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## INTRODUCTION

### In the Place of the Classroom

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The first of the epigraphs I have placed as guardians or guides at the entrance to this book—"I know that the world I converse with in the cities and in the farms, is not the world I *think*"—opens the concluding paragraph of Emerson's "Experience." It captures one of Kant's summary images of his colossal *Critiques*, epitomized in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, namely that of the human being as regarding his existence from two standpoints, from one of which he counts himself as belonging to the world of sense (the province of the knowledge of objects and their causal laws, presided over by the human understanding), and from the other of which he counts himself as belonging to the intelligible world (the province of freedom and of the moral law, presided over by reason, transcending the human powers of knowing). But each of the thinkers and artists we will encounter in the following pages may be said to respond to some such insight of a split in the human self, of human nature as divided or double.

Emerson's variation of the insight (not unlike John Stuart Mill's) is to transfigure Kant's metaphysical division of worlds into a rather empirical (or political) division of the world, in which the way we now hold the world in bondage is contrasted with, reformed into, a future way we could help it to become (this is not exactly foreign to Kant). Plato's variation—or rather Plato's vision of which Kant's is a variation—is that the world of sense is a degraded scene or shadow of an intelligible world which can be entered only by those fit to govern the world perfectly, that is, with perfect justice. Locke's vision is between a world of nature ruled by power and violence and a world of the political created by common human consent. Ibsen's division, in *A Doll's House*, is between an incomprehensibly unjust present world and a world of freedom and reciprocity which is almost unthinkable, which only human instinct and risk can begin to divine and describe. Freud's sense of our division shows the details of the private epic in which the world we do

not know we know rules the world we imagine we know. Shakespeare's late romance *The Winter's Tale* posits, in its longest act, a pastoral world of song and dance and familiar mischief which is a kind of dream of the actual world, one in which the various roles into which the arbitrariness of birth and accident have cast us—kings, princesses, merchants, clowns, peasants—are occupied by those whose natures exactly fit them for these roles, in which indeed there would be no need for "roles," since all members of such a society would know and receive pleasure and reward from their natural, and naturally modifiable, constellation of positions.

And so forth. Each of these variations provides a position from which the present state of human existence can be judged and a future state achieved, or else the present judged to be better than the cost of changing it. The very conception of a divided self and a doubled world, providing a perspective of judgment upon the world as it is, measured against the world as it may be, tends to express disappointment with the world as it is, as the scene of human activity and prospects, and perhaps to lodge the demand or desire for a reform or transfiguration of the world. So common is this pattern of disappointment and desire, in part or whole, as represented in the philosophical figures to follow here, that I think of it as the moral calling of philosophy, and name it moral perfectionism, a register of the moral life that precedes, or intervenes in, the specification of moral theories which define the particular bases of moral judgments of particular acts or projects or characters as right or wrong, good or bad.

An idea of the moral calling of philosophy as such inspires the American event in philosophy, as philosophy is discovered by Emerson. In putting Emerson first—say this is making the last first, looking back over the history of philosophy from the perspective of that re-beginning—I accordingly wish here to accent that history differently from the way it presents itself to philosophers who begin their sense of philosophy's re-beginning in the modern era with the response, in Bacon and in Descartes and in Locke, to the traumatic event of the New Science of Copernicus and Galileo and Newton, for which the basis of human knowledge of the world rather than of human conduct in that world is primary among philosophical preoccupations. It is familiar to describe modern philosophy as dominated by epistemology, the theory of knowledge, making the fields of moral philosophy and the philosophy of art and of religion secondary, even optional. My claim for Emerson's achievement is not exactly that he reverses this hierarchy but

rather that he refuses the breakup of philosophy into separate fields, an eventuality fully institutionalized as philosophy becomes one discipline among others in the modern university. (Such a refusal can be understood to manifest itself in the writing of Wittgenstein and of Heidegger. But in these cases this aspect of the writing is, for reasons yet unarticulated, ignorable at will.) So that Emerson's effort to reclaim or re-begin philosophy as such on these new, perhaps intellectually inhospitable, shores ("these bleak rocks"), is precisely what keeps him from being recognized, either by friends or by enemies, as a philosopher.

The sense of disappointment with the world as a place in which to seek the satisfaction of human desire is not the same as a sense of the world as cursed, perhaps at best to be endured, perhaps as a kind of punishment for being human. This sense of existence cursed requires not merely a philosophical but a religious perspective. I do not, in what follows, take up perfectionisms based on a religious perspective, any more than I regard the perfectionism I do follow out as requiring an imagination of some ultimate human perfection. Emersonian perfectionism, on the contrary, with which I begin and to which I most often recur, specifically sets itself against any idea of ultimate perfection.

But if the world is disappointing and the world is malleable and hence we feel ourselves called upon for change, where does change begin, with the individual (with myself) or with the collection of those who make up my (social, political) world? This question seems to make good sense if we contrast Emerson or Freud with, say, Locke or Marx (who is not featured in these pages but puts in a distinct cameo appearance), but its sense is questioned as we consider what perfectionist encounters look and sound like. I would say, indeed, that it is a principal object of Emerson's thinking to urge a reconsideration of the relation ("the" relation?) of soul and society, especially as regards the sense of priority of one over the other. I take seriously, that is, Emerson's various formulations of the idea that, as he words it in "The American Scholar," "The deeper [the scholar] dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true." By taking it seriously I mean I find it intuitively valuable enough that I am moved to work with it in making it plainer. It bears directly on what I have called the arrogance of philosophy, its claim to speak universally, to discover the bases of existence as such.

In Emerson, as in Wittgenstein's *Investigations*, I encounter the social in my every utterance and in each silence. Sometimes this means that I find in myself nothing but social, dictated thoughts (the condition Emerson opposes as "conformity," what philosophy has forever called the unexamined life); sometimes it means that I find in the social nothing but chaos (Emerson cries out, "Every word they say chagrins us"). What I conceive as the moral calling of philosophy is what I conceive the Freudian intervention in Western culture to have responded to. If I say that philosophy, as influenced by the later Wittgenstein, is therapeutically motivated, this does not mean, as some philosophers have construed it, that we are to be cured of philosophy, but that contemporary philosophy is to understand its continuity with the ancient wish of philosophy to lead the soul, imprisoned and distorted by confusion and darkness, into the freedom of the day. (A condition of philosophy is that the day not absolutely be closed to freedom, by tyranny or by poverty.) Freud perpetually distinguished his work from that of philosophy, recognizing that what he meant by the unconscious of experience and speech challenged philosophy's understanding of consciousness (I take it for granted that philosophy had no systematic understanding of the unconscious). I believe that Freud's stance against what he called philosophy has proved unfortunate both for philosophy and for psychoanalysis. It is my impression that Lacan's way of overcoming that stance only served to harden its prevalence in the United States. Perhaps those days are passing.

The sense of disappointment I find in the origin of the moral calling of philosophy is something that I have derived principally from my reading of Wittgenstein, most particularly his *Philosophical Investigations*, where the human being perpetually attacks its everyday life as intellectually lacking in certainty or fastidiousness or accuracy or immediacy or comprehensiveness and is compelled to search for an order or a system or a language that would secure a human settlement with the world that goes beyond human sense and certainty. Sometimes Wittgenstein describes or pictures this as a search or demand for the absolute, which he more generally names the metaphysical. Wittgenstein's principal contrast with the metaphysical is what he calls the ordinary or the everyday, a perpetual topic in the pages to follow here. Where Wittgenstein describes his effort in philosophy as one of "returning words from their metaphysical to their everyday use," I habitually speak of the task of accepting finitude. The attempt to satisfy the demand for the absolute makes what we say inherently private (as though we withheld the

sense of our words even, or especially, from ourselves), a condition in which the good city we would inhabit cannot be constructed, since it exists only in our intelligible encounters with each other. The philosophical outlook of Deweyan pragmatism, considerably more prominent in contemporary American intellectual life, at least in American academic life, than Emersonianism, is equally devoted to discarding empty quests for the absolute. But for my taste pragmatism misses the depth of human restiveness, or say misses the daily, insistent split in the self that being human cannot, without harm to itself (beyond moments of ecstasy) escape, and so pragmatism's encouragement for me, while essential, is limited.

Wittgenstein's disappointment with knowledge is not that it fails to be better than it is (for example, immune to skeptical doubt), but rather that it fails to make us better than we are, or provide us with peace.

The sequence of texts I devote attention to—while just about all of the texts are monsters of fame—is too selective to count as a proposed canon of reading in moral philosophy, even for one register of moral thinking. The severity of selectiveness in limiting the number of principal texts to the number of weeks of the course from which this book derives was itself limited by the hope that each text could receive enough of a consecutive exposition from me to prompt and allow my reader to go on with it alone. Any sensible teacher (myself half the time) will find the pace too fast. But any fewer texts would not, it seems to me, give a sense of the magnitude and variousness of the register of moral thinking I wish to bring to attention.

I have been guided in my specific selection by two main considerations: first, to show the persistence of a family of articulations of the moral life in modern thought (say from the time of Shakespeare and, in the following generations, in the work of Milton and of Locke) that begins most famously in Western culture with the beginning of philosophy marked by Plato and Aristotle; second, to include texts that no serious (or say professional) philosophical discussion of moral reasoning would be likely to neglect, but at the same time to insist upon the pertinence of further (literary) texts that few professional philosophical discussions, or courses, would feel pressured to acknowledge. The inclusion of the films that accompany the discursive texts here is meant to help in exerting such pressure, but no professor of philosophy should be expected to feel that their omission would intellectually be much of a loss, let alone unsafe. Nor would I wish to give the impression that philosophy left to itself requires compensation by revelations within the

medium of film. These films are rather to be thought of as differently configuring intellectual and emotional avenues that philosophy is already in exploration of, but which, perhaps, it has cause sometimes to turn from prematurely, particularly in its forms since its professionalization, or academization, from say the time of Kant (the first modern to show that major philosophy can be produced by a professor, namely within a discipline that is one among other university disciplines). The implied claim is that film, the latest of the great arts, shows philosophy to be the often invisible accompaniment of the ordinary lives that film is so apt to capture (even, perhaps particularly, when the lives depicted are historical or elevated or comic or hunted or haunted).

While the wisdom in discussing a text of Emerson's first is something whose fruitfulness can only manifest itself as the sequence develops, there are reasons for it that can be given at the outset. One reason is that the primary body of Hollywood films to be adduced here may be understood as inspired by Emersonian transcendentalism. Another is that Emerson brings to philosophy dimensions of human concern that the field of philosophy, in its Anglo-American academic dispensation, in which I was trained, particularly discouraged, not to say disheartened. Matters have modified themselves to some degree over the decades since I began writing, but Emerson continues to suggest for me, for example, a remarkably apt source of paths between the Anglo-American dispensation of philosophy and the German-French.

The hard division of the philosophical mind between these dispensations has been costly to academic life, hence to intellectual life more generally, if less assessably, in the humanities and the humanistically interested social studies in these decades. The division has served, for example, to deepen the suspicion between literary studies in America and American pedagogy in philosophy, the former so often hungrily incorporating the primarily French structuralist and post-structuralist theory that began in the late 1960s, the latter equally often holding this material in contempt. It may seem paradoxical, or irrelevant, to understand Emerson as a bridge between these philosophical dispensations since he is not widely accepted as a formidable philosophical thinker in either of them. So it figures that my fascination with Emerson has been a gift whose value I can neither renounce nor easily share.

I came late, as Emerson in his American context came late, to philosophy. This is not particular to me (merely exaggerated, as I spent the years of my life through college as a musician); it is reflected in such facts as that phi-

losophy is not a regular part of an American high school education and that the field of American studies was formed by an association of literary study and historical study, with philosophy left, or leaving itself, out. Emerson's response, in his new world, to his irresistible want of philosophy was to include habitually in his writing any and all of the vocabulary of philosophy—from ideas and degrees of participation in ideas, to impressions as the origin of ideas, to the distinction of accident and necessity, and reason and understanding, and fate and freedom, and possibility and actuality, and theory and practice. But he often introduces terms from this vocabulary in ways that disguise their origin, hence he allows an assessment of these terms by testing whether they hold up under the pressure of ordinary speech.

When he says, in "Fate," "Ideas are in the air," can we doubt that he is invoking Plato's theory of forms at the same time that he is speaking, in 1850, of the absorbing issue of slavery, as if inquiring as to our participation in, call it our stance toward, these ideas? He goes on to follow out the literal consequence that something essential to our lives, the air we breathe, would be fatal to us but for the fact that our lungs are already filled with this air, allowing us to withstand the weight and pressure of air from above by the counterpressure of that air from within ourselves. This becomes, I take it, a parable whose moral is that the issue of slavery is a matter of life and death, for the nation and for the nation's breath, its speech, its power to understand itself, and therewith for philosophy, whose demand for freedom is incompatible with slavery. (This incompatibility may be denied, or repressed. It once helped me to assert a difference between the idea that some people may rightly be made slaves and the idea that some group of people are inherently slaves, something other than exactly human. The former idea is merely hideous. Holders of the latter idea are accursed.) A leaf I take from Emerson's essays is the sense of writing philosophy from belated America as if this locale is the remaining place where one can take philosophy by surprise, I mean with surprise at the fact that there should be such an enterprise that measures the value of our lives. The familiar recognition that famous philosophers have failed to understand their predecessors, or say to do them justice, should perhaps be seen less as a matter of a need to transcend past achievements than as an effort to discover philosophy for oneself, as if philosophy exists only in its discovery.

What impels me to such a course, risking impertinence, is that America (unless I specify otherwise, I use this term as shorthand for the United

States), in refusing Emerson's bid for philosophy, has not to my mind sufficiently joined philosophically in measuring the value of our lives (unless perhaps one conceives that its literary accomplishments are its philosophy). Contemporary American philosophy has dominated the worldwide development of analytical philosophy, for which, in Quine's words, "philosophy of science is philosophy enough." It perhaps also dominates the field of moral philosophy, but with a, perhaps well-deserved, distrust of the rest of philosophy. And pragmatism, in its classical writers and in its contemporary forms, to the extent that I know them, does not, as I have suggested, seem to know what half of my life is, the half that is not subject to superstition or fanaticism or magic thinking (the traditional black beasts stalked by Enlightenment thought), but that is fraught with, let us say, disproportionate invitations to disappointment and chaos, to the sense of the public world as one in which "every word they say chagrins us."

But consider that there are no *other* words to say than the words everyone is saying. Hence each of the words at Emerson's disposal is one that he has found used in a tone or place or out of some inattentiveness or meanness that requires unswerving examination. His language is hence in continuous struggle with itself, as if he is having to translate, in his American idiom, English into English. I think Emerson is thus dramatizing a dissatisfaction with everyday language that philosophers congenitally sense. A persistent philosophical attempt to cure this dissatisfaction with the everyday is to link philosophical language with logic as in the work of Frege and Russell, initiating what has become known as analytical philosophy. When the later Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin, in a counterdevelopment of this dispensation, declare philosophy's reclamation of ordinary language, they are at the same time suggesting that logic provides not a solution to this dissatisfaction but a substitute satisfaction (which may indeed be all that is rationally attainable), and they are undertaking to demonstrate that only ordinary language is powerful enough to overcome its own inherent tendency to succumb to metaphysical denunciations of its apparent vagueness, imprecision, superstition—not overcome this once for all, but in each incidence of our intellectual and spiritual chagrin.

A sense of the struggle of language with itself forces a certain liberation in interpreting texts that seems to some to go beyond the apparent evidence of their words. Here I recall Emerson's repeated idea that serious writers write beyond themselves, or as he also puts the matter, that character (meaning

our constitution and our writing) teaches above our will. So that to understand serious writing will precisely require us to question what a text asserts in order to arrive at the conviction that we are covering the ground gained in what its words actually contrive to say.

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In what follows, I take my examples of moral issues most systematically from their manifestation in the art of film. A favored way of approaching the field of moral theory is to contrast two major theories: one of them, called deontological, takes the notion of the right as fundamental, independent of the good, and emphasizes the assessment of human action by its responsiveness to obligation and the motive of duty; the other of them, called teleological, takes the notion of the good as fundamental, deriving from it the notion of right, and stresses the consequences or utility of actions rather than their motives, emphasizing the assessment of human action by its responsiveness to the call to maximize the pleasure or happiness at a person's or a group's disposal. The most influential theory of the good is that of utilitarianism, represented most famously by John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth century; the principal theories of the right are associated with the names of Kant and Hegel.

But when I thought about these eminent theories in connection with the lives depicted in the grand movies I had been immersed in, the theories and the depicted lives passed one another by, appeared irrelevant to each other. Yet these lives seemed and seem to me ones pursued by thoughtful, mature people, heavily in conversation with one another about the value of their individual or their joint pursuits. I could not understand my interest in them as unrelated to moral reflection. I claim for these films that they are masterpieces of the art of film, primary instances of America's artistic contribution to world cinema, and that their power is bound up in their exploration of a strain of moral urgency for which film's inherent powers of transfiguration and shock and emotionality and intimacy have a particular affinity.

But if this moral urgency seems, at an early glance, marginal to the interests of the formidable moral theories most favored in courses in moral philosophy, how is one to assess its presence in the moral outlook explored in, to begin with, the writing of Emerson, hence who knows how deeply in the writings of those whom Emerson takes as his instructors—for example, Plato, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Milton, Kant—and in those who acknowledge instruction from him, notably Thoreau and Nietzsche? I came to

imagine that offering a course exploring such a question might prove to be an adventure for me that students and friends would be interested to share, ones at any rate prepared to follow out an inkling of curiosity about the interaction of moral reflection, one of the world's oldest subjects of philosophical investigation, with film, the latest of the great worldwide arts.

I call the film comedies in question remarriage comedies. Unlike classical comedies, where the problem of the drama is to get a young pair past the obstacle of an older figure, usually a father, and see them married (as, for example, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), these films concern getting a somewhat older pair who are already together past some inner obstacle between them and hence together *again, back* together. This simple difference turns out to generate an unpredictable, open-ended set of features shared by the films. For example, the woman of the principal pair is never a mother and never (with one exception that proves the rule) shown to have a mother; and, as if negating the pattern of classical comedy, her father is always on the side of her desire, not of the law; and the narrative opens in a city and moves at the end to the country, a place of perspective Shakespeare calls the Green World; and the principal man and woman, speaking, sometimes appearing to invent, each other's language, may seem a mystery to the world around them; and, as we shall see, so on.

In each of these comedies some element of melodrama variously makes an appearance without getting to the point of shattering the comedic universe. This fact eventually prompted me to look for a genre of film melodrama that makes explicit and focuses this intrusion into the life that the pair in remarriage comedy aspires to. When I found a form of melodrama that to my mind satisfies this intellectual or moral requirement, it proved to be one that questions the choice to marry as such. I call this genre the melodrama of the unknown woman, naming it after its most renowned instance, Max Ophuls's *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. These films were among many called "women's pictures" by Hollywood in its marketing of them; others called them tear-jerkers. These titles no more recognize, let alone account for, the power and richness of these films than the title "screwball comedies" accounts for, or helps alert one to, the intelligence and depth of remarriage comedy. Such titles, in serving at once to sell and to avoid the films, are prime exhibits in my view of America as tending to overpraise and undervalue its best achievements.

The Hollywood films to which I devote chapters are representative of the best that American film has contributed to the art of world cinema. But the

very facts that they are all, especially the comedies, beloved worldwide, and have kept their force for audiences over a major span of the existence of the medium of which they are part, and at the same time that they bear up (or so I claim) under the same critical pressure that one would bring to works in any of the other of the great arts, should suggest some fascination with the question of what film is, or does, that a substantial body of its instances manifest these powers.

It is true that none of the films under discussion in this book concerns front-page moral dilemmas, say the death penalty (as in *Dead Man Walking*) or whistle blowing (as in *The Insider*), or informing (as in *The Front*), or abortion (as in *Cider House Rules*). Yet it is notable that the newspaper figures in all but two of the remarriage comedies, sometimes so prominently that one may wonder whether it is a feature required by the genre, as if the genre is itself about the question of what is and is not news. What is the public's business? How do we come to our knowledge of what bears on the common good of our lives?

What can be said at once is that, if not front-page news, the issues raised in these films concern the difficulty of overcoming a certain moral cynicism, a giving up on the aspiration to a life more coherent and admirable than seems affordable after the obligations and compromises of adulthood begin to obscure the promise and dreams of youth and the rift between public demands and private desires comes to seem unbridgeable. The issues the principal pair in these films confront each other with are formulated less well by questions concerning what they ought to do, what it would be best or right for them to do, than by the question of how they shall live their lives, what kind of persons they aspire to be. This aspect or moment of morality—in which a crisis forces an examination of one's life that calls for a transformation or reorienting of it—is the province of what I emphasize as moral perfectionism. I do not conceive of this as an alternative to Kantianism or utilitarianism (Kant and John Stuart Mill both have deep perfectionist strains in their views) but rather as emphasizing that aspect of moral choice having to do, as it is sometimes put, with being true to oneself, or as Michel Foucault has put the view, caring for the self. That Shakespeare in *Hamlet* gives the line “to thine own self be true” to Polonius alerts us to the ease with which moral perfectionism can be debased (as when someone is glad to *tell* you how to be all you can be, or, in a more recent television advertisement, to promise you fulfillment through day trading on the stock

market)—as philosophy can itself be debased, the condition Socrates combated with his life.

There is a passage in an early dialogue of Plato, the *Euthyphro*, where the division of moral questions between those concerning the good and those concerning the right or just (prefiguring the division between what I have called utilitarianism and Kantianism) is explicitly distinguished, and where room is made for a further distinction. Here is Socrates speaking to Euthyphro:

But what kind of disagreement, my friend, causes hatred and anger? . . . If we were to disagree as to the relative size [or weight] of two things, we should measure [or weigh] them and put an end to the disagreement at once, should we not? . . . Is . . . not the question which would make us . . . enemies if we could not come to a settlement . . . the question of the just and unjust, of the honorable and the dishonorable, of the good and the bad?

(It is not clear, and for my purposes need not be, whether Socrates is differentiating competing segments of a question or different emphases of a question.) It is what Socrates is calling the honorable and the dishonorable that I propose to take as pointing to the issue of perfectionism—not in the sense of conduct expected of high rank and enforceable by others of that rank, but in the sense of conduct confrontable in moral conversation that affects your sense of your own worth and of those who in various ways identify or associate themselves with you. When the Cary Grant character in *The Philadelphia Story*, during an exchange with his former wife, played by Katharine Hepburn, touches on their past together, he rebukes her for her coldness and moralism, instancing her refusal to tolerate his taste for alcohol; and when she replies that that taste made him unattractive, he returns, “Granted [it was my problem]. But you were no help there. You were a scold.” He is not accusing her of some misdeed (as lying, stealing, treachery of some kind) but rather describing her as being unworthy of herself, of what she could be.

Such concerns are paramount in the moral thinking of Plato’s *Republic*, in which the soul is pictured as on a journey from spiritual slavery to perfectionist enlightenment. From the period since, say, Kant and Hegel, at the turn of the eighteenth into the nineteenth century, my favorite moral perfectionists are Emerson and Thoreau, to my mind the most underrated philosophical minds (however otherwise praised) to have been produced in

the United States. In Emerson's and Thoreau's sense of human existence, there is no question of reaching a final state of the soul but only and endlessly taking the next step to what Emerson calls "an unattained but attainable self"—a self that is always and never ours—a step that turns us not from bad to good, or wrong to right, but from confusion and constriction toward self-knowledge and sociability. Plato's idea of a path to one goal (the one sought by the sage) does not exactly fit Emerson's idea of how to live. In both, the idea of philosophy as a way of life plays a role in assessing your life now, but Emerson is less interested in holding up the life of the sage as a model for ours than in reminding us that the power of questioning our lives, in, say, our judgment of what we call their necessities, and their rights and goods, is within the scope of every human being (of those, at any rate, free to talk about their lives and to modify them).

In the period after Kant and Hegel, moral perfectionism is identified less with canonical moral philosophers than with figures who work, let's say, between philosophy and literature, such, beyond Emerson, and indebted to him, as Nietzsche, or with obviously literary figures such as Jane Austen, George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, Ibsen, Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, who look back to such writers as Rousseau, Goethe, and Wordsworth. Partly because of this shift in the division of intellectual labor, perfectionism has not been much esteemed among philosophers in my part of the philosophical forest, a lack of esteem that seems to climax with Rawls's discussion of Nietzsche in *A Theory of Justice*, which identifies moral perfectionism, in its strongest form, with Nietzsche and rules it out as a serious contender among views of the just life (interpreting perfection to regard certain privileged and cultivated styles of life as of intrinsically greater worth, and deserving of greater material rewards, than more vulgar, common lives). My discussion of Nietzsche in Chapter 11, prepared by the discussion of Rawls in Chapter 9, argues that Rawls's judgment in this rejection is based on an uncharacteristically (for him) ungenerous reading, in this case of Nietzsche's admittedly distressed and distressing sound. And since the central passage in question is one in which Nietzsche shows fairly openly his profound indebtedness to Emerson, its dismissal seems to me a continuation of the repression of Emerson's thought in professional American philosophy.

My stake in protecting perfectionism's examination of moments of crisis (perhaps one or other such moment will present itself as boredom), of the sense of a demand that one's life, hence one's relation to the world, is to

undergo change, is deepened in recognizing that two of the most influential, if problematic, philosophers working in roughly the central four decades of the twentieth century and alive in contemporary thought, namely Heidegger and Wittgenstein, neither of whom wrote works specifically identified as of ethics, produced defining texts (Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*) that may be seen to advance claims for a way of life, for a transformation of one's life, demanded by philosophy as such and that accordingly may be characterized as what I am calling perfectionist works. Each of these thinkers has left marks on my own work as decisive as those left by any other philosophical writers of the century just past, and while I from time to time note a conjunction of what I am moved to say with themes associated with their obviously different and sometimes strangely similar modes of philosophizing, I am not assuming in the present book a familiarity with their writing. I shall cite them from time to time to intrigue those who have not yet experienced them, and, for those who have, to suggest contexts of their pertinence that may not yet have dawned.

Whether the perfectionist view that will emerge is essentially elitist, or on the contrary whether its imagination of justice is essential to the aspiration of a democratic society, is a guiding question of this book. As I have emphasized elsewhere and will expand upon later in this book, there is no essential or closed list of features that constitute perfectionism. This idea follows from conceiving of perfectionism as an outlook or dimension of thought embodied and developed in a set of texts spanning the range of Western culture, a conception that is odd in linking texts that may otherwise not be thought of together and that is open in two directions: as to whether a text belongs in the set and as to what feature or features in the text constitute its belonging.

My conception of this book, like the course in which it originated, as being in what used to be called the humanities as well as in philosophy, places contradictory demands on your capacities. It asks you to read both very fast and very slow. (Although I cannot here, as I did in the course, assign you to read the works addressed, I hope that many of you will wish to read them—and to view the films. While each chapter is meant to have its autonomy, an irreducible feature of the book's motivation is to lead its readers outside the chapters and into the marvelous works, of literature and philosophy and film, that have inspired them.) Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations*, declares it to be "of the essence of our investigation that we do not seek to learn anything new by it. We want to *understand* something that

is already in plain view. For this is what we seem in some sense not to understand” (§89). This formulation captures the familiar fact that philosophers seem perpetually to be going back over something, something most sane people would feel had already been discussed to death. A more familiar formulation is to say that philosophy does not progress. This depends on who is doing the measuring. What I call slow reading is meant not so much to recommend a pace of reading as to propose a mode of philosophical attention in which you are prepared to be taken by surprise, stopped, thrown back as it were upon the text. When I say that in the humanities more generally you have to be prepared to read fast, the idea is that you have to make yourself not so much go back over a text as go on from it. You respond in a sense oppositely to the same fact as discovered in philosophy, namely that a text worth reading carefully, or perpetually, is inexhaustible. You always leave it prematurely. And a reason for leaving is that the next text may be more apt to illuminate it than another look at the same text. What I try to do in my work is to motivate both gestures of progress, both states of mind, going back and going on.

There is another inflection to the idea of reading fast. It warns not only that you must leave a work prematurely but that there is no given order that we know is the best one in which to read what you are drawn to read. These are both striking differences of a humanities course from a course in science. There are many ways of sequencing the written texts and sequencing the films, as well as of choosing the pairings between films and texts, that appear in the coming chapters. Each way would yield its own accents. The sequences and pairings to follow here (as well as certain choices of instances) are not exactly the solutions I have used in the past—I altered them somewhat each time I gave the course in part to ensure surprises for myself, but also because as new thoughts occur, new arrangements seem better suited to bring them into view. If the idea of reading the assigned films as instances manifesting a dimension of moral thinking traceable throughout Western culture is sound, then any pairing of one of these films with one of the assigned books should produce interesting, surprising results.

In case it seems that marriage is too specialized an issue to bear up under the thinking represented in the texts discussed here, I have a double response. First, marriage is an allegory in these films of what philosophers since Aristotle have thought about under the title of friendship, what it is that gives value to personal relations, and this is a signature topic of

perfectionism. Second, the idea I want conveyed is that the moral life is not constituted solely by consideration of isolated judgments of striking moral and political problems but is a life whose texture is a weave of cares and commitments in which one is bound to become lost and to need the friendly and credible words of others in order to find one's way, in which at any time a choice may present itself (whether, or when, say, as in *The Lady Eve*, to confess an indiscretion, or whether, as in *The Awful Truth*, to take offense at an indiscretion), in pondering which you will have to decide whose view of you is most valuable to you.

Something more needs to be said about marriage as a specialized moral relationship. The marriages accepted or rejected by the two film genres in question here all conceive the specific relation as between a man and a woman. (A famous case in which the relation promises to be abrogated is the conclusion of Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot*, itself evidently not a remarriage comedy.) So many terrible charges can be brought against the institution of modern, or say, bourgeois, marriage, that it can sometimes seem a wonder that sensible people who have a choice in the matter continue to seek its blessings and accept its costs. Remarriage comedies characteristically contain glimpses of cursed or confined marriages, but this never, within this comic structure of assumption, leads the intelligent and engaging couple, with whom we are given to identify, to consider that what is cursed is the institution of marriage itself. Nor is this conclusion reached by me or by most of my friends. My interest in these comedies continues to be aroused, however else, by this persistent faith, or wager.

While the aggressive playfulness and instruction between the principal pair of remarriage comedy involves questions and exchanges of gender roles, the topic of gender, while explicitly not excluded, is not explicitly and systematically explored in the following pages. While same-sex marriages, or unions, have become common enough to force a consciousness, and elaboration, of the economic and legal consequences for partners and for children reared in such marriages, it is too early yet to know (or I am too isolated in my experience to tell) what new shapes such marriages will discover for their investments in imaginativeness, exclusiveness, and equality.

A sensible discussion of such matters would have to take up the history of topics and encounters broached for a couple of centuries now concerning the education of women, from the time these topics were producing revolutionary thoughts, such as that men and women are essential to each other's

education, under explicit discussion in Rousseau and in Kant's early writings. While this history is not likely to be work that will fall to my hands, I hope the thoughts represented in these chapters will enter into that work as from a moment in which a certain bargain of public calm on the subject of women's education was forever broken, and a mode of mutuality demonstrated, by the restless conversation in sets of Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s.

These films can give the impression of regarding the more outstanding issues of moral perplexity (abortion, euthanasia, poverty, taxation, capital punishment) as matters that will take care of themselves for people of good will. The perpetual moral risk run by the principal pair of these comedies is that of snobbery. This is a reason the narrative of the films inevitably provides each of the pair with a moment of being humbled, or humiliated, hence with an opportunity for self-knowledge.

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A text that I have left unmentioned and that bears distinctly on Emersonian perfectionism is William James's still marvelous, brave *Varieties of Religious Experience*, which challenges both philosophy and religion in its faithfulness to human experience. At the conclusion of his book James finds that his testimony yields "a certain uniform deliverance in which religions all appear to meet. It consists of two parts: 1. An uneasiness; and 2. Its solution." And early in chapter 2 James had said: "I am willing to accept almost any name for the personal religion of which I propose to treat. Call it conscience or morality, if you yourselves prefer, and not religion." But I cannot really be indifferent to differences, intellectual and practical, between what we will call religious uneasiness and what we call a moral crisis. James treats the seriousness of the testimonies he cites (explicitly out of deference to the imagined sensibilities of scientists) as hypotheses of the existence of "facts" that cannot actually (by us) be verified. But the existence of divinity, whatever its further intellectual problems, is no more a *hypothesis* than the existence of my neighbor is, though I might deny, or hedge, either. So I say. But I am here leaving my expression of unease in the status of testimony, or intuition. (Wittgenstein pictures a pertinent sense of unease as mortal restlessness.)

Each of the works we will encounter contains some vision of and arguments about the good city—I earlier called it the imagination of justice. Part of the business of each of the works is to demonstrate whether and how this

matters to the characters who harbor these visions and engage in these arguments. That this utopian moment in moral thinking is particularly emphasized in the conversations of moral perfectionism is an effect of the estrangement of philosophy from theology. It expresses the sense that a transcendental element is indispensable in the motivation for a moral existence. Emerson, in the opening paragraph of "Self-Reliance," calls this element "the voice of the mind," harking back to an idea that Socrates, in an onset of philosophy, invokes as listening to one's genius (meaning not our virtuosity but something like our receptiveness), which may require self-disobedience.

The necessity of such moments arises from the awful knowledge expressed in Emerson's acknowledgment of the "discrepance" between the world I converse with and the world I think. One may respond that this knowledge is not awful, but simply a well-known fact. Yes, but what is not known is whether there is something undone that it is mine to do, that fits my hands. What I will call debased perfectionisms propose individual cultivation in forms that distract us from this knowledge. That we must have some such distraction from this knowledge, or ignorance, proves its existence. But what kind of distraction? This has been a topic of philosophy since Plato's *Republic*. What I call Emersonian perfectionism I understand to propose that one's quarrel with the world need not be settled, nor cynically set aside as unseizable. It is a condition in which you can at once want the world and want it to change—even change it, as the apple changes the earth, though we say the apple falls. (Nietzsche's word for the spreading inability to want the world is nihilism.)

It is a characteristic criticism of Emerson to say that he lacks a sense of tragedy; for otherwise how can he seem so persistently to preach cheerfulness? But suppose that what Emerson perceives, when he speaks of his fellow citizens as existing in a state of secret melancholy, is that in a democracy, which depends upon a state of willingness to act for the common good, despair is a political emotion, discouraging both participation and patience. So when Emerson asks of the American Scholar that he and she raise and cheer us, he is asking for a step of political encouragement, one that assures us that we are not alone in our sense of compromise with justice, that our sense of an unattained self is not an escape from, it is rather an index of, our commitment to the unattained city, one within the one we sustain, one we know there is no good reason we perpetually fail to attain.