In the context of reading James, the very idea of “the moral philosopher” reflects an ambiguity that in turn indicates a duality of purposes that the present work aspires to investigate. Namely, the volume represents both a study of James as a moral philosopher, and a survey of James’s reflections on the moral philosopher. The moral philosopher stands in fact as a Janus-faced figure, who in James’s work in moral philosophy plays several roles and can be seen to act in different contexts. The chief purpose of the present work is to explore and gauge this intentional plurality of occurrences and meanings through a reassessment of James’s composite understanding of ethics.\(^1\) James’s overall reconsideration of the contribution of moral reflection to the moral life, in which the semantic tension around the figure of the moral philosopher is most notable, is of the utmost importance when seeking to understand his distinctive conception of ethics, as explored in his writings and often accused of lacking substantial coherence. Hence, an effort at exegesis of James’s work in moral philosophy cannot but proceed from an analysis of this variety of applications and uses of the figure of the moral philosopher.

James will thus feature in this study as a moral philosopher primarily interested in the nature and role of the moral philosopher, described in both her reflective and ordinary embodiment, and whose views on this particular, meta-reflexive, issue will shape James’s most positive work in ethics. That is, James the moral philosopher will be the subject, and yet also the very object, of the investigation. Once approached from such a dual perspective, his texts will resonate with a whole novel rhythm. Unfolding such overlapping of intertwined levels of investigation and composition represents the key to rescuing James’s moral philosophy from the oversimplified and inadequate recounting that often spoils its
value and use, the Jamesian “figure in the carpet” through which make full justice to the sophistication and liveliness of his work.

In the book such analysis will be conducted through the examination of the wider metaphilosophical framework against which his reflections on ethics make sense. It is in fact of the utmost importance to be mindful of James’s fine-grained conception of philosophical activity in which he framed his views and arguments in moral philosophy. Too often, in fact, the recounting of James’s contribution to ethics has been conducted ignoring, or at worst betraying, his most general understanding of the nature and aims of philosophical reflection widely informing his moral thought. These misgivings have vitiated a significant part of the literature on the topic, which the present work aims at amending. It is thus the guiding conviction of the book that it is only by appreciating the specificity of James’s philosophical method and interests, as well as his instructions about how and why to engage in philosophical reflection in the first place, that we can dislodge some of the superficial and problematic interpretations of his moral philosophy offered so far, opening the way to a more imaginative and rigorous reception of his work that might be of interest, not only for historians of philosophy but also for the current generation of moral philosophers and ethicists alike.

As such, the present work, far from constituting a blunt apology for James’s moral philosophy, aspires rather at reconstructing its distinctive flavor, giving prominence to some overlooked but most significant aspects and nuances of his work. My challenge is to reconstruct James’s ethics in a novel and profitable direction that however is mindful of the internal constraints and presuppositions of its original formulation. This is in fact a book on James, that aims at the same time at being a book for us; a book which reveals some possibilities of understanding and practicing ethics, in a way emphatically indicated by James but almost gone unheard (or progressively forgotten), that might be useful and productive for the conduct of our moral lives. Once framed in a most congenial setting and returned to what I consider its proper fieldwork, James’s moral reflection would thus function as a model and source of inspiration for our own ethical investigations. The reconstruction of James’s work will thus be conducted with the goal in mind to see what his moral philosophy can still do for us, and how its regeneration can be of some use in our current situation. After being fully polished from the dust that covered them and adjusted to an optical focus congenial to ours, James’s philosophical lenses should be used to look into the moral problems still haunting us, his interested readers, as James himself in a certain degree foresaw.