29. Morality Revisited

Who was there who could defeat me argumentatively? Who was there who, playing the moralist in one way or another and yet overlooking or denying the will to power of moralists themselves, wasn't living in a glass house easy enough for me to detect?

Letter to the Editor
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Dear Editor:

On the occasions when some perfidious act engenders a good deal of moral outrage and indignation, I'm always struck by the number of high-minded people who reveal their lack of humanity. Who in their hurry to place themselves squarely on the side of the victim, let the spirit of revenge peep through their spirited demand for justice.

A case in point is that of women's groups who, all too frequently adding narrow-mindedness to their high-mindedness, denounce the judiciary and the law courts for going too easy on such offenders as receive the odium of all respectable citizenry. I'm referring to such criminal types as child molesters and, in order to make my point as quickly as possible, allow me to take up the case of the recently convicted Brandon psychologist.

Now the gist of this report is that the offender received a three-year suspended sentence for putting his hands down a child's pants. Furthermore, that this sentence, along with his being ordered to do community work and speak publicly about his act, displeases those both professionally and politically involved with such matters. The position of these caregivers and advocates seems to be that, in order to underline the gravity of such offences and to deter others from committing them, a period of incarceration is necessary. Leaving aside for brevity's sake the questions of gravity and deterrence, I should like to raise the one of overall social purpose and direction. With respect to the case at hand, is it to stigmatize the offender to the point of making him a virtual outcast or is it to rehabilitate him and reintegrate him into the community?

If the caregivers and advocates answer that it is the second, then I'm hard-pressed to understand their objections to a process by which the offender publicly announces his guilt, expresses remorse over his crime, exposes himself to the anger and

> opprobrium of others, and, by these means, attempts to win back a modicum of dignity and respect. Can one honestly say that the above is non-progressive but that putting him in jail is? Can one deny that the more forceful and punitive course says more about where we haven't gone than where we have?

– If I hadn't become a professor of philosophy, I would've been a medical doctor.

– Really, Theo.

– That's what my mother wanted. For me to follow in the footsteps of my Dad. He was a heart specialist just beginning to get a name for himself when he started having health problems. Basically, it was a loss of appetite and some pains in his abdomen. We thought his condition would get better but it didn't. Then we received the diagnosis. I was only twenty-one when we got the terrible news.

To be fundamentally right in a way that is fundamentally wrong for philosophy, the Nietzschean way, is to carry one's own bit of folly about. Principally the idea that one is out to conquer something beyond oneself. To win hearts and minds, to draw even a handful of truthtellers (call them philosophers) to one's side by virtue of an unshakeable argument. Perhaps I was stricken more by this folly then than now. Certainly it was the case that, coming fresh off my reading of Nietzsche and going straight into the academic world, I had a sense of my own moral superiority as a truthteller that, compared to what it is today, was unilateral and unambiguous.

"**A Critique of Geoffrey Sayre-McCord's 'Moral Theory and Explanatory Impotence'**"

"The purpose of this essay is to show in detail and without feigned good will how I view such an article as Geoffrey Sayre-McCord's. How I view it, that is, as so much intellectual straw-thrashing. So much circular reasoning and piling up of questionable assumptions. So much, in short, of a duplicitous nature passing itself off as painstaking scholarship and cumulative insight."

So much hostility and lack of restraint in this first essay of mine in a course called *Moral Theory*. It makes me wince now to read it but at the time of focussing on a scholarly debate about whether or not moral theory was feasible, about whether in fact something called moral properties could be said to exist, I was in another frame of mind. Perhaps I saw in my hostility

and lack of restraint the virtue of bravely flying my colours as a non-conformist, an unscholarly type, a higher form of truthteller simply by not being a scholarly type. And yet there I was dealing with scholars or rather one particular scholar and playing the scholarly game. Or rather *not* playing it while playing it and so in a sense in violation of it. In bringing forth the personal element as I did, I was making a pact with waywardness and trouble-making and so bringing forth what in professional circles is generally ignored or expelled.

– Why didn't you follow in his footsteps?

– My hands shook.

– But surely you could've been some other type of specialist.

– I've become that.

– Yes, and you've accomplished great things. Seven books is nothing to sneeze at.

– Andrew, you're wondering why I didn't go into the medical profession. When I was a second-year student at the University of Toronto, I took it into my head to go see the great Max Gottlieb. I had done some work on Tarski's truth definitions and I asked him if he would do me the favour of looking it over and then telling me whether I should become a doctor or a logician. Two days later I got a call from him. I was at home and I'll never forget his words. He said to me: "Baumgarten, you are *a logician!"*

It was this comedy of sophisticated self-assurance amongst scholars that, as I found it in Sayre-McCord and others, induced in me what I would call the signs of moral outrage.

"Why such anger and vexation in a formal essay? Because I dislike with a passion the specious, the pretentious, the hypocritically humble, the deceptive and misleading. I dislike them most particularly in the intellectual sphere – in the (can one imagine it?) *morally concerned* sphere! And due to the fact that formal requirements have obliged me to meet with more than one scholarly work exhibiting the above more-than-mote-in-the-eye, I now take the opportunity to discharge my pent-up wrath, realizing as I do that, given my inability under the present circumstances to deal adequately with more than one essay, I risk the unfairness of making Geoffrey Sayre-McCord my whipping boy."

Oh, much more confident then than now to think that I could deal adequately with that one essay! For however good or bad it was, it inevitably belonged to a much larger and more complicated field. Namely, all the thoughts, ideas, arguments, theories, and so forth that formed the matrix from which it sprang and took its own particular shape. A history of problems, in other words, that, had I been better informed about them, would have made me more humble and sympathetic to Sayre-McCord. But not to the point that such a path as he followed, so full of easy acceptance and so devoid of scrupulous questioning, wouldn't have vexed me.

– There are always those who bite off more than they can chew. But the great corrective in all this – and it far surpasses anything any self-correcting individual can do – is the community of scholars and scientists who monitor each other's work and who arrive at a consensus that is as every bit as much a test and challenge as it is an objective.

Up to the time of my essay critiquing Sayre-McCord, the vast bulk of my written assignments were interpretative. Be they on the works of Homer, Sophocles, Shakespeare, or Ibsen, they were original enough that I didn't feel compelled either to attack or defend the work of literary scholars. At least this was generally the case – only one major exception comes to mind[*] – and so the polemical side of me surfaced more in the classroom than in my writing. But with the shift towards philosophy, the situation changed and at least some of my writing became quite aggressive. I see three principal factors in all this: Nietzsche's influence on me, the desire to expand the range of my intellectual interests, and philosophy's own tendency towards quarrelsomeness. But the latter had a double resonance. While I was drawn to it in the form of debates and polemics in general, I was also repelled. Both drawn and repelled sufficiently that I had no other wish but to attack the pretensions to theory holding all together.

– If you take away theory, what else is there?

Looking back, I can see more clearly what I was doing in that moral theory course. It was resistance to the hegemonic aspect of theory. But what a problem unfolds once this is caught sight of. A problem in or for philosophy that is no less than the problem *of* philosophy. And so really *the* problem of philosophy. But a problem so recondite and hidden – and this is the complication and even over-complication – that it is inseparable from the appearance of philosophy's not being concerned about it or even aware of it and so having much time and energy for *other* problems.

– Andrew, I think I'm going to be sick.

Inevitably it must sound like I'm belittling all philosophy and consigning it to the fire. There doesn't seem to be a way of being philosophical without gross pretensions of one sort or another. It touches upon the tree of knowledge myth and the irrepressible combination of curiosity, pride, desire, and belief. We want to see like gods and this happens almost in direct proportion to acquiring the freedom not to have to worry about earthly matters. And yet a large measure of this self-deifying process inevitably becomes a construction of our world and so implicated in everything that may then be called necessary to it.

– Take it down slowly, Theo. It'll help to relieve the nausea.

We miss not taking ourselves too seriously in the scheme of things even by the fact that we try *not* to take ourselves too seriously. The god-like view we want of ourselves and everything else – even the view of ourselves as not being gods – assures this paradox. A scientist who peers into the cosmos and gives us an idea as to when it all started is no less removed from this sublime foolishness. Either in the case of the scientist or the philosopher, good hard work and considerable thought cozy up to extraordinary presumption and make us forget that we're always trying the impossible task of getting clear of ourselves and our world in order to have the absolutely pristine view.

– Take some deep breaths. Think about your wife, your daughter, your colleagues, your students. Oh, dear!

From where I stand, I can see it takes the view that the indeterminable whole is not just the end of everything known but the beginning of the great unknown. Mortality runs deeper than plummets sound and yet so do immortal change and growth. From a strictly imaginative viewpoint, there is no reason not to celebrate what will come any less than to mourn what will pass away. No reason not to think that the first won't be as bounteous and as marvellous as the second.

– I'm alright, Andrew. It was just shortness of breath.

– Theo, I'm starting to believe you. He doesn't give a damn about the violence he does.

It is by virtue of the fact that truthtelling has its work ethic but is not *just* a

work ethic that it must move critically into itself. If analytic philosophy is prepared to do this with its empirical tradition, then why not so-called postmodern philosophy with its theoretical? I suppose I was doing the second before I even knew it and certainly before I had ever heard the word postmodern. At the time of taking the moral theory course, I still thought of theory as a more or less neutral thing if it seemed to have understanding as its one and only objective. Sayre-McCord's article – but not only Sayre-McCord's article – exasperated me because, unlike Nietzsche's work, it showed not the slightest recognition of the subtlety and complexity of what it was purportedly explaining. Instead there was the assumption that certain ethical or moral principles broadly accepted today and with a long history of acceptance are fundamental ones and presumably so fundamental that one can dispense with calling them into question. In the case of Sayre-McCord, all his epistemological and ontological concerns, all the points by which he wanted to show that moral theory could be scientific, bore upon such meagre items (meagre because they brought nothing new into the picture) as the cause-effect relation between kindness and happiness (on the one hand) and cruelty and misery (on the other).

– Andrew, take your hand away from my forehead!

Perhaps the hardest thought is that we are condemned to our immorality as much as our morality and, as the key part of this thought, through the latter as much as by it. How much of the heroic inevitably takes on the harsh traits of the inhumane and even inhuman and how much of the humane takes on the soft and pliant ones of the hypocritical, cowardly, and mendacious. It could be said that nearly all public discourse and role-playing are devoted to the task of denying that any such state of affairs exists. That is, to a royal falsehood about morality that everything about it or at least everything essential to it is clear and straightforward. To a good deal of dissembling, cover up, and self-delusion that goes on with a more or less good conscience and makes up everything in society that glitters but is not gold.

– I don't like this collapsing of the distinction between good and evil. The very mixing of the two is, at best, an excuse not *to do good and, at worst — Andrew, there comes a point where the only response to such intellectual devilry is a cold silence.*

There must be a sense in which, morally speaking, one is always vulnerable. A sense in which one's morality is always one's immorality. But who can pass the bulk of their time with such paralysing considerations (unless their subject is truthtelling)? Who is not forced to a yes or a no as soon as they

put their hands to something? When I took up John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* in the second part of the moral theory course, I was upset by its phoney manoeuvres to demonstrate that a certain system of social organization (call it Western, liberal, capitalistic, and democratic) was the perfect convergence of justice and rationality.

"It is clear that the Original Position in *A Theory of Justice* draws just as much upon what could be called *irrational* as rational. True it starts off as a hypothetical contractual situation made up of parties distinct enough that we can more or less identify with them. But as one critic has pointed out, it is 'a very peculiar selection environment where there are no conflicting interests that need to be mediated, where everyone prefers the same two principles, and where the agreement on these two principles is unanimous.'

"The behaviour of these presumably rational beings is strange in another way. The condition of their being partially amnesiac (that is, being forced to submit to the Veil of Ignorance such that they don't know their personal identities and stations in life) seems to sit well with them (nobody presumably complains about it) and they attend to the business at hand with an uncommon preference for theoretical planning and distant projects over practical and immediate concerns. Of course what really underlies all this is that the Original Position involves no contracting process per se but rather the machinations of a covert legislator, namely, John Rawls, who determines the operative values and conditions in advance in order to allow for a *simulation* of free choice and rational deliberation."

It was Rawls' means that I was targeting rather than his end and yet this end, what was it to me? Certainly not what it was to Rawls. Certainly not something to protect and preserve and perhaps, as a secret moral calling, to serve as a political theorist.

– I suppose when we're forced to take up sides, there's always the chance of an injustice creeping in.

– Andrew, there's no injustice in taking up sides against evil. If you give up believing that people fight it for no other reason than to defeat it, then you move into an area of cynicism that is the first step towards not *fighting it.*

This difficult thing of the intellectual in its relation to the practical or worldly, how it feeds into it or plies it own course, how its very merit is plying its own course, is a venture so vast and complicated that it can never quite know itself. Operating with an abundance of risk capital, this indeterminate

relationship squanders its time, energy, and resources without knowing what long-term blessings or, for that matter, calamities will follow. And yet at the same time it is always a knowing that they *will* follow for even the most cursory study of history shows that the giving of birth to the present by the past is messy, complicated, and painful. It is almost a reflex action to stay away from the more disagreeable terms that Nietzsche uses to describe this process. His hyperbolic counter to hypocritical complacency in the moral sphere often seems like a diagnosis of the past meant to be a prescription for the future.

– Are we supposed to look towards the future with no hope at all? Are we just supposed to assume it will always be as it is?

– Given our species' track record, it may get worse.

– I don't go in for that sort of pessimism. The world has always been faced with great problems. It's courage and conviction and not black thoughts that have gotten us over the worst and will do so in the future.

Perhaps at no other time than this period of taking honours courses and being both a full-time student and a middle-aged one was I so disposed to exercising a certain mastery or authority in the classroom. The feminist voice versus my Nietzschean one was one of the axes on which classroom discussion turned that tended to be more animated and controversial than usual. This both generational and gender-oriented conflict that was really nothing more than brief displays of passionate intensity on both sides was nonetheless frequent enough that it excited in me a will to argue even more forcibly than I was used to. Being but a student and so, as it were, having no Achilles' heel in the way of professional concerns and commitments, in the way of having to be on guard against upsetting people's sensibilities, in the way of having to fear repercussions from challenging current mores or those who chose to be their spokesmen, I was almost argumentatively unbeatable and perhaps unbearable. No doubt a few walked away from various classroom discussions with a view of me as someone who spoke too loudly and acted too aggressively. Certainly I relished getting the better of these young women (all my principal adversaries were young women and indeed much younger than me except for one middle-aged woman with whom I frequently sparred) and on more than one occasion I was conscious of a certain erotic tinge these skirmishes had. Given that the male professors largely kept silent in the face of feminist commentary, I experienced the difference between their behaviour and mine as if it were an enhancement of my virility and masculine identity. At the same time I felt myself to be

morally superior to both parties since the one, the professors, had knowledge but lacked spirit (for the most part, they walked on eggshells whenever there was the chance that some indiscreet remark or all too defensive or confrontational gesture might be construed as sexist) while the other, the young feminists in the class, took advantage of this and had spirit without knowledge or, rather, self-knowledge. While of course they invariably knew something about the material that bore the brunt of their feminist critique, they were very much short in the area of awareness that I admired most and naturally cultivated. Nowhere did I see amongst them the type of spirit that peers deeply into itself and, going beyond theory, captures in one full movement its personal limitations and deficiencies along with its will to overcome them.

– Theo, I think I'll cash out.

What I was fighting in my own egoistic way and with my own degree of ideological commitment was no more simple and pure than my reaction to and reception of it. It was as much the folly of youth as the titillating and sometimes even charming threat it poses to age (this charm itself may be a threat) as it was the usual bugbears I encountered in scholarly work. Principally there was the ever-recurring one that I found not only in feminist writings but in all scholarship. The one that, as I understand it now and try to deal with it even while reacting and railing against it, is indispensable to generating a broad range of arguments and points of view. The one that, though it be an entanglement and obstacle for me, is a fortuitous possibility for many others. In short, the one that is the typical scholarly move of starting off with a few unexamined assumptions that are always-already problematic. Assumptions therefore that cannot be turned over and looked at if one is to deal with relatively clear and straightforward problems that are to be found downstream and away from the unmanageable, intractable, indeterminable source of all problems.

– I think we're getting variations on a theme that, like Chinese water torture, is supposed to break us down, drive out us our minds and make us shout: "Halleluiah! The Truth has finally come!"

No, I was not so supple in my thinking then as to see that where I hated or where I had contempt was but a zone of passage in that otherwise not inhospitable realm where all discursive possibilities take root. Or to see that, however great this hatred or contempt grew when I found myself challenged, discomforted, afflicted, outraged, and so forth, it was nonetheless bound up with common interest and enthusiasm, with what on a

general level is inseparable from extraordinary diversity and development. The all too delicate and almost impossible consciousness of this whole scene, the hardly practicable, manageable, and yet indispensable awareness of where we all are situated as truthtellers – this consciousness seems to me to be something that swirls around like the finest of moral vapours and is what Nietzsche points to when he says that we should be thankful for our enemies.

– Bravo. Summed up well and worth a good long period of reflection.

Yes, there's this matter that has been on my mind for some time now.

– Andrew, wake up. Otherwise I'm truly going to lose it.

It pertains to my subject in a strange, insolent, and even insulting way. It usually has far less to do with not telling the truth than with telling it. Or rather it has mostly to do with overtelling it or undertelling it, with not finding the right measure, means, pace, tone, setting, and occasion for telling it. It continually complicates matters by making an active restless shifting ground of the supposedly fixed and settled realm of intentions, aims, objectives, ideals, and so forth. It presents itself as the threat, and hopefully no more than the threat, of the paralysing nullity that the telling of the truth can be when it no longer connects, no longer discharges energy, no longer reveals itself as startling displays of synthesis, generation, transformation, and so on.

– Is he talking about his own truthtelling? Then I agree wholeheartedly. It's a queue de poisson. It tells us a great deal about nothing that could make any difference to a person seriously and responsibly concerned about the matter.

*

* It is at this point that I find myself looking for an excuse to include a short essay that initially I had no thought of including. The drive to put my wares on display always threatens to overburden the present work and egoistically trump up heterogeneity as a virtue in and of itself. Or, more properly, to make it lose its thematic grounding in my subject and so become a sort of intellectual interloper. It is necessary then for me to double back on this area and give it as much consideration as possible.

First of all, I realize that I'm always taking a chance when I dip into my old writings. It is a relatively easy thing to do and, at least in my own eyes, raises them to a venerable status. It is also the case that, as good as many of them are, it would be a sin against my subject to drag anything into it that wasn't already barking at the door. For then I would be merely puffing myself up with pieces I take pride in and without even the mitigating factor of being aware of it. It would be like riding on the crest of what I have already said rather than still exploring it.

So here is this essay which I long to put not wrongly into this greater one. Already I have marginalised it and still I'm wondering what hole there would be in my account if I didn't reproduce it. The fact that it is about Ibsen's *Ghosts* but not about Northrop Frye's influence on me (although it no doubt gives signs of this influence and, to this extent, is no different from the others), the fact that it is, roughly speaking, a good whacking I gave to a distinguished critic's interpretation of *Ghosts*, the fact that it has some bearing on moral issues and how delicate things in this area often fall into clumsy hands – all these facts or factors don't seem to add up to a proper justification for dragging it in and sprucing it up.

Am I honoured then in not doing so? In resisting the temptation to play the Carl Ridd that I myself was so critical of? It seems to be so and yet, at the same time, the more I push it towards the margins, the more I say to myself this minor essay is not really essential but only interesting and pertinent up to a point, the more its reduced status becomes its *equivocal* status – the more it seems to be barking at the door.

Objections to Francis Fergusson's View of *Ghosts* as a Truncated Tragedy

In his book, *The Idea of a Theatre*, Francis Fergusson states that "the underlying form of *Ghosts* is that of the tragic rhythm as one finds it in *Oedipus Rex*." Mrs. Alving, according to him, is involved in a quest for her "true human condition." In this quest, according to Fergusson,

> she suffers a series of pathoses and new insights . . . and this rhythm of will, feeling, and insight underneath the machinery of the plot is the form of the life of the play, the soul of the tragedy.

At the centre of Fergusson's thesis is the idea that *Ghosts* has two concurrent actions operating throughout. One is an underlying action with a tragic rhythm and the other is a larger one that imitates the plot. A difficulty arises in that he speaks of the first as giving a tragic form to the play while maintaining that the second also gives a form to it or at least, as he maintains, a superficial one. In other words, we are meant to understand that Ibsen's work is not one but *two* plays operating on different levels. The superficial play he calls a thesis-thriller because it "proves the hollowness of the conventional bourgeois marriage." According to him, it employs theatrical tricks to keep the suspense going until the final curtain. Moreover, he claims that this superficial play interferes with the more important one which is the tragedy of Mrs. Alving.

Fergusson claims that this underlying action is part of a broader action (and this is another point of confusion because he has already characterized the larger action as the superficial thesis-thriller) which he describes as an attempt to control the Alving heritage by most of the characters who "want some material

or social advantage from it . . .” He cites two examples: Engstrand’s need for money for his Seaman’s Home and Paster Manders’ desire for “the security of conventional respectability.” It is difficult to see, first of all, how the opportunity which comes to Engstrand at the end of the play to extort money from Paster Manders can be viewed as an attempt to control the Alving heritage. Rather than plotting anything along these lines, Engstrand is busy throughout the play simply trying to enlist Regine’s and the Pastor’s help to get his pet project off the ground (i.e., the Seaman’s Home). In the case of Pastor Manders, it may be that he is trying to secure social recognition from his handling of the Orphanage business. However, this does not entail that he is also after what he is already well-endowed with, namely, conventional respectability. As for the two other characters, Osvald and Regine, Fergusson offers no evidence to show how they might be scheming to control the Alving heritage. On the contrary, Regine abandons it and, in a certain sense, so does Osvald. Furthermore, Fergusson never makes it clear how Mrs. Alving’s quest for a “true and free human life” belongs to this poorly defined larger action of all members wanting control of the heritage. Her attempt to do away with an *unwanted* heritage, namely, the unpleasant memories of her marriage to Captain Alving by dedicating an orphanage in his memory in conjunction with her plan to start a new life with her son, is derailed precisely by elements that belong to what Fergusson calls the thesis-thriller.

In order to give credence to putting distance between Mrs. Alving’s fate as some sort of spiritual quest and the shocking developments of the past that, in their very revelation, devastate the present and create the tragedy, Fergusson resorts to such statements as the following:

> The tragic development is written to be acted; it is to be found, not so much in the actual words of the characters, as in their moral-emotional responses and changing relationships to one another.

This line of argument is tantamount to saying that wherever the written play doesn’t provide evidence of a relatively pure and independent spiritual quest by Mrs. Alving, it should be assumed that a correct production of the play will provide that evidence. Instead of analysing it as a literary work (in principle, the author is against this), Fergusson interprets it as if it were a staged production which happily conforms to his thesis. By doing so, he removes himself from a more objective study of it that would not rely on this artifice.

In addition to the above, Fergusson employs a number of vague statements to exaggerate Mrs. Alving’s spiritual state as opposed to her practical and even, as one might say, her intellectual concerns. One example is as follows:

> . . . Mrs. Alving is fighting to realize her sense of human life in the blank photograph of her stuffy parlour. She discovers there no means, no terms, and no nourishment . . .

Apart from its obscure language, the above statement, like similar ones, does not show how Mrs. Alving’s quest manifests itself as the action of the play. In *Oedipus Rex* the hero is a doer; it is possible to pinpoint events which are brought into being because he acts. Aside from the Orphanage business and Osvald’s return to the family home, both of which are largely antecedent events, no such moves or developments are instigated by Mrs. Alving. In response to this paucity of evidence of her cutting a predominantly spiritual path, Fergusson tells us that the tragic quest of Mrs. Alving must be seen at the level of her

psyche. In other words, the underlying action of the play must be understood as being predominantly in her head. We are then invited to an imaginative reading of the play that would take it to be properly performed only if it followed this prescript.

According to Fergusson, the tragedy of Mrs. Alving manifests itself most clearly in her changing relation to Osvald. In order to demonstrate this, he plots the play like a Greek tragedy. The opening conversation between Engstrand and Regine is the prologue. The conversation between Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving in Act I is the *agon.* The scene following their overhearing Regine with Osvald becomes the tragic suffering of Mrs. Alving. And the fit which turns her son into a vegetable is the *peripety*. Again, it is to be noted that Fergusson seems to think that whatever elements of the play don't fit in with his interpretation of it are not essential. For instance, Paster Manders' conversation with Mrs. Alving only has significance for him as a discussion of their opposing views about Osvald. Their first exchange is in fact taken up almost entirely with other topics. These are the reading of works written by free-thinkers, public opinion, the Orphanage, the question of insuring it, the character of Engstrand, and the question of whether or not Regine should live with this man whom she thinks is her father. Fergusson also underplays the significance of the rather heated discussion between Pastor Manders and Oswald over common-law relationships. Characterizing it as "light and conventional, an accurate report of a passage of provincial politeness," he does not see it as one symptom among many of a malignancy at the heart of a restricted and closed-off thinking in society.

According to Fergusson, when Mrs. Alving overhears Oswald and Regine unwittingly reenact an ugly incident of the past which involved Captain Alving and Regine's mother, she "suffers the breakdown of the moral being which she had built upon her now exploded view of Osvald." Here Fergusson suggests in what I daresay is a truncated way that this shocking incident has a traumatic effect on Mrs. Alving that shatters both her belief in her son and her hopes for their future together. Since there is nothing Mrs. Alving or any other character says which either explicitly or implicitly reveals this to be the case, Fergusson is forced to retreat once again into his argument that only a staged version can properly reveal this. He points to the passage where she speaks of the ghosts of the past clinging to the present and states that it is part of the tragic rhythm, the epiphany following the suffering and *agon*. Rather than trying to explain the significance of this passage or relate it in some meaningful way to the shock Mrs. Alving receives upon seeing her husband come to life in her son for an instant, he contents himself with describing it as "a poetry not of words but of the theatre, a poetry of the histrionic sensibility."

At the points where *Ghosts* most obviously doesn't live up to Fergusson's view of it as Mrs. Alving's spiritual tragedy, he faults it not only for what he calls the superficial action or thesis-thriller, but "the limitations of the bourgeois parlour as the scene of human life." For instance, he objects to the ending of Act I since it interrupts Mrs. Alving's suffering and, taking the focus away from her tragic quest, puts it on the more sensational issues concerning Oswald and Regine and the former's presumably having lecherous designs on the latter. According to Fergusson, the lengthy and matter-of-fact discussion that Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders have at the beginning of Act II is but a deceptive cover for Mrs. Alving's "suffering the blow in courage and faith . . ." When Mrs. Alving deals with such topics then as marriage, law and order, hypocritical conventions, cowardice, artificial and dead teachings, old prejudices and beliefs, duty and obedience, illusions, ideals, and truth, the real significance of her performance as a

theatrical event is not supposed to lie in what she says but how well she conveys her hidden suffering to the audience.

It is the end of *Ghosts,* however, which gives Fergusson the greatest displeasure by robbing him of the full tragic experience. Since Mrs. Alving does not come to some sort of resignation to or full acceptance of what fate has inflicted upon her, he sees the tragic action as being broken off prematurely. ("At the end of the play the tragic rhythm of Mrs. Alving's quest is not so much completed as brutally truncated, in obedience to the requirements of the thesis and the thriller.") One thing he never makes clear is how Mrs. Alving, who is essentially an innocent victim or, if not that, a person with the best of intentions, should accept a catastrophe totally out of proportion to the responsibility she has for it. Even if the action were to continue to the point where she sadly resigned herself to her fate (i.e., by presumably accepting her son's affliction as a cross she must bear), it would turn her not so much into a tragic heroine as a pathetic figure with all fight and resistance knocked out of her.

The dilemma which Mrs. Alving faces at the end of *Ghosts* is in total conformity with what Fergusson calls the thesis-thriller if one sees Mrs. Alving's fate not so much as a tragic quest but as a series of tragic choices. Her lifelong dilemma has always been whether to break away from or submit to the dictates of a society constantly at odds with honesty, truth, and a sensitive reading of new developments and events. Up to the point of the catastrophe, she has managed to run a middle course by making a number of both conventional and non-conventional moves. When she left her husband but quickly returned to him, usurped his position as head of the household but kept up a pretense that theirs was a normal marriage, and sent her son away from his father but kept alive in him the illusion that his father was a good and respectable man, she followed a pattern of conformity and rebelliousness which is in evidence at the very beginning of the play. There she plans to build a free and liberal-minded future on the false foundations of the past. At the end of the play, Mrs. Alving has finally reached a situation where she can no longer equivocate between what society tells her is the right thing to do and what she likely knows or feels in her heart is required (i.e., executing her son's dying wish). If the play were to end with Mrs. Alving making a final decision whether her son should live or die, it would have to be considered, like Manders' choice between either expressing his love for the young Mrs. Alving or sacrificing it on the alter of public opinion, a choice between either achieving a great personal victory or suffering a great moral defeat. That is, by either following the dictates of her heart in a matter of great seriousness or, with fear more than anything else as the motivating factor, following the dictates of society.