

9 Moral Differences and Distances: Some Questions

Cora Diamond

THIS MATERIAL MAY BE
PROTECTED BY
COPYRIGHT LAW
(TITLE 17, U.S. CODE)

The theorizing mind tends always to the oversimplification of its materials. (William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience)

1

Moral philosophy is concerned with the character of moral concepts; but *which* moral concepts? A picture of the nature of moral thought may dictate, or seem to, which moral concepts should be considered. There are the big general ones: right and wrong, good and bad, duties, rights and obligations. Recently the focus of moral philosophy has included also the notions of virtue, and of particular virtues. The underlying picture here is roughly this: moral thinking is a kind of evaluative thinking, and in evaluative thought we have in mind something or other – act, person, character trait (say) – and we consider the application to it of some evaluative term. The picture supports a certain philosophical conception of a dispute about fact and value. That is, we take moral thinking to be ascribing value, moral value, to this or that; and then the philosophical question about such thinking will be whether the thing's having the value is a genuine fact about it, and our judgment a genuine recognition of something out there to be known. The picture also supports a philosophical conception of moral disagreement: moral disagreement will be disagreement about whether a term of moral evaluation applies to such-and-such; and we may also recognize a further possible kind of disagreement, over the acceptance or rejection of an evaluative concept (*blasphemous*, say, or *chaste*), or a set of such concepts. Perhaps the source of this picture is a general

conception of *judgment-making*. But I shall not speculate about that. I shall instead consider a different kind of distance that there may be between people in their moral thinking. I shall look at some examples, and some questions suggested by the examples. The focus in the next section will be on the terms 'moralistic' and 'moralism' as terms of criticism.

2

I start with a remark made by D. A. J. Richards, in *A Theory of Reasons for Action* (1971). In an argument of a contractarian type, Richards says that we would accept, in an appropriately defined 'original position', a moral principle about mutual love 'requiring that people should not show personal affection and love to others on the basis of arbitrary physical characteristics alone, but rather on the basis of traits of personality and character related to acting on moral principles'. Bernard Williams, who quotes this passage, refers to Richards's principle as 'this righteous absurdity', and the account of which it is part as 'richly moralistic'; Rai Gaita describes the same passage as involving the moralistic devaluing of what in human life makes possible our sense of the preciousness and irreplaceability of persons.¹

What kind of criticism is made by the term 'moralistic'? Williams suggests that the source of the 'righteous absurdity' is 'a feeling that love, even love based on "arbitrary physical characteristics", is something which has enough power and even authority to conflict badly with morality unless it can be brought within it from the beginning'; and he adds that the feeling is a sound feeling. That is, the criticism that Richards's account is *moralistic* does not rest on a judgment that Richards is mistaken about the possibility of such conflict; the idea is rather that Richards's moralism, taken to be a disabling distortion of his thought, lies in his way of conceiving the conflict as well as his response to it.

Williams's description of Richards's proposal as moralistic needs to be understood in the context of his more general criticism of the distinction, made by contemporary moral theories of a broadly Kantian type, between the *moral* and the *non-moral*: between the moral and non-moral points of view,

and between moral and non-moral motivation. Earlier in the essay I have quoted, Williams writes of possible conflict between morality (as conceived by Kantians) and a broad range of personal projects.² It is particularly clear in that earlier passage that his recognition of the genuine possibility of conflicts between morality and what is outside it (and his limited use of the language of the Kantians in specifying which conflicts he means) cannot be taken as an acceptance of the Kantian understanding of the conflicts, in terms of a realm of morality with some things inside the realm and other things outside it. When Williams, in the passage I quoted, describes as moralistic Richards's response to the possibility of conflict between love and morality, what Williams takes to be moralistic is not just Richards's proposal of a moral principle intended to prevent such conflict, but also, and at least as significantly, his understanding of the character of the conflict, involving as it does a Kantian conception of human nature and of the role in our thought of the moral and the non-moral. The moralism of Richards's *proposal* is inseparable from a moralistic understanding of the nature of the conflict which the proposal aims to head off.³ Although Williams uses the term 'moralistic' only in his criticism of Richards, the term could have been used in expressing one of the essay's main criticisms of much contemporary moral theory, namely, that such theories are moralistic in their characteristic way of dealing with *all* the relations between 'the moral' and 'the non-moral': in their way of dealing with possible conflict, and in their way of dealing with what 'morality' *allows* to go on outside its own realm, allows to go on in the realm of personal relations and personal projects.

It is very easy to think that the terms 'moralism' and 'moralistic' are used only pejoratively; but that would be an oversimplification. Henry James is interesting to consider in this connection, since he was himself the target of moralistic criticism which he took to show a profound failure of understanding. But he could also write this of Henry Fielding:

...we see [Tom Jones] through the mellow air of Fielding's fine old moralism, fine old humour and fine old style, which somehow really enlarge, make every one and every thing important.⁴

The complexity of James's response to Fielding's moralism comes out in the contrast he drew between Walter Scott and Fielding. Fielding's novels, like those of Smollett and Richardson, aim, James says, to instruct and edify. Of *Tom Jones* in particular he writes,

The story is like a vast episode in a sermon preached by a grandly humorous divine; and however we may be entertained by the way, we must not forget that our ultimate duty is to be instructed. With the minister's week-day life we have no concern: for the present he is awful, impersonal Morality...⁵

James goes on to make clear the contrast with *Waverley*: it was the first 'self-forgetful' novel. 'It proposed simply to amuse the reader, as an old English ballad amused him. It undertook to prove nothing but facts. It was the novel irresponsible.' (Ibid.)

That, as I suggested, is a complex passage, and not without its own criticism of Scott; the term 'irresponsible' is not used wholly ironically. But I am interested in the connection between Bernard Williams's description of Richards's moralism and James's description of Fielding's. Williams describes Richards's feeling that love has power and authority enough to conflict badly with morality unless it is *brought within it from the beginning*. And James, in describing the eighteenth century moralistic story-teller, tells us that he brings the entirety of the story into the sphere of the moral, from beginning to end. That is, Fielding's moralism is described by James as a mode of story-telling in which conflict of the sort Williams mentions cannot arise. The implied author, telling us of human love, human acts, human relations, does not allow us to enter sympathetically into these relations except as understood from the point of view of Morality. He does not invite us to care, as readers, about human life and what goes on in it, except so far as that care is subject to the authority of awful, impersonal Morality. What is being thought of as 'moralism' in the case of Fielding is not just the imposition of the authority of Morality, but also Fielding's conception of the point of view of Morality. We may contrast James on Turgenev: the seriousness of a human subject is what it reveals of human life to the caring mind. Turgenev's object is 'that of finding an incident, a

person, a situation, *morally* interesting', but finding a subject morally interesting is not a matter of finding in it what Morality would find. The eye for all of human passion, the 'deeply sympathetic sense of the wonderful complexity of our souls', makes the moral interest; what can be of moral interest is discovered in the writing, or in the reading.⁶ There is no idea here of a 'moral point of view' *set over against* other sorts of attention to the human soul. If there is such a thing as a 'moral point of view' exemplified by a writer like Turgenev, it is simply the point of view from which we see and attend with warmth and sympathy to the complex reality of human life: what is 'moral' here emerges from the intelligence and fineness of the consciousness.

James has his own conception of how the moral enters writing that is not moralistic in the sense in which Fielding is. Moralism itself he thinks of as possibly expressive of a kind of moral timidity, but it need not be that; there is no suggestion that Fielding is seen by James as suffering from any kind of timidity. The familiar use of 'moralism' as a pejorative term goes with the idea that the moralistic person is also a hypocrite (a good example would be Pastor Manders in Ibsen's *Ghosts*); James's non-pejorative use is tied to his interest in moralistic characters who are quite free of hypocrisy.

(There are, indeed, other non-pejorative or semi-technical uses of 'moralism', e.g., 'legal moralism' as a label for an approach to questions about law and morality. Of these uses, the most significant is 'moralism' as a term for tendencies of thought within Christian theology, concerning moral virtue and its importance. Within the various branches of Protestant theology, there was evolution towards 'moralism', e.g. in Anglican theology in seventeenth-century England, and in American Calvinism after Jonathan Edwards. An interesting connection between the disputes about moralism within Christian theology and the questions I am asking about moralism may be seen in Henry James's family. The philosophy of Henry James, Senior, had as a central element the rejection of moralism in the theological sense; but moralism, as evidenced in Christian thought, he took to be tied to moralistic deformation of human character, to forms of pride. His interest in and criticism of moralism thus forms the background of that of Henry James, Junior, to which I shall return.)

I do not want to leave behind the question what kind of criticism 'moralism' or 'moralistic' may make. But in this section I turn to a different but related question, about the kind of distance there may be between people's mode of thinking about the significance of the moral. The example comes from *The Washington Post*. I am including here a front-page story in the *Post*, 'Hell on Wheels', and some letters responding to it.⁷

Hell on Wheels

Paraplegic Killed in Maryland Crash Broke the Law and Conventions
by Chip Brown

They laid Hobart Wilson in the ground last week. The people who stuck by him – his mother, his wife, his boy Junebug and a handful of other kin – slid the metal coffin over the tailgate of the family's two-tone pickup truck. Then they drove all night in the rain with the body, 500 wet and winding miles from a small brown house in Silver Spring to a grave beside Wilson's father in Harlan County, Kentucky.

Hobart Wilson was 26 when he crashed head-on into another car near Bowie the Friday before last, killing himself and a luckless stranger. He had been driving 100 mph in the wrong lane. The impact splayed open the other car with such force that it jarred the needle off the speedometer. Fire gutted Wilson's car. But, save family, people familiar with him mourned mostly for the innocent, other motorist, for there was not much to redeem in Hobart Wilson's life.

'Hobart Wilson?' said an investigator in the sheriff's office. 'Do you always write about garbage?'

Even so, he was one of a kind, a man of the fiercest pride, a poor, white country boy known by judges and wardens and lawyers and police as one of the most notorious characters in Montgomery County.

Wilson was crippled from the waist down when he fell off a tractor 21 years ago. In courtrooms and bars and suburban streets people would stare as he crabbed along on a custom-built, skateboard-like contraption made of 3/4-inch

plywood and grocery-cart wheels. It was padded with foam rubber, covered with blue velour, and measured 4 feet long. It was wide enough for Wilson to rest comfortably on folded elbows. When he was in the county detention center, he carried a can of STP oil to keep the wheels oiled.

The board on wheels that Wilson built gave him the mobility that the world had taken away. It was his signature, the inspiration of an adamantly self-reliant man. On his wheeled board he was a freakish sight, scudding around downtown Rockville like a man who had long ago shed his obligations to society. He would dart under trucks and cross against the lights.

Leaving court once, Wilson's son climbed on his father's back and the pair proudly rolled out together. One time in the winter when one of his cars broke down on the highway during his annual trip to Kentucky to visit his father's grave, Wilson trundled out on the highway on his wheeled board and hitchhiked the rest of the way. He didn't see himself as handicapped and he spurned help from those who did, dragging himself up stairs with his long tattoo-covered arms. Though his legs were the size of broomsticks, he could lift 130 pounds with his arms.

In a way his arms were his life. He had inscribed his world on them in tattoo ink: a rose with his wife Vickie's name, a design with his father's name, and his son's name, Hobart III, known as Junebug. And there was a tattoo for the man himself [whom his] wife and mother and friends knew as Junior. It said, 'Born to Lose.'

'I don't think Junior was treated fairly,' said Vickie Wilson. 'Nobody disliked him but police and judges. I know he wasn't all good. I know he had a high temper and a grudge against the world. But how would you feel if you were him and you heard people making smirky remarks? Would you feel like obeying their code? He never complained. I never heard him say "I wish it could be different." He thought that's the way it was, that's the way it is, that's the way it's gonna be.'

Even as a juvenile, Hobart Wilson lived by some code that derived from hugging the ground and fixing dinner on a hot plate on the floor when nobody was around to cook. And from a certain perverse point of view, his grotesque

and comic history of roguish feats and criminal offenses would be an achievement even for a hellion who could walk.

Wilson and the law go back more than a dozen years. Police would often find weird grocery-cart wheel tracks in the mud behind buildings that had been burglarized. As an adult he was convicted of weapons charges, drunk driving, resisting arrest, trespassing, breaking into stores, malicious destruction of property (stabbing four Michelin tires), maiming and other charges.

He liked to drink and he liked to drive (with special hand controls) and he liked to carry an Old Timer knife sharp enough to shave the hair off his arms. He propped himself up on his board like the Sphinx and did not care for anyone who gawked at him. He would as soon fight the gapers and wiseguys as suffer them, his strategy being to catch the feet of opponents, trip them, and then lunge off his wheeled board when they were sprawled on his level. Sometimes he came out the worse for wear – when he was 23 he suffered a knife wound that took 20 stitches to close – but for the most part, Wilson was a terror of the lower echelon.

Wilson was the youngest of Lucille Wilson's four boys. He was born in Pineville, Kentucky, one of seven children. The family moved to Montgomery when Hobart was 3 and lived all over the county as he grew up. He was 5 when he fell off a tractor.

'After the accident, they told me he wouldn't live a year, but with the help of the Lord he lived 21,' said Lucille Wilson. 'He was the baby, he always got what he wanted. If he said "Let's have lemon pie tonight," why there'd be a lemon pie.'

When he wasn't in the hospital with kidney stones as big as Ping-Pong balls, and other complications relating to his paralysis, he was under a car. Cars and clothes were his passions. He was considered an expert mechanic, and as a stock-car racer in Frederick he won several trophies. In his brief life, his nephew Tommy guesses that Hobart Wilson owned 35 to 40 cars. For every car he had at least two silk shirts, and he always wore dressy pants, even when he went out on a job for the family landscape business and had to lie in the dirt to wrap burlap around plants.

His traffic violations did not approach his shirts in sheer quantity, but they were numerous, too. One in 1976 – failure to keep right of center – eerily foreshadowed the final crash. In the course of his life, Wilson was in trouble with the law so often that police dubbed the incline for the handicapped at the Rockville station the Hobart Wilson ramp.

Police and judges say he tried to outfox the system, using his plight to garner sympathy. In all his district court cases, Wilson asked for jury trials, and even if he didn't win an acquittal, he might get off with a suspended sentence. Eventually, though, the system got wise.

'He was known to every judge in this court and in the district court too,' recalled Judge Philip M. Fairbanks, whose name inevitably surfaces when people talk about Hobart Wilson.

A few years ago Fairbanks, one of the circuit's sterner judges, revoked Wilson's probation and sentenced him to 3 years in jail. One of the most famous bits of dialogue in the County Courthouse ensued as Wilson was rolling out of Courtroom 4, having spent most of the afternoon craning up at the judge as the judge had spent it peering down at him:

Court: 'I'm not going to change my mind...Mr. Wilson has been a problem and he's just going...'

The defendant: 'Can I say something now?'

Court: 'You can say anything you want.'

The defendant: 'You're a common son of a bitch.'

In jail, Wilson was nearly as much trouble as he was free. County detention officials remember a time when he threw a tantrum. Rather than be confined to a cell, he stuck an atrophied leg through the bars and snapped the bone like a twig.

Wilson had just gotten out of the detention center the Sunday before the fatal crash. That Thursday night he went to visit his sister, planning to be gone a couple of hours. Vickie Wilson said she would have some scallops waiting for him when he got back. It took him 5 minutes to put the hand controls into her Camaro. His nephew Tommy helped Wilson into the car so the wheels on his board wouldn't get muddy.

'He said, "I'll see you in a little while." I said "Okay," and that was goodbye,' Vickie Wilson said. She fell silent for a while.

At last she said: 'I think he should have one decent thing said about him. If any of the high society took the time to talk to him they'd see what a kind person he was, but they always had to be smart to him. Well, they can say what they want now. He's by his father where won't nobody push him no more.'

The following are the six letters printed by The Washington Post in response to 'Hell on Wheels'. The letters may have been abridged by The Post.

I am writing this after reading The Post's article on Hobart Wilson, who killed my husband on May 29 in a head-on collision while going 100 mph. So he was a cripple and a poor man; he should have not been driving in the first place. And why should The Post or anyone else give him front-page coverage for what he did? My husband, Gilbert Layton, was a great husband and father, and also a grandfather. There was no one who did not like and respect him. If anyone should have been on the front page, it was he. Because Mr. Wilson hated the world, a good man had to die a tragic death, leaving a loving wife, two children and two grandchildren he loved very dearly.

I am sorry for his wife and son, but that is all.

To send out a reporter to cover a story on this man is in very bad taste. I don't think The Post needed news that badly. The story was written so that readers would feel sorry for a man who didn't deserve it, who felt sorry for himself and wanted to kill himself and didn't care who he took with him. Unfortunately, it was my good husband, the father to our two children. — BARBARA LAYTON

Well, you people at The Post have finally dropped to an all-time low. I am, of course, referring to the article titled 'Hell on Wheels.' It is apparent that in order to make the front page of The Post, you have to have killed, maimed, raped or be a known felon.

I am not a callous, unfeeling or cold-hearted individual. I am very sympathetic toward people who deserve sympathy. I

certainly don't feel sorry for a person who apparently spent his life feeling sorry for himself.

My heart goes out to the family of the innocent victim he killed. To the wife who will be without a husband. To the children who will be without a father. To his grandchildren who will never know their grandfather.

Yes, I knew Gil Layton. I know his wife. I feel I know his family very well as Gil and I spent much time talking about them. Bragging about his granddaughters as any grandfather would. Showing all his co-workers pictures of them.

Gil epitomized what President Reagan meant when he referred to American heroes in his inaugural address. He was the typical hard-working family man. He married his high-school sweetheart. He learned his trade as a printer in a small weekly newspaper in his home state of New Jersey. He served his country in the Army during the Korean conflict. He was honorably discharged, reaching the rank of tech sergeant. He came to Washington seven years ago when he got an appointment at the Government Printing Office as a linotype operator. He moved over to the photocomposition division when the GPO converted most of its composition to computerized typesetting.

I don't ever recall Gil losing his temper, although I am sure he must have. His quiet manner made him one of the most likable people one would ever want to meet. I honestly know of no one who disliked him.

I am thankful that I had the privilege of knowing and working with him and his memory will always be with me.

This is the man that should be on America's front pages.
— JAMES D. ROBB

'Hell on Wheels' devoted 40 column inches and a front-page photograph to a worthless wonder whose contribution to society consisted of 'weapons charges, drunk driving, resisting arrest, trespassing, breaking into stores, malicious destruction of property, maiming, and other charges.' The same edition spent all of 8 column inches on a man (Leslie Jones, p. B5) who was an Oxford graduate, held two degrees, had been an organist and choirmaster, an Army bandmaster and a teacher and educator for some 30 years. — ARNOLD S. LOTT

I am so outraged by the long, prominent article about Hobart Wilson that I had to write. I think it is high time that we stop the sickening sympathy for those who deliberately break the law on the theory that they have suffered an injury and 'society' therefore either owes them something, or else 'society' will pay for it in some way.

It seems that the only concern is for the criminal. What about the victim, his rights, his hopes, his life?

The investigator in the sheriff's office had a good point when he asked, 'Do you always write about garbage?' – MARJORIE W. GREEN

Chip Brown's unsentimental article on the death of Hobart Wilson leads one to conclude that Mr. Wilson was a very uncommon man. – ROSE WILSON

I can't understand the logic of writing a sympathetic story about a guy who couldn't make it; a guy who flat out killed a man – a man *The Post* characterized as a 'luckless stranger.' I can well imagine how Mr. Layton's family must have cringed at that characterization. Also, I can imagine a couple of 'Good Gods!' from people who read that story and are crippled from the waist down – and are making it. Those people have lived with people staring at them and being smart with them.

Let's hear it for those people, not Hobart Wilson. Let's hear about Gilbert C. Layton, killed by a common SOB. – WILLIAM H. WEAVER

The letter-writers treat the story as if it had only one character; but the reporter has given us two characters – and the best lines are Vickie Wilson's. She says, of Hobart Wilson, 'I think he should have one decent thing said about him' – that is what should now be said, now he is dead; and Chip Brown lets us hear her say it. He quotes also her remark about the 'high society': 'They can say what they want now', words of grand dignity, almost an echo of the motto of the Marischal family of Scotland:

They say.

Quhat say they?

Lat them say.

And then there is the wonderful final sentence: Vickie Wilson's words, but Brown's choice as *final* sentence, with its triple negatives: 'He's by his father, where won't no one push him no more'.

Flannery O'Connor wrote that the qualities that make fiction are the sense of mystery and the sense of manners. 'You get the manners from the texture of existence that surrounds you', and in the South there are manners 'in abundance', in (among other things) the richness of Southern speech. Brown is not writing fiction, but he shapes his story to give us that richness of speech, that sense of manners – manners respecting the dead, manners used superbly to protect oneself and one's family.⁸ The other necessary quality in fiction was the sense of mystery; and O'Connor found that she could write about human life in a way that (she thought) allowed mystery to be seen through writing about 'freaks', grotesques, and more generally about 'poor folks'.

People wrote to O'Connor to ask why she did not write about nicer things and normal people. We come home tired, they said, and we want to read about something that will lift up our hearts. The people who wrote to the *Post* asked why Hobart Wilson was given front-page coverage. Why write about a man who couldn't make it? There are lots of disabled people who *are* making it, who don't attack people who stare at them; the *Post* should be writing about them. Or: the person whose story should be on the front page is Gil Layton, the decent man, respected by all. Another letter-writer objected to the forty column-inches, and front-page coverage, for a worthless wonder with a long criminal record, while there was an obituary one fifth as long, buried in a back section, for a decent Army bandmaster, a graduate of Oxford, an organist: if anyone *deserved* the front-page story, it was he, not Wilson. And another letter writer expressed outrage for the sympathy given to a law-breaker. She referred to the fact that an officer in the sheriff's department asked whether Brown always wrote about 'garbage'; the letter writer says that that is a good point: we don't (that is) want to read about garbage.

So there are letters of outrage, letters in which the *Post* is bitterly accused of sympathy-mongering for a man who deserves no sympathy; and there are also readers who find

themselves at a great distance from those letter-writers. What sort of clash is this?

(I am not here concerned with the general question whether the article itself is properly subject to criticism. Some people find the portrayal of Wilson overly romanticized; and there might indeed be disagreement about that. There is also a question about when it is appropriate for a newspaper not to print something it would otherwise regard as printable, in order to avoid pain and offence to those who have recently been victims of crime or disaster. The distance I am concerned with is different from disagreement about that question, too. What separates people (the separation, that is, that is my concern) is the appropriateness of the kind of interest in Wilson that the reader of 'Hell on Wheels' is invited to feel.)

There are contexts in which it would be fair enough to note that there is more to be said for Layton, the innocent victim, than for Hobart Wilson. But they are both dead, and we are not confronting the question 'Whom do we want in the neighborhood?' When we are invited to hear Vickie Wilson say, 'I think he should have one decent thing said about him', manners – what Flannery O'Connor referred to as manners – remind us that there are contexts in which we should see the dead law-breaker simply as dead man, about whom it is right that something decent should be said. Again, the letter writers invite us to see the *Post* story, encouraging sympathetic attention to Wilson, as akin to a defence attorney's attempt to get an acquittal by working on the jury's sympathy, or as akin to Wilson's own attempts to manipulate juries. But we are not jurors; it is not our responsibility to issue a verdict or determine a sentence. So what exactly is the matter if we read Wilson's story with sympathy or interest? Is there something the matter with our not approaching the issue as impartial juries or stern judges, if (after all) there is no question of our actually issuing a verdict?

Chip Brown's article has a moral complexity which is related to the response it got. Although Brown begins by saying that not much was redeemable in Wilson's life, his story presents Wilson as a man in whom there is something to admire. The currents of life run very strong in him; and it is the possibility of his exciting admiration, or something like it, as well as sympathy and interest, that is connected with the outrage aroused

by the article. There are two centres of interest in the article: Wilson alive, full of life, even as law-breaker and spitter at the law, and Wilson dead, reached by Vickie Wilson's language. If 'Hell on Wheels' invites a certain admiration for Wilson, or sympathy for him, interest in him, or a strong sense of him as fellow mortal, it is, though, encouraging responses which are not subjected to the authority of awful, impersonal Morality. Sympathy and interest are going where they go, independent of moral desert.

I am trying to suggest a parallel here with the issues of Section 2. There I quoted Bernard Williams, about the responses one may have to the possibility of conflict between love and morality – one response being the avoidance of possible conflict by subjecting love, from the start, to morality, depriving it of independent authority. The idea suggested by the letter-writers that the criterion for sympathetic interest should be *moral deservingness* heads off a related kind of possible conflict. The sense of life, the sense of what is humanly interesting, can choose objects and consider them as morality would not; and it may seem thereby to constitute a possible threat to morality. I am not sure that this is a fair reading of the letters; I will come back to the question.

I suggested earlier that the letter-writers may have been distressed also by the fact that the implied reader of 'Hell on Wheels' is not invited to make moral judgments (or is invited not to make such judgments); the story of Wilson's life is not used to edify or instruct. The term 'moralistic' can point to an insistence on moral judging or to the habit of moral judging, in contexts which only some would see as calling for such judgment. Muriel Spark, for example, has Mrs Hawkins (in *A Far Cry From Kensington*) describe herself this way: 'I enjoy a puritanical and moralistic nature; it is my happy element to judge between right and wrong, regardless of what I might actually do'.

I want to consider this question further (the question of the relation between moralism and the place and character of moral judging in human life); and to do so I shall temporarily leave the Hobart Wilson example, and turn to several others, including Annette Baier's discussion of Hume and Kant, Henry James's views, and Martha Nussbaum's discussion of James.

In 'Moralism and Cruelty: Reflections on Hume and Kant' (1993), Professor Baier contrasts the two moralists, considering in particular what they take to be appropriate response to moral failings. She several times describes Kant's account as moralistic and Hume's as not so (pp. 443, 450-451). Various elements in Kant's thought contribute to the characterization of Kant as moralistic.⁹ Here is part of her discussion of Kantian moralism:

Kant's is an overtly moralistic morality, holding us to account for all failures in which our faulty will has played a role, encouraging us to anticipate a just judgment by an all-seeing God... Human conscience is to be a stand-in for the just divine judge, but not for the merciful pardoner, so forgiving ourselves is not encouraged. We are to demand moral perfection of ourselves, as God demands it of us. We are to be punctilious about leaving it to magistrates to punish people for breaches of their perfect obligations, and leaving it to others to demand, each of herself, her own perfection. We are to show some concern for the happiness of our fellows, but only as far as the moral law allows room for that concern ... The Kantian conscience accuses, recognizes that punishment is deserved, but leaves it to God or the magistrate to inflict it. (443-444)

Here what makes an account moralistic is not the idea that people should be forever acting as moral judges of *others*; it is rather the modelling of one's relation to one's own actions and character in terms of a kind of internal moral courtroom. Thus Professor Baier later makes the contrast with Hume's nonmoralistic account by referring to Kant's as 'moral law enforcement' (p. 451).

Professor Baier's contrast between Hume's nonmoralism and Kant's moralism turns also on the *content* of their accounts. She describes Humean morality as '[boasting] of its nonmoralistic avoidance of "useless austerities, rigours and self-denials" and [promising] "nothing but gentleness, humanity, beneficence, affability; nay even, at proper intervals play, frolic and gaiety";¹⁰ the contrast between Hume and Kant is

that between *epicureanism* and *moralism* (pp. 450-451). (Moralism as denial of 'joy in living' is also, we may note, a theme of *Ghosts*.)

This contrast in content is interesting - interesting because it suggests something else that is at stake. That is, for a morality to be moralistic is not merely for it to prescribe what from a Humean point of view look like useless austerities, rigours and self-denials. Such prescriptions have their source in a conception of human nature, and of the significance in our lives of morality - and thus also of what needs to be strengthened in us, what we may need to be protected from. Any human good independent of morality, any interest or desire, might on occasion give rise to conflict with morality, hence (from the point of view we are characterizing as moralistic) should be brought under morality from the beginning; and tendencies to indulge such interests or desires should be regarded with suspicion. That conception of human nature was a great theme of Henry James's. For him it was associated in particular with New England (and Annette Baier also refers to the kind of moralism she contrasts with Hume's view as 'puritan moralism', p. 450). The New England character 'takes things hard': James twice puts that phrase into the response by outsiders to the New England character - to the character that wants always to know what its duty is, that is unwilling to *enjoy* unless it is certain it ought to. (See *The Bostonians*, ch. 2; *The Europeans*, ch. 3; cf. also *The Ambassadors*, ch. 1: 'Woollett [the New England town] isn't sure it ought to enjoy. If it were it would.'¹¹) For James, what is to be contrasted with the New England subjection of life to 'ought' is, most frequently, Europe; those of his characters who are New Englanders through and through hate Europe (Olive Chancellor, for example, in *The Bostonians* and Waymarsh in *The Ambassadors*). There are a number of reasons for their disliking Europe, and one is that Europe does not want to be improved, while the moralistic character in James's novels is frequently an improver. The New Englander feels the iniquity of the world, and in Europe is painfully aware of iniquity ignored. Another thing hated in Europe is its 'discrimination of types and tones', its interest in, tolerance of, shades and ambiguities.¹² Europe is feudalism (in contrast with the bright hopeful republic);

Europe is Catholicism; and all of this is thought of as seductive, as something to be resisted, to be on one's guard against. (See especially ch. 3 of *The Ambassadors*.¹³)

In discussing James on moralism and puritanism in *The Ambassadors*, Martha Nussbaum notes his portrayal of the moralistic character as 'all moral pressure': there is in that character an essential opposition to *passivity* and to (non-moralized) emotion. This, I think, leads us back to Hobart Wilson, for one of the things that the letter-writers object to is that readers of 'Hell on Wheels' are being enticed into sympathy for someone who does not deserve it, and may *yield* to such sympathy. Nussbaum describes the hero of *The Ambassadors* as 'yielding to the impressions of life as they unfold themselves before him – as allowing himself to be seduced' (p. 187); and that very suggestive description fits the reader of 'Hell on Wheels', or the reader perhaps as seen by the letter-writers. The interest of Wilson's story lies in the strong impressions of life 'unfolding themselves' before the reader, who may be thought of as thereby seduced.

In summary of these points: moralism may or may not involve an insistence on judging *others*; the role given to judging, within a moralistic view of morality, may be the somewhat different role it has in making a view of morality 'austere', i.e. in placing under suspicion whatever is not brought under the authority of morality. That habit of suspicion (that form of the habit of judging) is an essential element in what James calls 'taking things hard'.

(It should be noted here that the level of specificity of content at which there is a tie between the content of a morality and the morality's being moralistic goes below the level alluded to by Annette Baier in her quotation of Hume's 'useless austerity' passage. Certain vices and virtues, certain principles, have particular significance in characterizing a morality as moralistic – lying, for example. Martha Nussbaum mentions the importance James attaches to hatred of lying, as a characteristic of New England moralism, in *The Ambassadors*. The attitude towards lying also has great significance in his other treatments of moralism: in *The Europeans*, Europeans fib and lie (and are thus contrasted with New Englanders);¹⁴ and again in *The Bostonians*, Boston itself, on p. 1, is 'this unprevaricating city', while Southerners, and people from New York,

not only fib but (more significantly still) joke about it. The moral character of *places* is intensely felt by James; and the contrast between America (or New England) and Europe is for James not just the contrast between moralism and aestheticism but often the more specific contrast between *rigour as to truth and enjoyment of appearance*. Another important connection between the content of a morality and its being moralistic concerns the significance attached to sexual morality and the particular character of the sexual morality itself;¹⁵ yet another connection lies between the role given to retributive punishment and the morality's being moralistic. This latter connection is indeed central in Professor Baier's account of Kant's morality as moralistic; and Hawthorne should be mentioned as a writer who particularly emphasizes the connection between puritan moralism and punishment.)

Some, at least, of the resentment occasioned by what is now labelled 'political correctness' is a response to moralism on the left, moralism of a sort already present in the feminists and reformers sketched by James in *The Bostonians*, and attacked by George Orwell in 'The Art of Donald McGill' and other essays. No better example can be found of an element of human nature capable of clashing with morality, or what we take to be morality, than our sense of what is funny. Jokes, especially vulgar ones, depend heavily on stereotypes and on topics taken to be intrinsically funny, like sex and drunkenness;¹⁶ they thus have enormous potential for moral offensiveness, and are frequently cruel. Hence the familiar use of 'That's not funny' to mean not that something is not funny but that we ought not to find it so. But how far should the jokey side of us, what Orwell called the Sancho Panza in us, be squashed into the space which morality (conceived in this or that particular way) is willing to allow it? Should we, for example, prohibit the teaching of a children's song about a drunken monkey, because drunkenness is, after all, nothing to joke about? If some answers to such a question are felt to be puritanical or moralistic, that feeling is (I am suggesting) not primarily a response to the content of the answer but rather to how the question itself is conceptualized – to the underlying ideas about human life and human good. Under cover, as it were, of 'the authority of Morality', something with its own rights is being denied them: *that is the feeling*.¹⁷