather than her father as the controller of her fate. A fate was rather a cumbersome and
formidable possession, which it relieved her that some kind person should undertake the keeping of.”

Both Francie Dosson and Verena can be seen as irresponsible in blithely assigning their lives to others for safekeeping. On the other hand, neither has the potentiality for consciousness to appreciate the meaning of this irresponsibility. Both are beneath the level of consciousness required of contributors to the action. This is particularly manifest in Verena’s case: “The girl was both submissive and unworldly, and she listened to her mother’s enumeration of the possible advantages of an intimacy with Miss Chancellor as she would have listened to any other fairy-tale.”

Verena responds sexually to Olive’s forcefulness without being conscious that she is doing so:

Olive had taken her up, in the literal sense of the phrase, like a bird of the air, had spread an extraordinary pair of wings, and carried her through the dizzying void of space. Verena like it, for the most part; liked to shoot upward without an effort of her own and look down upon all creation, upon all history from such a height. From this first interview she felt that she was seized, and she gave herself up, only shutting her eyes a little, as we do whenever a person in whom we have perfect confidence proposes, with an assent, to subject us to some sensation (I, 120).

Sublimely unconscious Verena becomes part of the responsibility of others, and sharing vicariously in their life, for better or for worse. Of little interest in their own right, characters like Verena and Francie Dosson are usually used to point up a managerial inclination in those around them.

Olive suppresses her consciousness in order to rationalize her behavior towards Verena. The following fantasy is fairly characteristic: “in such a relation as theirs there should be a great respect on either side for the liberty of each. She had never infringed on Verena’s, and of course she wouldn’t begin now” (II, 202). In order to give a strong moral note to this sort of rationalization, James alludes to “Miss Chancellor’s quick conscience” (III, 12). He does not allude to her “blunt” or “atrophied” but to her “quick” conscience, inferring that she has sufficient moral awareness — but that she doesn’t allow it much rein.

10 The Bostonians, I, 106-107.
This suppression of consciousness is signified by the presence of the death-wish, which points to unconscious guilt feelings: “The most secret, the most sacred hope of her nature was that she might be a martyr and die for something” (I, 17). The death-wish is complicated in Olive’s case by an heroic coloring and by the pleasure which she derives from the contemplation of death within a heroic and sacred context. This complication results, no doubt, from the convenient linking of her relationship with Verena to her militant, feminist ideals. Later in the novel Olive feels “something of the ecstasy of the martyr” (I, 224). The choice of the word “ecstasy” puts the reader in touch with the sexual underground of Olive’s heroic desires. Increasingly, the sacred comes to camouflage the profane: “Olive wished more and more to extract some definite pledge from her; she could hardly say what it had best be as yet; she only felt that it must be something that would have an absolute sanctity for Verena and would bind them together for life” (I, 172).

Olive Chancellor is not an evil person in any ordinary sense. She does not consciously intend evil; rather she is conspicuous for the goodness of her intentions, thereby joining those Jamesian characters who show up the surprising “brutality of good intentions.”11 One is reminded of the good intentions of Lord Mark in telling Milly Theale of Kate’s real relationship with Densher in *The Wings of the Dove*. In this connection Susan Stringham tells Densher:

“One could almost pity him — he has had such a good conscience.”
“That’s exactly the inevitable ass.”
“Yes, but it wasn’t — I could see from the only few things she first told me — that he meant her the least harm. He intended none whatever.”
“That’s always the ass at his worst,” Densher replied.12

The wreckage brought about by well-intentioned people is a persistent theme in James. He unfolded it in *The Golden Bowl*, for example, in Maggie Verver’s naive throwing together of husband and Charlotte Stant in her scrupulous attentiveness to her father’s happiness:

She began with wanting to show him that his marriage could never, under whatever temptation of her own bliss with the Prince, become for her a pretext for deserting or neglecting him. Then that, in its order,

11 Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton* (London, 1897), 139.
entailed her wanting to show the Prince that she recognised how the
other desire — this wish to remain, intensely, the same passionate little
daughter she had always been — involved in some degree and just for
the present, so to speak, her neglecting and deserting him . . . . Before
she knew it, at any rate, her little scruples and her little lucidities, which
were really so divinely blind — her feverish little sense of justice, as I
say — had brought the two others together as her grossest misconduct
couldn’t have done.13

In Olive’s manipulation of Verena, she does evil. She does evil because of the suppression of awareness about the real quality of her relationship with Verena. That this consciousness is latently there is indicated by the presence of the death-wish with its sexual overtones. All of this would seem to challenge the view that the suffering of James’s characters is tragic “because it is suffering illuminated by understanding, or the passionate aspiration after understanding.”14 What seems clear is that if the “aspiration after understanding” is not present in the characters, then the pressures of guilt and suffering ensue to promote detachment and understanding. In this sense guilt and suffering can function as a corrective force to generate consciousness which is adequate to the demands created by the characters’ situation.

This sort of pattern can be observed in the case of Isabel Archer in The Portrait of a Lady. Isabel tends to waver between a sense of personal responsibility for the failure of her marriage and a sense of having been betrayed by Osmond. At times she can reflect: “It was not her fault — she had practised no deception; she had only admired and believed.”15 At other times she sees herself in a graver light: “Very often, however, she felt afraid, and it used to come over her, as I have intimated, that she had deceived him at the very first” (III, 42).

Apart from the design which Madame Merle and Osmond have initiated in order to control Isabel’s money through the marriage to Osmond, it would seem fair to say that she had badly misjudged Osmond’s character, that she had not been as aware and hence not as protected as she might have been. She comes to recall, bitterly, the truth of Ralph’s early warning about Osmond: “It lived before her again — it had never had

time to die — that morning in the garden at Florence, when he had warned her against Osmond. She had only to close her eyes to see the place, to hear his voice, to feel the warm, sweet air” (III, 44). This recollection makes it clear that an awareness of the significance of Ralph’s warning had always been available to her; she had blocked this awareness in order to give full play to the aesthetic and romantic pleasures which she drew from her relationship with Osmond.

In retrospect there is still a glow of pride associated with her determined choice of Osmond:

Isabel's cheek tingled when she asked herself if she had really married on a factitious theory, in order to do something finely appreciable with her money. But she was able to answer quickly enough that this was only half the story. It was because a certain feeling took possession of her — a sense of the earnestness of his affection and a delight in his personal qualities. He was better than anyone else. This supreme conviction had filled her life for months, and enough of it still remained to prove to her that she could not have done otherwise. The finest individual she had ever known was hers: the simple knowledge was a sort of act of devotion. She had not been mistaken about the beauty of his mind... If she had been captured, it had taken a firm hand to do it; that reflection perhaps had some worth (III, 35-36).

The mixture of acquisitiveness, vanity, and aestheticism towards Osmond is curiously similar to his attitude to her, and this tends to take some of the pathos out of Isabel's case. Instead of the pathos of a victimized young woman, one sees in Isabel a gradual turning towards the acceptance of moral responsibility for the failure of her marriage, because she “had not read him right” (III, 34). In thus recognizing her previous lack of awareness as a major cause of her suffering, Isabel pays belated homage to the categorical moral imperative embedded in the Jamesian world, the imperative to be adequately conscious. In this connection Dorothea Krook has perceptively summed up what might be called the education of Isabel Archer:

Isabel Archer is too susceptible — just that shade too susceptible to fine appearances, to a brilliant surface, to the appeal, in short, of the merely aesthetic, to be morally altogether sound... and for this Isabel has to suffer, and through her suffering learn that the aesthetic is not coextensive with the moral, and that the touchstone of taste is not the touchstone by which a good life can be lived.16

16 Krook, 59.
The fact that Isabel returns to Italy — the fact that she takes her punishment, as it were — is one of the clearest examples of the sovereignty of the morality of consciousness in the Jamesian world.

It must be admitted that there are characters in James who accomplish considerable evil without showing any particular signs of guilt; there are characters who do evil without ever becoming aware of it, although they often end up as rather forlorn figures. These are usually the characters who have a keen aesthetic sense but little moral awareness. Mrs. Brooke in The Awkward Age (1899) is such a character. F. W. Dupee has drawn a vivid picture of her in his well-known study of James’s writings:

Like Falstaff she is not only witty but the cause that others are so. Like all the better rogues she has a kind of conscience, if this may be said without the impertinence of seeming to whitewash her. Her conscience is her exacting sense of social fitness, her awareness of others, her heroic respect for delicacy, imagination, humor, composure and candor. Her badness consists in her willingness to sacrifice other people — notably her daughter, Nanda — to her own system; and, apart from her wish to provide for her own in a practical way, she has no family sentiment.17

The reader is often blinded by the light which Mrs. Brooke radiates as she soars through her rhapsodies on the joys of consciousness: “The thing is, don’t you think?” she appealed to Mitchy — “for us not to be so awfully clever as to make it believed that we can never be simple. We mustn’t see too tremendous things — even in each other.”18 They show their fine surfaces to one another, yielding to communal consciousness the smallest spark of privacy. Mitchy describes them all as “one beautiful intelligence” (p. 225). At one point Vanderbank is moved to commemorate their candor: “the high intellectual detachment — with which we discuss a question touching you, dear Mrs. Brook,19 so nearly and engaging so your most private and most sacred sentiments. What are we playing with, after all, but the idea of Nanda’s happiness?” (pp. 232-233).

The offering of one’s person to others as an object of consciousness may not do much for one’s comfort, as Lambert

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18 Henry James, The Awkward Age (London, 1899), 220.
19 James added a final “e” to her name for the New York edition.
Strether senses under the curious eyes of Maria Gostrey in *The Ambassadors*:

They had taken hold of him straightway, measuring him up and down, as if they knew how; as if he were human material they had already in some sort handled. Their possessor was in truth, it may be communicated, the mistress of a hundred cases of categories, receptacles of the mind, subdivisions for convenience, in which, from a full experience, she pigeon-holed her fellow-mortals with a hand as free as that of a compositor scattering type. She was as equipped in this particular as Strether was the reverse, and it made an opposition between them which he might well have shrunk from submitting to if he had fully suspected it. So far as he did suspect it he was, on the contrary, after a momentary shake of his consciousness, as pleasantly passive as might be. He really had a sort of sense of what she knew. He had quite the sense that she knew things he didn’t, and though this was a concession that, in general, he found not easy to make to women, he made it now as good-humouredly as if it lifted a burden. . . She knew even intimate things about him that he hadn’t yet told her and perhaps never would. He wasn’t unaware that he had told her rather remarkably many for the time, but these were not the real ones. Some of the real ones, however, precisely, were what she knew.

Mrs. Brooke, Vanderbank, and Mitchy offer themselves to each other for leisurely examination with easy grace, as Vanderbank explains:

"... we shall continue to soar and sing. We pay for it, people who don’t like us say, in our self-consciousness —"

“But people who don’t like us,” Mitchy broke in, “don’t matter. Besides, how can we be properly conscious of each other —?"

“That’s it!” Vanderbank completed his idea: “without my finding myself, for instance, in you and Mrs. Brooke? We see ourselves reflected — we’re conscious of the charming whole.”

When Mrs. Brooke, Vanderbank, and Mitchy assemble, the reader witnesses an impressive orchestration of consciousness, though invariably consciousness of the aesthetic kind. In this connection, it is somewhat misleading to argue that there is “positively nothing they do not ‘know’ about themselves and each other.” Take, for example, the scene in which Mrs. Brooke, in the presence of Vanderbank, tells Mitchy that Mr. Longdon has offered Vanderbank a good sum of money to marry Nanda. In doing this, Mrs. Brooke forces Vanderbank

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20 *The Ambassadors*, 8-9
21 *The Awkward Age*, 229-230.
22 Krook, 147.
to abandon the idea. In terms of the aesthetic of power, she has executed a neat piece of strategy; but she does not appear to realize that Vanderbank will hate her for making Mr. Longdon’s offer public or that it was an injustice to treat Vanderbank this way. She acts this way with everyone, and everyone eventually deserts her.

When this happens, there is little evidence of the presence of a sense of guilt, but only an anxious feeling that, somewhere, somehow, her strategy has failed her. Mrs. Brooke’s final and desperate attempt to persuade Nanda to remain with her is based on her own selfish need rather than on Nanda’s welfare. Moreover, she cannot bring herself to understand the nature of Nanda’s professed relationship to Mr. Longdon. She asks Nanda: “But doesn’t that, my dear, put the extravagance of your surrender to him on rather an odd footing? Charity, love, begins at home, and if it’s a question of merely giving, you’ve objects enough for your bounty without going so far.”23 Of course from Mrs. Brooke’s point of view, “charity” not only begins at home but ends there as well.

Inasmuch as she lacks moral awareness, Mrs. Brooke can be said to have done considerable evil to those around her, particularly to Nanda. In addition, she may be said to suffer for this evil by being finally deserted. There is no guilt to help create awareness in her. In these respects, she resembles that host of Jamesian aesthetes, like Gilbert Osmond, who are caught up in a distinctive form of idolatry in the Jamesian world; these characters tend to use people for the sake of pursuing consciousness instead of using consciousness for the sake of people. This is why Mrs. Brooke fails to completely understand the people around her even though she has devoted her life to a complete understanding of everything. In short, it is because she fixedly assures herself that she already has complete awareness of her situation that she cannot attain this complete awareness. This is the moral dimension of her “free surrender to the play of perception” (p. 82).

Nanda represents a rather different case, although in the light offered by her mother’s example, she too is prepared to manipulate other people. In particular, she starts a train of evil events by bringing pressure to bear on Mitchy to marry Aggie. The marriage is a complete failure, as the reader might have pre-

23 The Awkward Age, 250-251.
dicted, because Mitchy and Aggie are not at all suited to each other. Aggie eventually becomes an adulteress, and poor Mitchy is left with very little to live for. Nanda chose to interfere in the lives of these two people on the grounds that Aggie must thus be rescued from the corrupting influence of her environment; ultimately Aggie becomes immersed in the corruption around her. The real reason for Nanda’s interference was to get Mitchy out of the way so that Vanderbank would see that he had a clear field with her, a strategy which was fully up to her mother’s standards. At the time, there was no sign of a consciousness of doing evil; on the contrary, Nanda’s whole conscious orientation was towards the welfare of Aggie and Mitchy. It is the shrillness of her beautiful intentions which is the familiar sign of rationalization. Speaking of Aggie, she tells Mitchy:

“As if she cared particularly for me? Ah, that has nothing to do with it; that’s a thing without which surely, it’s but too possible to be exquisite. There are beautiful, quite beautiful people who don’t care for me. The thing that’s important to one is the thing one sees one’s self, and it’s quite enough if I see what can be made of that child. Marry her, Mitchy, and you’ll see who she’ll care for” (p. 270).

The voice is Nanda’s, but the tone and method are her mother’s. With that partiality of vision which is so characteristic of her mother, Nanda is able to shut her eyes with respect to Mitchy’s fate by concentrating on the merit of her attempt to save little Aggie.

Although Mitchy’s role in the story seems primarily that of a loser, James has noted elsewhere that Mitchy is modestly successful in looking out for his own interests, in spite of having been manipulated by Nanda:

It’s absolute to him that Nanda will never have him — and she appeals to him for another girl, whom she sees him as “saving” (from things — realities she sees). If he does it (and she shows how she values him by wanting it) it is still a way of getting and keeping near her — of making for her, to him, a tie of gratitude. She becomes as it were, to him, responsible for his happiness — they can’t (especially if the marriage goes ill) not be — given the girl that Nanda is — more, rather than less, together. And the finale of the picture justifies him; it leaves Nanda, precisely, with his case on her hands.

Like other of James's adolescent characters, Nanda is interesting, from the point of view of consciousness, because of what might be called her plasticity in this respect. James found more than one tender drama in the "helpless plasticity of childhood that isn't dear or sacred to somebody!" As Nanda becomes more and more associated with Mr. Longdon, the moral bent of his outlook awakens a responsive awareness in her. That Nanda is possessed of at least a latent moral awareness is ironically seen by Vanderbank, who, though he doesn't possess it himself, recognizes that it would be a thorn in his side were he ever to think seriously of marrying her. In this connection, he tells Nanda:

"I'm only afraid, I think, of your conscience."
He had been indeed, for the space, more helped than she. "My conscience?"
"Think it over — quite at your leisure — and some day you'll understand. There's no hurry," he continued — "no hurry. And when you do understand, it needsn't make your existence a burden to you to fancy you must tell me." Oh, he was so kind — kinder than ever now. "The thing is, you see, that I haven't a conscience."

Paradoxically, Vanderbank is also afraid of how quickly Nanda's experience is widening: "She knows everything, everything. . . But of course she can't help it," he added. "Everything, literally everything, in London, in the world she lives in, is in the air she breathes — so that the longer she's in it the more she'll know" (p. 288).

Nanda is eventually visited by guilt, and this promotes adequate awareness. This is indicated in a conversation between Nanda and Mr. Longdon in which they begin talking about Vanderbank:

Her visitor . . . gathered in his hat and stick, which for a minute occupied his attention. "He ought to have married —"
"Little Aggie? Yes," said Nanda.
They had gained the door, where Mr. Longdon again met her eyes.
"And then Mitchy —"
But she checked him with a quick gesture. "No — not even then!"
So again, before he went, they were for a minute confronted. "Are you anxious about Mitchy?"
She faltered, but at last brought it out. "Yes. Do you see? There I am" (p. 414).

25 Letter to Dr. Louis Waldstein, October 21, 1898, ibid., I, 305.
26 The Awkward Age, 382.
Towards the end, she promises Mitchy: "I sha’n’t abandon you" (p. 399). This pledge is similar to that which Isabel makes to Pansy in *The Portrait of a Lady*; it is the acceptance of final responsibility for another in the light of that person’s fully appreciated welfare. What distinguishes this sort of responsibility from her earlier interference in Mitchy’s affairs is her belated consciousness of the reality of her own situation and of those around her. This is why she asks Vanderbank not to abandon her mother. She sees that they are suited to one another and that this relationship is what her mother desires, even as she suspects that it will not be easy to keep Vanderbank by her mother.

Nanda may look forward to a serene future with Mr. Longdon, who accepts his role as loving father with dignity and assurance. He will provide her with the guidance and stability which her mother had never given her. He is just serious enough to engender that atmosphere of reflective, penitential calm which is so suited to Nanda’s eccentric needs.

In thwarting her capacity for awareness, Nanda had done considerable evil to those around her; this is in part mitigated by her adolescent status and by her mother’s poor example. Perhaps this is why her fate isn’t quite as bleak as that of Isabel in *The Portrait of a Lady*, or that of Catherine in *Washington Square*, or that of Olive in *The Bostonians*. All of these characters are well-intentioned, rather good people in the ordinary sense. In this connection, it might be said that there are few conscious evildoers in the Jamesian world. The location of the fount of evil in the underdeveloped consciousnesses of his characters is typical of James’s intellectualism. At the same time, consciousness provides the hard underpinning for the patterns of crime and punishment in James’s world. If it is seldom portrayed as the key to virtue or heavenly reward, it is at least deeply linked with the safety of the characters, and perhaps of something more. In *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess wonders in connection with young Miles: “What had his intelligence been given him for but to save him?”27