

What Mary Didn't Know

Tamás Demeter

Introduction

One of the dominant themes in the first three series of *Downton Abbey* is Mary and Matthew's relationship that has quite a swinging history. It begins with Matthew's rather obvious first-glance attraction to Mary to which she initially responds in a rather cold manner, but gradually becomes more open and friendly, and she develops affectionate feelings toward him – so much so that she eventually agrees to marry him at the end of the second series. But until this conclusion is reached, their relationship goes through a complicated path.

In this essay I intend to focus on Mary's hesitation to accept Matthew. According to the most obvious interpretation of Mary's behavior her hesitation is due to the uncertainties surrounding the future of the estate: Is it going to belong to Matthew or the eventually unborn son of Lord Grantham? This unsettled question may be seen as a crucial element in the process of Mary's deliberation. But in the light of future developments her motivations might be interpreted in different ways, and the various interpretations shed different lights on her character. At times even she hints at her ignorance of her own motivations behind her wavering suggesting that the interpretation of her hesitation is certainly not a straightforward matter. And as some of her comments on the affair with the Turkish diplomat suggests, there may also be hidden psychological obstacles lurking behind her actions. Not surprising then that there are various and at least partly conflicting possibilities of interpretations and more complex ones could be invented.

Here I'll argue that the conflicting interpretations illustrate a problem for philosophy of psychology as it reflects a subtlety and indeterminacy in our psychological practices of attributing intentions and motivations, and also that despite this indeterminacy we are very much inclined to treat them as arising from stable character traits. Further, I'll point out that this line of the story facilitates insights about the mental similar to those that can be found in some distinguished parcels of the history of philosophically relevant literature in Henry James and Michael Frayn. But before turning to these insights let me start by summing up the events I consider relevant for any interpretation of Mary's hesitation and suggest some possible readings. After that I'll turn to two possible ways in which philosophical lessons can be derived from this material.

Facts of the matter

Most of the crucial events take place in the first series. In episode three, series one Mary enters into a questionable love affair with a certain Mr. Pamuk, a Turkish diplomat, who suddenly dies in her arms. So the affair turns out to be a one-night stand, not that it was otherwise promising spectacular prospects for future development. In episode four it is conclusively settled that Mary cannot be the heiress of Downton, and it is Matthew who to be the next Earl of Grantham. Robert, Mary's father and the present Earl, raises to Mary the idea of marrying Matthew which she dismisses with the line "I'd never marry any man that I was told to" – and right after this scene she looks as someone tormented by a rather

unpleasant idea. In a later scene Mary bursts into tears under the pressure caused in her by the constant mentioning of Matthew's name in an after-dinner conversation, because she perceives as if it was only Matthew who mattered to her father, and she accuses her mother, Cora, with giving up on her because of the Pamuk affair. Cora only comments on this with "Don't quarrel with Matthew [...] because one day you may need him".

In episode five Cora in another conversation with Mary about the prospects of her marrying Matthew proclaims to her that due to the Pamuk affair "You're damaged good", and Cora emphasizes that this circumstance should be considered seriously in the present context. Especially because word is getting around in London that Mary is "not virtuous" – a piece of information that apparently shocks Mary, yet she insists on managing her own affairs and resists the pressure coming from her mother. It is also in this episode that one can perceive Mary growing increasingly more sensitive to Matthew's affections and approach. (Taking notice of this, however, goes beyond a mere recording of facts, as it already contains a good deal of interpretation on the observer's part.) Yet, Mary seems to be more interested in competing with her sister, Edith, for the attention of Sir Anthony, an older guest for dinner, just to teach Edith that if she wishes she easily attracts men's attention. Mary's behavior obviously hurts Matthew, but she realizes this only when he leaves the house.

In episode six, Cora finds out about a letter sent to the Turkish embassy describing the circumstances of Pamuk's death. Following Matthew's suggestion to see each other more often, he proposes to Mary as a conclusion of an intimate after-dinner conversation in which Mary half-seriously warns Matthew "You must pay no attention to the things I say." Later Mary tells about the proposal to Cora who asks what answer she gave to him, and Mary replies that "Only that I'd think about it." Then Cora comments: "That's an advance on what it would have been a year ago" and asks Mary whether she loves him. Mary responds: "Yes. I think I do. I think I may have loved him much longer than I knew", and then to Cora's disappointment she hints at the Pamuk affair: "I'll have to tell him, if I didn't I'd feel as if I caught him with a lie." Here the conversation ends as Robert enters the room.

In episode seven Mary finds out that it was Edith who sent the letter to the Turkish Embassy. It also turns out that Cora is expecting a child who may be a son, and in this case Matthew would be pushed out as the heir of the title and the estate. Through a series of conversations we come to know that Mary does not know if she wants Matthew without the title: the title is one thing, his personal qualities make him desirable on independent grounds. Nevertheless, Mary keeps postponing the answer to Matthew while she is under pressure from various family members suggesting Mary either to keep postponing until it turns out if Cora is expecting a boy, or to say 'yes' because it can be withdrawn later if she is. Matthew thinks that Mary is postponing because she wants to wait and see whether her mother is expecting a boy – but Cora loses the child. Mary tells him that if this was the case, then she could have easily said yes and cancel the engagement if the child is indeed a boy – just as her grandmother suggested. Matthew, unconvinced, feels that Mary's hesitation forces him to leave Downton, and even if Mary is still uncertain she very much regrets her hesitation and says that she "ruined everything".

Series two covers the years of World War I, Matthew's engagement with Lavinia, and Mary's adventures with potential suitors. Throughout series two their mutual affections are

strengthened. After Lavinia's death, in the Christmas Special, Mary confesses to Matthew her affair with Pamuk, and identifies its spring as coming from "lust" or "need for excitement". She also points out that this affair changed her life and she was made different by it. Matthew eventually proposes again to her and she accepts him putting a formal end to a long period of hesitation.

Some possibilities of interpretation

Before turning to lessons and literary parallels of philosophical significance, let me sketch some lines of potential interpretations that can be constructed by turning various elements from this pool of events into evidence. As I will point out in each case, it is also possible to find or create evidence conflicting the proposed interpretation from this very same pool.

The 'emotional uncertainty' line: Mary just does not know how she feels about Matthew, her emotions are changing and evolving under influences from family members and events taking space in her life world. Nevertheless, her emotions have a more or less clear tendency to grow increasingly affectionate toward Matthew. This line of interpretation conflicts with certain character traits Mary exhibits and she and others consensually ascribe to her like being highly self-conscious, stubborn and most importantly decisive personality who wants to take matters in her hands.

The 'greedy' line: Mary is hesitant because she wants to find out where the fortune goes eventually, and she camouflages her greed with emotional uncertainty – possibly deceiving even herself. This conflicts with Mary's emphasis on Matthew's personal qualities and her insistence on accepting only someone she is attracted to. Besides, if greed was her motivation then the rational course of action would be indeed to accept Matthew in episode seven, series one with the hidden proviso that if Cora's child is a boy, then she withdraws. But Mary does not take this route.

The 'social exclusion' line: Mary is worried about the social consequences of the Pamuk affair, which is threatening with a scandal, and time is not on her side. But she is hesitant to accept Matthew until it is clear that no better candidate turns up in reasonable time, so she keeps postponing the decision. This conflicts with Mary's several outbursts against socially accepted norms and her willingness to act against them (but one may suspect that she is not brave enough to actually act against them). Besides, one may point out the increasingly affectionate feelings she has for Matthew. These are reflected in her behavior as well as in her talk to and about Matthew.

The 'bad conscience' line: Mary is tormented by the Pamuk affair and her being a "damaged good" not worthy for Matthew, so she hesitates to say 'yes' because that, by her moral standards, would require a confession. But a confession runs the risk that it may prompt Matthew to withdraw his proposal and spreads the word of an embarrassing affair. This conflicts with Mary's confidence to face and accept the consequences of the affair in episode five, series one. Although this particular one might be an act of defiance, her pride and vanity make it plausible that she is willing to face the consequences of her actions instead of being shy of them.

The 'conflicting influences' line: Mary is exposed to pressures in various forms and directions from family members to marry Matthew. These pressures come from her mother and father, her grandmother and aunt, and sometimes they suggest different paths to go like in episode seven, series one in which her grandmother suggests her to accept Matthew tentatively and then see if Cora's child is a boy, while her aunt suggest her to wait until the child is born. The first option, however rational it may be, is dishonest and so it is morally questionable, the second one entails the consequence, as her grandmother rightly points out, that Matthew's emotional commitments will be shaken if Mary's response is openly conditional upon the sex of Cora's child. Now, one could argue that the conflicting influences drag Mary into different directions and she cannot decide on which advice to follow. But this line can be opposed by pointing out Mary's independent personality, the fact that she responds to influences with resistance and her insistence to have the final word at least in her personal matters.

These lines of interpretation (and I'm sure quite a few more could still be invented) are, of course, not altogether contradictory and can be combined to some extent. However, there is a good deal of conflict between them as they cannot all be true: they rely on several mutually exclusive motivations and character traits in Mary.

The choice from among them, or the way they are combined depend to a great extent on how one *perceives* Mary's general character on the basis of her appearances in various situations. This introduces an essentially personal bias into one's interpretation of her hesitation, as interpretation consists in arranging the facts of the matter and assigning significance to them so as to produce a coherent narrative of Mary's adversities. This is not an arbitrary process in the sense that one can arrange narrative elements and their significance as one wishes. Instead, the interpretation is composed against the background of personal sensitivities that make us responsive to certain aspects of situations and of the agents' behavior, thereby inclining us in specific cases towards accepting some interpretations as opposed to others. Thus our interpretations are always and irredeemably personal, never objective. It is our personal sensitivity that is expressed through the stock of psychological concepts we are accustomed to deploy in representing an agent's behavior as coherent – but creating this coherence can proceed in various and mutually exclusive ways. In what follows I will explore two ways of drawing the philosophical consequences of this personal bias in psychological interpretation by linking Mary's case to philosophically significant literary examples.

Possible lesson I: Epistemic indeterminacy

For some it may seem that the problem arises from our less than ideal access to the relevant evidences: should we know Mary's motivation and character better, we could describe her psychology adequately. Unfortunately, in social interactions we are never granted ideal access to an agent's mind therefore we are stuck with a pool of behavioral evidences from which only partial accounts can be construed which leave ample space for conflicting accounts.

Michael Frayn's play *Copenhagen* is intended to be an illustration of this indeterminacy. The situation it portrays cries out for psychological interpretation: it is the infamous meeting of

Heisenberg and Bohr in September 1941 in Copenhagen. The drama stages a fictional, otherworldly conversation between them reconstructing what had happened in the actual meeting that the parties later remembered and interpreted in radically different ways. The primary aim is to reveal what Heisenberg's intentions were in visiting Bohr, and thus to review the prospects of a moral evaluation of Heisenberg's behavior, and indeed of his own. The characters' 'spirits' reconstruct the meeting in several inconclusive versions, demonstrating thereby the indeterminacy of the possible interpretations.

The meaning of Heisenberg's behavior is opaque, thus for the other parties it is unsettling, and the moral evaluation of the situation depends on its psychological interpretation. According to Frayn's own interpretation in the postscripts to the Methuen edition, the drama is about "the epistemology of intention," as its main lesson is that reporting one's motivations and ascribing them to someone else are equally subject to question. Intentions and motivations cannot be "precisely established" as they "remain shifting and elusive".

For Frayn the basic philosophical lesson of his play is that in understanding motivations we face indeterminacy similar to the one we face in the quantum world according to the Copenhagen Interpretation. On the Copenhagen Interpretation micro-physical indeterminacy is due to our intervention through our measurement apparatus, which does not only measure but also influences phenomena in the quantum region. Indeterminacy here arises from the way we can access phenomena, and is thus of an *epistemic* kind: this is the only way we can have knowledge of quantum phenomena; but what we have knowledge of in this case is not the phenomena in themselves, but it is them and the measurement apparatus together.

Something similar may be the case with psychological interpretations too. We do not have direct access to intentions, motivations and character traits; we can only infer them on the basis of behavior, and in accordance with the conceptual and inferential resources our psychology supplies us with. And due to our different psychological sensitivities we always do this with an irreducibly personal bias. Therefore our interpretation of Mary's, Heisenberg's or anyone else's behavior is jointly made up by behavioral facts and a personal psychological toolkit of concepts and sensitivities. So motivations and intentions can only be accessed through their effects (behaviour) *and* the observer's psychological apparatus.

There is a realist commitment lurking behind this picture, as it does not deny that motivations and intentions exist independently of our psychological apparatus. On this view our psychological concepts are external to our mental architecture, even if we are unable to gain epistemic access to the latter without relying on the former. Given that our psychological apparatus is always and irreducibly personal, psychological interpretation is always underdetermined by the facts of behavior – even in the case of first-person reports, as they are also conditioned by personal psychological sensitivities. There is no way to pick the true interpretation that maps onto the actual mental architecture of Mary that causes her hesitation, as we are never in a position to choose from among competing interpretations on the basis of independence evidence. But in principle, if we could take an impersonal, objective view, a view from nowhere that is not influenced by personal biases, or God's eye view, then independent evidence could be reached and the psychological background of Mary's hesitation could be revealed.

Possible lesson II: Metaphysical indeterminacy

One could argue, however, that the realist inclinations of Frayn's self-interpretation and its extension to Mary's case are inappropriate as there is no distinction to be drawn in this case between phenomena (her mental architecture) and apparatus (psychological concepts and sensitivities). One could argue that our psychological apparatus is constitutive of the mental architecture that it seemingly describes. In this case the indeterminacy of interpretation is of a *metaphysical* kind: concepts used in psychological interpretation contribute to the creation of mental phenomena themselves, and so psychological indeterminacy is of a different kind than the one that the Copenhagen Interpretation suggests.

According to this view, even if ideal epistemic access, i.e. God's eye view is granted, it is still possible to give a coherent interpretation of an agent's behavior with the ascription of radically different mental architectures in its background, and this is due to the lack of facts independent of the psychological apparatus. The case is not that there are potentially relevant but for some reason inaccessible facts (for example, because of the limits of human experience, irreducible personal bias, etc.); rather, it is that the relevant facts cannot be identified without psychological interpretation, so the former cannot be used for grounding latter.

As Daniel Dennett argues in *Journal of Philosophy* (1990), psychological interpretations organize facts of behavior into patterns, and consequently the patterns themselves cannot be identified without the interpretations creating them. There is no independent ground for identifying patterns as competing interpretations would not even agree on which facts are irrelevant disturbing "noises" and which are evidence. Giving an alternative interpretation the evidence changes as well: some parts of the agent's behavior cease to be noise and turn into evidence, other parts become noisy – as we have seen in the competing interpretations of Mary's hesitation. The case is thus not that we have different interpretations organizing and weighing facts of behavior differently. Rather, it is that different facts of behavior are turned into evidence that support an interpretation of Mary's behavior depending on the psychological apparatus with which we approach the events.

Classifying behavior, i.e. telling which bodily movement means what, is done through our psychological apparatus, so behavioral evidence counting in favor of an interpretation is itself a matter of interpretation. In order to use some bodily movement as evidence, one needs to specify its meaning and significance; and *vice versa*, by ascribing mental states to an agent, one gives meaning to some of his bodily movements. There are thus no independent facts in the business of psychological interpretation.

Some similar understanding of human psychology can be illustrated through William James' *The Golden Bowl*. The story is well-known. Adam Verver, a rich American businessman travels around Europe with his daughter, Maggie. A friend introduces Maggie to an impoverished Italian prince, Amerigo, and eventually they get married. Before their engagement the prince had had a liaison with the beautiful but also poor Charlotte, and they had parted because of their financial circumstances. Although Charlotte is a school-friend of Maggie's, she does not tell Maggie about this relationship, who urges her father to

be married again. And he marries Charlotte. Maggie and her father spend most of their time together and with Maggie's recently born child, thereby bringing closer Amerigo and Charlotte, who renew their liaison at last. Although Maggie discovers this, she tries to sort things out while keeping everything under the surface. She succeeds; Adam and Charlotte return to America; Maggie and Amerigo begin a new life.

The indeterminacy of psychological interpretation is clearly perceived in a key scene of the novel. Charlotte asks for Amerigo's help in choosing a suitable present for Maggie without letting her know. It is not entirely clear, not even for Charlotte herself, what her purpose is in so doing, apart from having the prince in her company and having something said between them. What does this scene mean? Charlotte may want to compromise Amerigo; or she may want to get closer to the prince by this common secret; or to initiate the renewal of the relationship; to manipulate him by pricking his conscience for he is about to get married for financial reasons; or to remind him with whom he is actually in love. Or the situation can be interpreted as a heroic attempt to gain some kind of recognition for their former liaison, or even as a symbolic act of closing the affair. And it can also be said that this scene has no special significance, it is an empty conversation in an uneasy situation which may have arisen from a bad idea.

The problem is quite similar to the one we have faced in Mary's case. Which one to choose? None of them corresponds to facts better than the others, so the choice depends on one's previous interpretations of the agents' preceding behavior, and will emphasize different aspects of the situation and the preceding events. So the choice will be made on idiosyncratic grounds, depending on which interpretation provides a synoptic view of the events for the interpreter from his or her personal outlook; which one corresponds best to the purposes the interpreter ascribes to the characters; which one seems the most appropriate given the interpreter's sensitivity to the situations encountered; which one makes the interpreter feel that he or she understand the situation and the behavior of the characters in them; which one fits best with the overarching interpretation of the events portrayed in the novel, etc.

As Robert Pippin points out in his *Henry James and Modern Moral Life*, James' position in psychological matters is more radical than the epistemic indeterminacy view discussed above. However epistemically refined our insight may become, our motivations are just not that sort of things that may be said to be "there". Again, the problem is not that one must choose the true interpretation from among rival ones in the light of the best evidence at hand, but that the evidence is simply not there before the interpretation – not even for the agents, even if they think that their intentions explain everything. Their meanings, just like the interpreter's, also always depend on their own and others' reactions, future expectations, intentions, their views on the supposedly appropriate behavior, etc. – that is, on several interpretations and future interpretations. And these are available only retrospectively, and open to constant revision without the possibility of being conclusive – without there being facts that could settle the matter between conflicting interpretation, just like in the case of Mary's hesitation.

Conclusion

I've sketched two ways and two literary parallels for a philosophical understanding of Mary's hesitation to accept Matthew. The first option emphasizes the epistemic limitations with respect to psychological understanding and argued that due to these limitations we cannot offer uniquely adequate psychological interpretations of motivationally opaque cases. On this account opacity arises from the distortions of the personal stance from which, and the way through which, we have inferential access to someone's motivations. The second option runs deeper than this and suggests that opacity arises from the metaphysics of psychological interpretation, namely from its peculiar feature that in the pool of potentially relevant behavioral facts psychological interpretation itself distributes meaning and significance so as to create its own evidence. On the second account our psychological sensitivities do not distort ideal epistemic access, but are instrumental in bringing order to the otherwise noisy world of behavioral facts through finding patterns in it. While on the first account knowledge of motivation is in principle possible and only epistemic contingencies compromise our access to it, the second account suggests that 'knowledge' may not be the proper term to describe the outcome of psychological interpretation. So if one is inclined toward this latter account, then one may easily conclude that what Mary does not know, may not be known at all.