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The James Brothers and the Tragic Beauty of Individualism

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The James Brothers and the Beauty of Individualism

One of my mother's most cherished photographs – one that she keeps framed on our mantle year round as Santa pictures and vacation pictures shuffle in and out with the seasons – is of my brother, a little boy not even three years old in a flannel sweater, holding a tiny baby all swaddled up in blankets with a hat atop its head. I am that newborn baby. And my brother's beaming face is directed up at the camera with a look that can only be described as pure joy. He had asked for a little brother and his parents had delivered; now he had a playmate that could be his sidekick in anything and everything, someone that would be just like him.

I can imagine that brotherly relationships often start out that way, with the still immature elder brother hoping for, even expecting, a carbon copy of himself who will enjoy all of the same things, think in virtually the same terms, and be a constant companion. But a clone and a brother are two very different things, which everyone eventually is forced to realize. My brother has always been the taller, larger and easier to anger of the two of us. He is more physically powerful, craves action, and openly vocalizes his feelings. Always present throughout his life has been his genuine lack of interest in anything to do with academics, especially the reading of books. I, on the other hand, have always craved a good book and a compelling story no matter what the medium. I've always thrived in my schooling and in my younger days I was more of a recluse, being satisfied with a more introspective and contemplative disposition.

So for the better part of eighteen years, my brother and I dealt with misunderstandings, conflicted interests, and opposing viewpoints on nearly every possible aspect of our lives whether it was a matter of taste or of temperament. But despite all of

that, after we had both grown up and gone our separate ways, we learned to respect each other for who we were, and eventually came to appreciate that amidst the startlingly long list of differences, we retained a number of similarities at the core of our beliefs, particularly our belief in the autonomy of every individual. And all along the way, we constantly defined ourselves by the boundaries that were built up between us. In a way, the mutual recognition that we could still love one another despite our differences made us both realize that there was no single way to view the world. Never would there be an idea or system of beliefs that could answer every question for every person.

The reason I tell you all of this is to put forth the idea that despite how different two brothers might be in physical appearance, taste, temperament, physical and intellectual capacity, and any other way, shape, or form, there will always be something that connects them, and in many cases they are driven by the same things. And this connection is more than the abstract strands of brotherhood or familial love. Perhaps it is a similarity in experience, or perhaps it is something in the blood or DNA, or maybe it really is just an intangible connection of familial souls. Whatever it is, it is fascinating how such seemingly different people can share key, fundamental similarities, as if there is something in the numinous nature of brotherhood that maintains some inherent mutual thought.

And if we look to the relationship between the two late nineteenth century's intellectual giants – namely the James brothers, William and Henry – we see another pair of brothers that on the surface seem drastically and irreconcilably different. In a historical account of the family, F. O. Matthiesen describes their opposed temperaments: "Active and passive, participating and detached, scientific and aesthetic, William James and Henry James, … divided and ranged in so many contrasting directions that, between them, they

touched upon nearly all the major cultural interests of their age."[1] Though close in age and raised in the very same household under the same influence of educational and parental forces, these two brothers diverged on numerous accounts. And like most brothers, they seemed to define themselves in opposition to and around one another. William, as the critical and active older brother, had little interest in literature and instead preferred logic and science. Henry, on the other hand, scoffed at philosophy and is best known for being one of the most prolific and influential fiction writers of the late-nineteenth century.

The superficial antagonisms might be numerous and apparent, but at the core of their intellectual pursuits, both Henry and William explore the usefulness and practicality of a belief that is quintessentially American. In Henry Bamford Parkes' article "The James Brothers", he describes them as opposites: "the two brothers were alike in that the fundamental premise of all their activity was an acceptance of the moral freedom of the individual human being."[2] Though each brother had his own neuroticisms to contend with and worked in separate arenas, both Henry and William began from this fundamental premise. For both, the autonomy of the American individual was so complete that every person had not only the privilege but also the *responsibility* to define his own morality, that "moral standards must be derived from [the individual's] own experience and not from any objective authority."[3] In all of American life and thought, there is this rebellion against the old world and a moving away from tradition. The New World, so aptly named, gives the American an opportunity for untold growth and wonder in a land that he can shape around

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[1] F. O. Matthiessen, *The James Family: Including Selections From the Writings of Henry James, Senior, Willian, Henry, & Alice James*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1947. Pg. v.
[2] Henry Bamford Parkes, "The James Brothers", 325
[3] Henry Bamford Parkes, "The James Brothers", 325

his own intuitive sense of self. America thus presents itself as the first society to be completely individualistic, fueled by the drives and desires of each private citizen.

We see this belief manifest itself most profoundly in William's philosophy, particularly in his conception of pragmatism, an approach to philosophy most succinctly described as the application of scientific inquiry to belief. As William himself once said, "The true is the name for whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good too, for definite and assignable reasons."[4] Essentially, it is treating every potential belief as a hypothesis whose usefulness, and consequential 'truth', can either be practically proven or disproven. This scientific process is done on an individual and constant basis, as relative experience varies from person to person and as time passes, our very experiences are even likely to change. Part of the significance behind a tool like pragmatism is that it allows morality to be maintained in an era where objectivity is nearly impossible to discover. In this, the American instinct to constantly reinvent oneself manifests itself clearly in William's philosophy.

And although Henry James found his success as a writer well before his brother fully developed his conception of pragmatism, similar ideas that subtly explore individualistic, pragmatic thought are prevalent throughout Henry's work. Parkes, in his aforementioned article, explains, "particularly in the three great novels of his maturity[5], [Henry] shows that to him also, in a different way, individuals alone were real."[6] In Henry's three great novels, he is more deliberate and flamboyant in his execution, but in works like his early masterpiece, *The Portrait of a Lady*, we see an exploration of inexhaustible individualism at

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[4] William James, *Pragmatism*, 42
[5] These three novels are *The Ambassadors*, *The Winds of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*
[6] Henry Bamford Parkes, "The James Brothers", 326

odds with and confronted by a realistic world. The novel follows the title character Isabel Archer and her experiences when she goes to Europe in her early adulthood. Isabel comes to exemplify the most radical aspects of American optimism, but by the end of the novel we see that Henry offers both a critique and a complex glorification of individualism. The tale, which shows Isabel trapped in a manipulative and loveless marriage, exposes the hopeful exuberance as well as the frailties of the American spirit.

The Jamesian Household

The mutual focus of Henry and William James on the autonomy of the individual is no doubt at least partially a product of their exceptional upbringing. Their father, Henry James Sr., was a deeply spiritual man and a Swedenborgianist who was eventually considered a zealot and heretical theologian. He was a good friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson but was intensely critical of him. And despite the good intentions of advocating solidarity and righteousness for all men, Henry Senior struggled throughout much of his career and was typically unable to find an audience for his theories. Reformer Stephen Pearl Andrews described Henry Senior best as a man who "tends powerfully toward metaphysical subtleties and spiritual entities, until he is completely lifted off the solid earth, and loses all knowledge of practical things."[7] Henry Senior was *so* spiritual, so steeped in mysticism, that his preoccupations overwhelmed his appreciation for the real world, which clearly inhibited the success of his career. So with such an enthusiastic father at the head of a full household, one can only marvel at the impressions that must have made on his children.

[7] Matthiessen, pg. 13

Everything that Henry and William focus on in their intellectual pursuits were perhaps, in at least some small way, manifestations of their father's preoccupations and indicative of an urge to correct his faulty beliefs. Parkes tells us that Henry Senior was "in revolt against most of the accepted beliefs and conventions of his time and … believed in love and emotional spontaneity rather than in discipline."[8] He longed for the fraternity and solidarity in an era in which both were constantly deteriorating, but his arguments for such ideals lacked the aesthetic finesse and genius that his two eldest sons would eventually discover. Henry Senior did, however, instill these values in his children so much so that in their own respective adulthoods, their work would reflect their father's concerns.

This essence of "love and emotional spontaneity rather than discipline" served as the cornerstone of Henry and William's upbringing, for theirs was an education based on an excess of sentiment at the expense of facts. But Henry Senior considered this done with good reason. The education of the James children proved to be as peculiarly stimulating as it was unorthodox. It was riddled with inconsistencies and instability as the family moved about the world, but at the heart of Henry Senior's intentions was something profoundly significant. Rather than provide the same stifling childhood that he suffered through, in which the family was a self-contained unit without any "subordination in it to any objective or public and universal end"[9] Henry Senior tried to instill in his children the same values that he criticized the society of his time for lacking: fraternity and solidarity. The deliberate function of the family was to direct its members towards addressing the overarching concerns of society. In a way, he sought to better society itself by making his children into good people that could govern themselves properly with a righteous and

[8] Henry Bamford Parkes. "The James Brothers." pg. 325
[9] Henry James Sr. *Autobiography* in Matthesson text (p. 30)

intuitive sense of self. In an autobiography, Henry Senior described his intentions as a parent:

> I desire my child to become an upright man, a man in whom goodness shall be induced not by mercenary motives as brute goodness is induced, but by love for it or a sympathetic delight in it. And inasmuch as I know that this character or disposition cannot be forcibly imposed upon him, but must be freely assumed, I surround him as far as possible with an atmosphere of freedom.[10]

There is something wholesome and optimistic in Henry Senior's thought, almost to the point of naïveté. It is as if he believed in the natural inclination of his children to exude goodness if given the absolute freedom to choose. Curiously enough, his motives seemed to work through sheer force of will and the natural inclination of his children to imbibe some of their father's exuberant spirit.

Central to instilling such virtue in his children was fostering the restless, adventurous spirit that was seen as necessary for such an ideal person, but that spirit was completely devoid of the habit necessary to pursue the virtuous life. Thus, the James brothers were "educated on both sides of the Atlantic and never permitted to stay long enough anywhere to establish roots in a settled community … [T]he Jameses grew up in a fashion which made them quintessentially American."[11] Due to sufficient inheritance granted to their father, he was able to provide for his children whatever whims he saw fit. So at the ages of thirteen and twelve, William and Henry were exposed to what Matthiessen calls "the Europe of the tourist."[12] Over the course of five formative years, they saw all the greatest cities of Europe and all the most magnificent art-galleries, cathedrals, and theaters. They were showered in literature and learned to speak both French and German. Exposure

[10] Matthiessen, p. 70
[11] Henry Bamford Parkes. "The James Brothers." pg. 325
[12] Matthiessen, p. 69

to the greatest that Western society has to offer in every arena was meant to fortify the goodness of Henry's children and provide an endless list of opportunities to choose and exercise their freedom. But their education lacked any cohesive structure. Henry himself would much later reflect, "We wholesomely breathed inconsistency and ate and drank contradictions."[13] They were overindulged in the pleasantries of life with no straightforward commandments with which to guide their lives.

Without any clear perception of the cosmic or social order, the individual children were left to define themselves by their experiences and relationships, with each determining his morality yet preserving an idealistic solidarity with his fellow man. This dualism seems contradictory, and it just might have been, but the preservation of his children's autonomy was forefront to Henry Senior. An essential part of that was furnishing his children with the best of Western art. Henry James Senior was able to provide an upbringing for Henry Jr. and William that was an unobtainable ideal for most American families. While to some degree we can draw connections between the success of William and Henry to the inspiring home that bred them, we can also blame their countless neuroses and hypochondria on their unusual upbringing. They lived in a world of blissful ideals, but such a world was ultimately unrealistic. Quite a number of factors distinguished the James children from the average American family: "freedom through exposure, freedom through choice between all varieties of sensuous, aesthetic, and religious experience, inevitably separated the James children from those of less favored families, and gave them, in this country as well as abroad, a sense of living on a kind of blissful island."[14] Such an idyllic childhood most likely left the James children ill prepared for the 'real world', which

[13] *Notes of a Son and Brother*
[14] Matthiessen, p. 70

would explain in particular William's later struggles to settle on a career and Henry's social seclusion.

Henry and William's intellectual pursuits in their adult lives reflect a sort of rebellious obsession with their father's personal philosophy, or at least a preservation of the ideas and lifestyles that he instilled in his children. William's foray into pragmatism maintains and legitimizes the sort of radical, individualistic ideals of his father with all of his zeal and none of his zealotry. And for Henry Junior, after years as an expatriate in Europe, he eventually focused on showcasing the 'special cases' of American characters with upbringings akin to Henry's own, doing this to show the limits of individualism while simultaneously glorifying it in his own peculiar way.

William's Pragmatism as Individualism

Two of Henry Senior's maxims were as follows: "Life is simply the passage of idea into action," and "The measure of a man's goodness is his use to society."[15] These qualities of action and practicality become particularly important to William in his development of and contributions to the school of American philosophical thought known as 'pragmatism'. But William was fortunate enough to lack his father's extreme religious zealotry while maintaining an energetic enthusiasm and social grace. Louis Menand, in *The Metaphysical Club*, tells us that to William "certainty was moral death."[16] William was prone to act decisively, only to quickly change his mind. He had a manner of spontaneity that was constantly guided (or perhaps misguided?) by his relatively unstable emotional intuition.

[15] Matthiessen, p. 12
[16] Menand, Louis. *The Metaphysical Club*. Pg. 75

In all this, he was remarkably like his father and constantly plagued by being overly self-conscious.

Part of what would eventually make William so successful with the psychology of belief and philosophy was the peculiar background provided to him by his father. His fragmented educational background and fickle interests left him perpetually interdisciplinary, and he was far from overly intellectual. In not being tied down to any particular academic tradition or school of thought, all of William's actions and beliefs were entirely his own. Menand describes it with the following:

> William's lack of a systematic education gave him one distinct advantage: it permitted him to approach intellectual problems uninhibited by received academic wisdom. The openness that characterizes both the style and the import of his writing on pragmatism seemed to some of his followers to have been specifically a consequence of his disorganized schooling.[17]

William was a distinct and independent thinker in every sense of both words. While pragmatism as a general philosophical tool would later be used in different ways by a number of American thinkers, William's set of beliefs stood apart from the rest. His enthusiastic spirit was most infectious, even if the application of his many ideas could sometimes appear unfocused or even contradictory, reflecting his natural indecisiveness.

Perhaps to make up for being naturally fickle, William invented the philosophical tool of 'pragmatism' (while giving the credit to friend Charles Sanders Peirce), which allows the user to make practical choices amongst a number of philosophical options by assessing which adds the most actual value to his or her life. Making decisions in life is rarely easy, for the most part because it is oftentimes difficult to intuitively determine which is the just, truthful, or beneficial course of action. Objective belief is considered impossible, because

[17] Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, p. 94

experiences vary in day-to-day life and vary even more from person to person: "The choice between principles is complicated – as it always is in life – by circumstances."[18] For William James, any belief, whether in a personal virtue or even the existence of God, must be learnt by positive reinforcement; the analogy that Menand makes is learning to shoot a free throw: "each time it issues in a successful action, it gets reinforced as an organic habit. What 'imprints' the belief is the action."[19] Truth is not something inherent in a belief; it is the act of believing that makes it true, thus making any belief completely determined by the individual believer. And because the belief is intimately tied to the potentially positive outcome, the truth always becomes what is most useful to the individual. As William himself says, "The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events."[20] Truth then – contrary to traditional belief – is something to be created by and for us from within, not discovered from without. It is for this reason that many of the philosophers in William's time relentlessly criticized pragmatism, considering it a personal attack on philosophy in general, but they misinterpreted the point of it. Pragmatism is simply a tool used to make philosophy more practical and belief more efficient by weeding out what might be considered unnecessary.

Part of the rationale behind pragmatism lay in the application of the scientific method to more than just science; we see it applied to the very foundation of human life. By doing this, only the theories and hypotheses that actually contribute to our lives are held to be true. What remains, however, is a steadfast assertion of freedom. Henry Bamford Parkes in *The Pragmatic Test* reminds us that William James "accepted the

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[18] Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, p. 352
[19] Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, p. 355
[20] William James, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth", p. 114

scientific method of reaching truth in so far as it was compatible with freedom."[21] He would test the validity of any belief by measuring its benefit to his life, rather than use it to discover any truth that corresponded objectively to the nature of the universe. His pragmatism was a scientific practice only insofar as it allowed him to define the universe on his own terms. Thus, the ironic contradiction inherent in pragmatic thought is its focus on autonomy at the expense of what we might call 'actual fact'. The main contention that pragmatic belief had with traditional belief was that with the latter, beliefs were justified and true only if they corresponded to the way the world actually is. But pragmatism holds that beliefs do *not* have to mirror actuality: "No belief, James thought, is justified by its correspondence with reality, because mirroring reality is not the purpose of having minds."[22] The purpose of minds, according to James, is so that we may use them to define our existence. William himself once said, "Mental interests, hypotheses, postulates, so far as they are bases for human action – action which to a great extent transforms the world – help to make the truth which they declare."[23] Truth as most people know it is discounted in favor of a truth that has a definite and clearly positive impact on our lives. The most important thing was not the world as it was, but the world as people believed it ought to be. Thus, in pragmatism the limits of the world are only as limited as the individual's imagination.

As a theory of truth, pragmatism looks to the future and considers the impact that any belief will have for an individual in the days and years to come. On the other hand, traditional, rationalistic conceptions of truth, pointedly examine the past as a means to

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[21] Henry Bamford Parkes, *The Pragmatic Test*, p. 73
[22] Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, p. 356
[23] William James, "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence" (1878), *Essays in Philosophy*, *The Works of William James*, 21.

discover truth. But William criticizes its over-abstraction and lack of concrete application: "Reality stands complete and ready-made from all eternity, rationalism insists, and the agreement of our ideas with it is that unique unanalyzable virtue in them of which she has already told us. As that intrinsic excellences, their truth has nothing to do with our experiences."[24] In the correspondence theory of truth, that which is considered 'absolutely true' is so because it literally corresponds to the actual state of things. In the thirteenth century St. Thomas Aquinas claimed, "A judgment is said to be true when it conforms to the external reality."[25] This train of thought progressed as the norm and to a great extent remains the norm even today. But James would counter that the 'reality' to which belief is said to conform to does not *exist* in the sense that you or I exist and therefore adds little to our concrete experiences. For that reason, William James claims that such truths are "absolutely insignificant until you handle them pragmatically."[26] In this we begin to see how it was William's aim not to abolish all metaphysical truths but to refine and *legitimize* them.

Perhaps selfishly on the part of William James, who spent much of his life trying to reconcile modern science with religious faith, his pragmatism became a philosophical tool that allowed an individual to believe in God and science without the apparent contradictions that ran rampant in his day. It was for Charles Sanders Peirce to focus on the more narrow and scientific application of pragmatism. But it was necessary for both to dismiss at least those overly abstract metaphysical doctrines, particularly essentialism and the treatment of truths as immutable and timeless. But as Sami Pihlström recognizes,

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[24] William James, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth", *Pragmatism: A Reader*, p. 126
[25] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Q. 16
[26] William James, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth", *Pragmatism: A Reader*, p. 127

"[William James] was a philosopher most profoundly interested in perennial metaphysical questions, including the ones regarding monism and pluralism, determinism and freedom, and (of course) the reality of God and immortality."[27] William was focused less on delegitimizing metaphysics and more on demonstrating how and why such beliefs retain potential to have a concrete, positive application in everyday life. William himself said, "If theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much."[28] What we consider to be better for us and what is true can *never* be separated in William's thought, and even amidst possible contradiction, distinct beliefs can coexist in the mind of the individual so long as their products remain beneficial to us. Therein lies what might be the greatest flaw in William's pragmatic thought: the relativistic angle that it inevitably takes. If pragmatism actively refutes any semblance of cosmic or social order, then the individual's morality is determined from experience and not from any authority. Logically speaking, then this could warrant anyone to simply do as he or she pleases, either by claiming or by truly believing that engaging in harmful or disruptive behavior had a positive, practical impact on his or her life.

To some degree, however, James avoids relativism in his pragmatism, and he spends much of his career clarifying its definition, emphasizing the sense of moral responsibility he claims is inextricably linked with it. William was very aware of and concerned with the conflict between good and evil both in the world and within the heart of the human being, and went as far as to claim that man had a natural inclination towards that which was moral: "The feeling of the innate dignity of certain spiritual attitudes and of the essential

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[27] Sami Pihlström, "Metaphysics With a Human Face: William James and the Prospects of Pragmatist Metaphysics"
[28] William James, "What Pragmatism Means", p. 107

vulgarity of others is quite inexplicable except by an innate preference of the more ideal attitude for its own pure sake. The nobler thing *tastes* better, and that is all that we can say."[29] Essentially, he believed that all human beings are imbued with an intuitive moral sense and it is up to each individual to fulfill this natural inclination. But this is grounded more in a vague aesthetic sense rather than anything truly moral. And as Menand points out, William goes so far as to turn to a Darwinian explanation for the presence of instinctively 'good' ideas in human beings: "he thought … innate ideas are fortuitous variations that have been naturally selected."[30] He presumed that minds with 'good' ideas were naturally adapted to survival and therefore procreation, which makes some amount of logical sense but seems more of a desperate attempt to justify a flaw in his thought. To some degree, William is naturally much better morally than his philosophy can ever develop, having easily discovered righteousness because of his own idyllic upbringing to the extent that he comes to expect it of the average person.

Ultimately, through pragmatism we see an idealistic radical individualism at work in the mind of William James, no doubt influenced by his blissful childhood and liberal education as well as his equally idealistic father. And although the assortment of William's contemporary fellow pragmatists, the most notable being John Dewey, disagreed both on the aesthetic presentation and inspirational source for pragmatism, what remains of William's pragmatism is a single claim: "people are the agents of their own destinies."[31] In a way, pragmatism was and forever will be an attempt to reclaim the waning glory of early America, when thinkers like Emerson praised the self-reliance of the individual and his

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[29] William James, *Will to Believe*, p. 187
[30] Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, p. 357
[31] Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, p. 371

capacity to reinvent himself as the pinnacle of humanity, rather than the industrial capitalism that dominated the dawn of the twentieth century.

Henry and Pragmatism

The most recent biographer of William James writes that William "saw in Henry a passivity, a willingness to let life come to him, whereas William viewed himself as meeting life head-on. Henry was the serene observer, William the restless doer."[32] Ross Posnock regards theirs as a relationship of neat dualisms: "active, manly, inquisitive William versus contemplative, sissified, withdrawn Henry."[33] As previously stated, the temperaments of the oldest two James brothers are as opposite as can be, and each grappled with his own neuroses in distinct ways, with the success of both due to the genius that was apparently lacking in the rest of their siblings. To reiterate, each coped with underlying insecurities and internal conflicts by exploring the deeper meanings of the moral freedom of the individual human being. William explored this with pragmatism, whereas Henry explored it in the much more aesthetic terms of the novel.

In "The James Brothers", Parkes argues that both Henry and William believe in pragmatism in that "truths varied according to the individual observer and had no absolute validity."[34] In the following passages from letters written from Henry to William, we see his praise of pragmatism first-hand:

> Why the devil I didn't write to you after reading your *Pragmatism* – how I kept from it – I can't now explain save by the very fact of the spell itself (of interest & enthrallment) that the book cast upon me: I simply sank down, under it, into such depths of submission &

[32] Gerald Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought*, p. 29
[33] Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity*, p. 27
[34] Henry Bamford Parkes, "The James Brothers", p. 327

> assimilation that *any* reaction, very nearly, even that of acknowledgement, would have had almost the taint of dissent or escape. Then I was lost in the wonder of the extent to which all my life I have … unconsciously pragmatised. You are immensely and universally right![35]

And:

> It may sustain & inspire you a little to know that I'm with you, all along the line - & can conceive of no sense in any philosophy that is not yours! As an artist & a "creator" I can catch on, hold on, to pragmatism, & work in the light of it & apply it; finding, in comparison everything else (so far as I know the same!) utterly irrelevant & useless – vainly & coldly parallel![36]

So it becomes clear that although they spent much of their adult lives far apart, with apparent distaste in their respective interests, Henry eventually came to appreciate his brother's philosophy. It remains, however, that both these letters were written towards the end of both their lives, a short three years before William's death. Also, it is important to remember that these are a private correspondence between two elderly and ailing brothers. It is probable that to some degree these kind words were written in an effort to encourage William and bridge the intellectual chasm that loomed between the brothers throughout much of their lives. Particularly considering the fact that Henry found success earlier and easier than William, in large part by obliquely criticizing individualist belief akin to his brother's, by benevolently vocalizing respect for William, Henry is likely healing a wound in their relationship. Furthermore, these letters were written well after Henry's prolific career had established him as critical of extremely individualistic and pragmatic thought. Henry may have "unconsciously pragmatised" for his entire life without demonstrating a deliberate preference for pragmatism in his novels.

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[35] October 17, 1907, *William and Henry James: Selected Letters*, p. 489
[36] July 18, 1909, *William and Henry James: Selected Letters*, p. 508

Parkes also claims in his essay that particularly in Henry's later novels, we see his privileged protagonists come to moral self-discovery by way of developing their relationships with other people; they define themselves and their morality based on their relative experiences. While this certainly is the case with Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors* (Parkes's prime example), at the end of the novel Strether ultimately rejects the love of Miss Gostrey, leaving Europe to return to a loveless and drab life in Woollett, Massachusetts. Strether might be righteously pragmatic and seemingly justified in his actions, but do they make him happy? The obvious answer is a resounding *no*. But Parkes describes Strether's revelation with the following: "It is a realization that the individual has an innate sense of good and evil (in the same way that he has an aesthetic sense), and that moral values are an essential and intrinsic aspect of all inter-personal relationships."[37] While certainly characteristic of William James, with its natural inclination towards goodness, this realization seems anti-pragmatic. It is a glorification of the moral capacities of the individual but has very little of what William would call "cash-value"; Strether becomes morally righteous in his newfound wisdom. It is important to remember, however, that William's pragmatism was always grounded less in the scientific method and much more so in the individual's moral responsibility to define the world for himself.

When dealing with the innate sense of good and evil, it is difficult to ignore Immanuel Kant, who claimed that such an innate sense of morality was a product of natural abstract principles and a sense of duty to our fellow beings, separated from our emotional, perhaps selfish inclinations. Acts of goodwill were considered good as ends in themselves and never as a means to some other selfish end. William James integrates these ideas

[37] Henry Bamford Parkes, "The James Brothers", p. 328.

directly into his sense of pragmatism, and Henry also utilizes them in his writings. In this, both celebrate how man must suffer into wisdom, discovering this innate morality through experience without requiring any reward. Thus, Lambert Strether, in neglecting his potential happiness for the sake of acting rightly, and the fact that he discovers and develops this truth through his experiences, qualifies himself as a pragmatic figure of William's sort, and even Kantian to some extent.

In *The Ambassadors*, Henry James utilizes his common ploy of the international scene – in which the stereotypical American is confronted with European tradition – to reveal this change in Strether. The culture shock that Strether experiences awakens him to an enlightened state of mind that he lacked throughout his life, one in which he reawakens to moral discovery by way of experience. But it does little to actually fix his problems, showing that however pragmatic his revelation might seem, its only practical benefit is wholly internal, and does little to positively affect Strether's external world. What attraction does Strether's righteousness have for us then, other than his assumed self-satisfaction and wisdom? In this, we see that Henry ultimately does not blindly support radical individualism and offers a critique of William's thought in making us question how beneficial pragmatic thought is in practice.

Henry's *Portrait of a Lady* and Its Comment On Individualism

Part of what makes it so easy to assume that Henry critiques ideas like pragmatism has a great deal to do with his approach to writing, particularly as he explains in his essay "The Art of Fiction". T. S. Eliot once famously said that Henry James "had a mind so fine

that no idea could violate it."[38] Henry James wrote with the underlying assumption that human life is too grandiose and complicated to ever be subjected to generalization (which would include pragmatism). He believed that to truly experience the world, one must have the sensibility to consider every gesture and impression – "the faintest hints of life"[39] – and use one's imagination to extrapolate the seemingly insignificant, garnishing mere implication with assumption, "convert[ing] the very pulses of the air into revelations."[40] James himself explains this to aspiring writers with the following excerpt:

> The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life, in general, so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it--this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience, and they occur in country and in town, and in the most differing stages of education. If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions are experience, just as (have we not seen it?) they are the very air we breathe. Therefore, if I should certainly say to a novice, "Write from experience, and experience only," I should feel that this was a rather tantalizing monition if I were not careful immediately to add, "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!"[41]

Henry had a mind that was constantly aware of these behavioral nuances, and understood that even the smallest of gestures has its origin in some psychological impulse. One cannot listen merely to the words that an individual might say; one must examine the context from which the words originate: an entire past of experiences, aspirations for the future, and even the present emotional state. Henry fully appreciates the complexity of human life and conveys it through his writing, thus qualifying him as a superb natural psychologist even

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[38] T. S. Eliot, "In Memory of Henry James," *Egoist*, 5 (1918), 1-2; rpt. in *Critical Thought Series 5: Critical Essays on Henry James*, ed. Peter Rawlings (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), P. 150.
[39] Henry James, "The Art of Fiction"
[40] Henry James, "The Art of Fiction"
[41] Henry James, "The Art of Fiction"

before his brother helped to found modern psychology. In much the same way, this offers an oblique critique of William in that the older brother's philosophy focused not only on a generalization for how we should approach philosophy, but also relied heavily on the supposed inherently good moral tendencies of the individual, tendencies that William took for granted.

Henry James then, is in fact even *more* grounded in reality than his brother, whose pragmatism is empirical but at the same time very theoretical. As a painter in prose – a widely used analogy most obvious in his *Portrait of a Lady* – Henry creates a world in which his brother's theories, or at least radical individualism in the general sense, can be tested. Henry, in each of his novels, presents his reader with characters that struggle to uphold pragmatic, even Emersonian ideals of American individualism. But more often than not, these struggles appear to fail in the face of the world that is too overwhelmingly traditional and too wretchedly oppressive to tolerate such ideals. The portrait that James gives us with *Portrait of a Lady* is of the young and impressionable Isabel Archer, and we only get a snapshot of her life, not the full picture. The reader is given the limited portrayal so that he can be forced to examine the system of implications throughout the novel, testing the reader to see if they are "one of the people on whom nothing is lost." If we exhaustively analyze the character of Isabel Archer as she moves to Europe in her early adulthood and exercises her personal volition only to have her freedom apparently consumed by a society that seeks to stifle it, we ultimately see the flaws and limits of a pragmatic sense of personal freedom. Though she retains her personal autonomy, her eventual loss of social freedom through her pained marriage is akin to Lambert Strether's righteous yet seemingly

unhappy fate. Society criticizes and ostracizes Isabel, making us wonder if her philosophy can ever succeed in making her happy.

Isabel Archer enjoys an idyllic childhood that is remarkably similar to that of the James children and therefore comes to assume her own idealistic freedom just as William James does. Although offered a more traditional education at a primary school, Isabel instantly "protested against its laws" and instead sought after a more self-directed education in which "the elation of liberty and the pain of exclusion were indistinguishably mingled" (PoaL 40). And it is mentioned that her father's harsher critics would say of her and her sisters: "They had had no regular education and no permanent home; they had been at once spoiled and neglected; they had lived with nursemaids and governesses (usually very bad ones) or had been sent to superficial schools, kept by the French, from which, at the end of a month, they had been removed in tears" (*PoaL* 49). For the most part, this particular quote could have been said of the education that Henry and William received from their own father.

In the James brothers, such a childhood fostered a sense of great independence but also of inconstancy, no doubt a product of the instability in their background. Henry James Senior, however, did play a very direct role in raising his children, whereas Mr. Archer is said by some to have "not even brought up his daughters" (*PoaL* 49). Isabel and her sisters, however, *were* brought across the Atlantic for three brief spurts, each before Isabel reached the age of fourteen. While this certainly pales in comparison to the five formative years that the James brothers spent touring Europe, the lives of the James and the Archer children still represent the sort of 'special case' that Henry James is preoccupied with in much of his writing. Isabel spent her childhood education reading from an immense and

completely unregulated library in her home. And it is said that she "had had the best of everything" and "it appeared to Isabel that the unpleasant had been even too absent from her knowledge" (*PoaL* 49). She was spared from the suffering that most have to endure – the kind that allows an individual to achieve wisdom – and instead relished in the fantasies of whatever novels she fancied in that great library. Ironically enough, in what could be considered a delusion of grandeur, Isabel is frequently equating her life with that of characters in novels. Upon meeting Lord Warburton, she proclaims, "Oh, I hoped there would be a lord; it's just like a novel!" (*PoaL* 31). And Isabel assumes that people act like they do in books, worrying over whether or not they are "nice to girls" (*PoaL* 74). Curiously enough, this technique does not descend into meta-narrative and instead calls our attention to the unreality of Isabel's beliefs. Mr. Touchett is the opposite, grounded in reality and even commenting of novels, "I don't suppose they're very accurate" (*PoaL* 74). Because her childhood was created out of her imagination, she believes that she can continue to do the same with her entire life.

Since childhood, Isabel was able to command sovereignty over her own life and was granted a freedom in excess that she perhaps naively expects to maintain well into her adult life. Her father wanted his children to experience as much of the world as possible, which Isabel enthusiastically continues. At the story's outset, all that is really known of Isabel is discovered through the jumbled telegram sent by her aunt to the elder Mr. Touchett that describes her as "quite independent" (*PoaL* 27). This quickly and simply establishes a stereotype that is expanded extensively throughout the novel as Isabel continuously defines herself while defying any semblance of objective authority. Every new experience thus becomes an opportunity for her to test its usefulness, seeing whether

or not she deems it worthy to be assimilated into her life. She considers herself intelligent and therefore deserving of the freedom to shape the world according to her intuitive beliefs, rather than allow the truths of the world to be impressed upon her by figures of authority. Isabel believes "that a young woman whom after all everyone thought clever should begin by getting a general impression of life" (*PoaL* 71). This capacity to constantly reinvent herself based on her own inner sense of morality is stereotypically American, Emersonian, and even pragmatic. Such pursuits reinforce her independence, which is difficult to maintain in the ceremonious world of Europe where this urge is stifled by tradition and societal expectation.

Perhaps the greatest authority in Isabel's experience is European pomp and tradition, a force completely foreign to her that pressures women to follow the typical expectations of their gender roles. Isabel is expected to graciously accept romantic suitors that propose to her, particularly those that appear to be socially beneficial. However, Isabel prefers to live spontaneously, following her flighty desires from moment to moment rather than following any overarching principles that exist independent of herself. This is exemplified in a conversation between Isabel and Mr. Touchett when he says of the English, "They've got everything pretty well fixed … It's all settled beforehand – they don't leave it to the last moment" (*PoaL* 75). European society is somewhat stagnant and follows a rigid tradition that is both practical and reasonable, but at the same time stifling because it originates from without. Isabel prefers to "leave it to the last moment," and says to her uncle, "I don't like to have everything settled beforehand … I like more unexpectedness" (*PoaL* 75). She prefers surprise and sensation in a life where she has control over her actions.

Nearly every other figure in the book, with perhaps the most insightful being her cousin, Ralph Touchett, criticizes Isabel's unconventional behavior. Early in the novel, Ralph contemplates her with the following: "She was intelligent and generous; it was a fine free nature; but what was she going to do with herself?" (*PoaL* 81). Isabel's behavior is puzzling to Ralph and the rest of the characters in Europe because in traditional European society, "Most women did with themselves nothing at all; they waited, in attitudes more or less gracefully passive, for a man to come that way and furnish them with a destiny" (*PoaL* 82). Instead, as Henry says, Isabel is "a certain young woman affronting her destiny" (*PoaL* 10). She is characterized by her active search for experience, rather than passively awaiting what will come her way. This observation is the focal point of Isabel's entire independence. She sees the many roles that she is expected to fulfill as unwanted requirements and detests them purely because she does not actively seek them out, going so far as to claim that even her clothing is "imposed on [her] by society" (*PoaL* 223). The tradition and ceremony of European culture stifles the autonomy of the individual, particularly women, and Isabel is the independent American who somewhat fatuously defies such convention.

Throughout the novel, Isabel utilizes her volition to work against the authority of convention in a number of different ways, the most glaringly prevalent being her treatment of the several men that court her. The first example is the overly persistent Caspar Goodwood who, after being rejected by Isabel in America, follows her across the ocean to England in an effort to gain her affection. Goodwood is an American mill owner from Boston that Isabel even admits is "the finest young man she had ever seen" (*PoaL* 52). Goodwood is "obscurely handsome," (*PoaL* 52) successful, somewhat crude, and adores

Isabel fiercely; in short, he is every bit the ideal American man and a seemingly a perfect romantic match for Isabel. However, Isabel consistently rejects his advances, seemingly because their romance would be something outside of her control.

It is also curious to note that at one point when Isabel asks Goodwood to leave her alone, he responds, "What do I gain then by not trying to make you feel otherwise?" (*PoaL* 177). Her response is to ask, "Do you need a reward for an act of generosity?" and she further explains with the following: "There's no generosity without some sacrifice … If you make the sacrifice you'll have all my admiration" (*PoaL* 177). Not only is Goodwood unsatisfactory because acceptance of his proposal is passive and submissive, but Isabel judges him for expecting a reward for his suffering. His moral code is so unlike hers that she finds him nearly insufferable. All Goodwood can think of is what he can optimistically do to change the situation, looking for the means to achieve the positive end that he has in mind even when it is not possible, using her as a means to such end. Isabel rejects all of Goodwood's advances in order to preserve her independence, and she says, "I don't need the aid of a clever man to teach me how to live. I can find it out myself" (*PoaL* 179). The traditional perspective was that women needed men to govern their lives, in order to give them direction, and Isabel quite clearly rejects any attempt to have her life explained by anyone but herself.

The second of Isabel's suitors is Lord Warburton, an aristocratic, wealthy, charming, and handsome man that is a neighbor of the Touchetts and a close friend of both Ralph and the elder Mr. Touchett. When Isabel rightfully suspects that he is in love with her, she feels as if "a social magnate had conceived the design of drawing her into the system in which he rather invidiously lived and moved. A certain instinct, not imperious, but persuasive, told

her to resist – murmured to her that virtually she had a system and an orbit of her own" (*PoaL* 122). Isabel feels herself being drawn into the rigid, ceremonious structure of European society that expects her to be the submissive female, but she resists because she perceives such constraints as arbitrary and meaningless. Therefore, she reasons, all constraints ought to be rejected, not obeyed. This impulse is puzzling to every other character in the novel, particularly because Lord Warburton is portrayed as something akin to the pinnacle of manhood in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Ralph claims that Warburton "has hardly a fault" (*PoaL* 169), and even Isabel herself recognizes that marriage with him would be "getting a great deal" (*PoaL* 152). However, her impulse is still to deny the aristocrat because such a marriage would be a rejection of her own willful independence, and she even goes as far as to call it "Lord Warburton's big bribe" (*PoaL* 135), indicating her opinion that marriage with Warburton would be unjustly drawing her into something that was not right for her. Through this rejection, even more so than that of Caspar Goodwood, Henry James means to make the reader question Isabel's rationale, ruminating at the impracticality and perhaps irrationality of it. Isabel is certainly missing a great opportunity, all for the sake of a sense of freedom that virtually no other character can truly understand.

For all her life, Isabel thinks and acts according to her private definition of morality, much like a good pragmatist would do. Every decision that Isabel makes is more an expression of her own autonomous will than it is in pursuit of moral righteousness. It is said that Isabel had a "habit of taking for granted, on scanty evidence, that she was right" and "had an infinite hope that she should never do anything wrong" (*PoaL* 68). This is made evident when, in a conversation with her aunt, Isabel asks that Mrs. Touchett tell her

"the things that one shouldn't do," (*PoaL* 86) not so that she can adhere to such rules, but so that she can exercise her will and choose which to accept or deny. Isabel considers her own moral compass to be superior to that of society as a whole, and for this reason she consistently rejects the advice of her friends and family, as well as that of societal tradition.

Every decision that Isabel makes in her travels is made by rejecting the opinions and constraints of authority in favor of her own perhaps weakly defined principles. In this, she ultimately makes herself vulnerable to external, sinister influences. Therein lies the impracticality of individualistic thought. Isabel's opinions are poorly developed and inconstant: "Her thoughts were a tangle of vague outlines which had never been corrected by the judgment of people speaking with authority. In matters of opinion she had had her own way, and it had led her into a thousand ridiculous zigzags" (*PoaL* 68). Isabel has faith in nothing greater than herself, and because she is fickle and flawed, like most humans, her thoughts lack the necessary cohesiveness that can only be provided by a solidifying authority. Thus, her greatest strength – her independence and her will – eventually become her greatest and most poignant vulnerability. Here is where the real critique of her seemingly extravagant philosophy—and thus Henry's critique of William—begins.

As a result of her tangled thoughts, Isabel is quick to fall prey to the enchanting Madame Merle, a popular single woman with neither husband nor fortune. Isabel sees Merle as the ideal of independent womanhood: "She had evidently nothing of the fluttered, flapping quality of a morsel bunting in the wind; her manner expressed the repose and confidence which come from a large experience" (*PoaL* 197). Mme Merle appears to represent the ideal that Isabel strives for: experienced, independent, unrestrained, and completely in control of her own life. "She was in a word a woman of strong impulses kept

in admirable order. This commended itself to Isabel as an ideal combination" (*PoaL* 197). Mme Merle appears equally as impulsive as Isabel but lacks the younger girl's flighty convictions and appears to execute her choices through an expression of her unified self. Isabel believes Mme Merle to have nothing but the greatest of qualities and "found herself desiring to emulate them, and in twenty such ways [Madame Merle] presented herself as a model" (*PoaL* 211). Isabel idolizes Madame Merle and accepts her as a role model for the feminine freedoms that she pursues.

For a time, Mme Merle appears to be little more than an influential source of authority in Isabel's life, but everything changes when Ralph pleads with his father to leave Isabel a great deal of money. Ralph had come to admire her greatly: "A character like that,' he said to himself—'a real little passionate force to see at play is the finest thing in nature. It's finer than the finest work of art" (*PoaL* 81). Ralph talks almost reverently of Isabel, but does not believe himself to be in love with her. He likens her to a beautiful work of art, and rather than harshly critique her independence, he is absolutely fascinated by her. Ralph decides that in order for Isabel to continue her life of liberty – particularly within the confines of European society – she needs a source of financial stability. While the typical means for a young girl to do this would be marriage, Ralph pleads with his father to leave half of his inheritance to Isabel, essentially "to put a little wind in her sails" (*PoaL* 204). His aim is to sustain her existence as an autonomous work of art so that he might continue to appreciate her beauty. The mere fact that this is seemingly the only way for Isabel to maintain independence shows us that her radical sense of independence is so impractical that under normal societal constraints, she could never sustain herself. Ralph claims that his ultimate end in giving Isabel half of his inheritance is "to facilitate the execution of good

impulses," which he considers "noble" (*PoaL* 206). He believes that a subject so beautiful would be incapable of making mistakes, a woefully incorrect assumption.

For selfish reasons, Madame Merle uses her influence to subtly arrange for Isabel to marry Gilbert Osmond, an indolent and relatively unknown American living in Italy with his daughter. Merle is more than capable of persuading Isabel, because she provides Isabel with a much-needed source of authority that gives her fanciful life direction. Isabel is led to believe that Osmond represents all of the romantic independence that she exhibits, because he is a "specimen apart" (*PoaL* 285), a man unlike all that she had ever known that she believes would not be an oppressive force in her life. Unlike suitors Goodwood or Warburton, Osmond is what Isabel calls a "nonentity" (*PoaL* 357), and she loves him for the careless freedom that he appears to represent. And she eventually agrees to marry him because in such a marriage, she would be the active party, saving the passive Osmond from certain poverty. The only way that Isabel could ever submit to marriage would be in a context in which she would be continuing her streak of independence for the sake of itself.

Caspar Goodwood's judgment, however, is most telling when he says to Isabel, "You think he's grand, you think he's great, though no one else thinks so" (*PoaL* 357). Other than Mme Merle, Isabel is the only character in the entire novel that has a positive opinion of Osmond, and she ignores the advice of even Ralph because she arrogantly believes her own opinions to be superior, particularly with her mantra, "Judge every one and everything for yourself" (*PoaL* 273). When Isabel begins talking of her longing to gratify her husband, Ralph's passionate reply is, "You were not meant to be measured in the way—you were meant for something better than to keep guard over the sensibilities of a sterile dilettante!" (*PoaL* 373). Ralph mistakenly thinks that she can be governed by his intentions for her.

And in speaking out of passion, he only drives her further into her decision to marry. In much the same way that she wanted Mrs. Touchett to tell her the "things that one shouldn't do" only so that she may choose to defy such rules, it almost seems as if Isabel's resolve is reinforced by all of the advice she receives against marrying Osmond.

Thus, it follows that a tragic part of Isabel's life is her incorrect belief that Osmond "wants [her] to know everything" (*PoaL* 370). She believes that he supports her independent lifestyle, particularly because he initially encourages her, saying that she "should travel and learn" (*PoaL* 334). In reality, Osmond aims to stifle her "too many ideas" (*PoaL* 311) and uses Isabel as a means to his private ends, acting without any sense of objective moral principles. Osmond uses her for his own profit at the expense of her freedom. Even Osmond's actual proposal is an act of manipulation. Instead of offering marriage, a binding proposal used by both Goodwood and Warburton that frightened Isabel, Osmond confesses his supposed love for her (*PoaL* 335). This proposal, instead of forcing Isabel to obey practical convention, plays on her flighty sentiments and allows her to believe that she is making her own decisions when she eventually accepts Osmond's love. By accepting marriage with him, Isabel perceives herself as in control, both of her own life and Osmond's financial well-being.

Their marriage, however, comes to be characterized by "restriction and depression" for Isabel (*PoaL* 456). Mme Merle even says that Isabel "can scarcely be termed a member of the family" and that Isabel and Osmond "think quite differently" (*PoaL* 388). Isabel is stifled and oppressed in her marriage, and begins to develop the sense that it was her overly zealous pursuit of freedom that ironically led her into confinement. It takes her years to realize that Madame Merle manipulated her into the marriage with Osmond. But

instead of blaming Mme Merle, Isabel realizes that she has no one to blame but herself, saying, "let me bear my burdens myself and not shift them upon others" (*PoaL* 434). Having been so fascinated by her lack of suffering in her early adulthood, Isabel came to discover the suffering that would lead her on the path towards true wisdom. She manages to accept responsibility for her actions, and does not direct all her blame upon Madame Merle. Astonishingly enough, Isabel manages to avoid bitterness and refuses the prospect of divorce (*PoaL* 521), maintaining her spirit: "Her poor winged spirit had always had a great desire to do its best, and it had not yet been seriously discouraged. It wished, therefore, to hold fast to justice—not to pay itself by petty revenges" (*PoaL* 435). Despite her misery, she still does her best to remain a dutiful wife and virtuous woman. And she resolves to bear her burden alone, evading Ralph's attempts to hear her problems (*PoaL* 497-500). Her moral growth is immense and is a product of her lust for experience and her desire to define the world on her own terms.

Having discovered this new state of wisdom, Isabel is finally able to gather an impression of a moment that passes between Merle and Osmond, that ultimately leads her to realize the true nature of Merle and Osmond's relationship. Merle later confirms such suspicions by exclaiming that she has "Everything!" to do with Isabel (*Poal* 551), thus confessing to playing a hand in her marriage. The entire novel comes to its culmination when Isabel fully understands the nature of her predicament and resolves to accept her situation, even after Caspar Goodwood tempts her with a final, passionate entreaty to marry him instead: "You must save what you can of your life" (*PoaL* 626). Steadfast in her morality and duty to her husband, she ultimately returns to Rome and accepts her lifelong punishment that she must endure for her mistakes.

Henry James shows us the extent to which the independent human being can thrive and how she can function and subsist in a world in which freedoms are repressed. But the most important message in *Portrait of a Lady* is not about the failure of independent thought or the naïveté of youth. If Isabel's final conversation with her beloved, dying cousin is any indication, the ultimate message is one of hope and love. Finally, in the scene where her seemingly impenetrable wall of self-righteousness is broken down and they are completely honest with one another, they relish the love that they share. In those moments, "nothing mattered … but the knowledge that was not pure anguish – the knowledge that they were looking at the truth together" (*PoaL* 612). The pain that once seemed overwhelming for her is transformed into a source of strength, as the gateway through which she finally discovers truth and even more importantly, love. One of the last things Isabel says to Ralph is as follows: "And I want you to be happy – not to think of anything sad; only to feel that I'm near you and I love you. Why should there be pain? In such hours as this what have we to do with pain? That's not the deepest thing; there's something deeper" (*PoaL* 613). After anguishing in pain for a fleeting moment, Ralph manages to utter, "It passes, after all; it's passing now. But love remains" (*PoaL* 613). Their unity in mutual sorrow and pain only strengthens their love and is enough to prove that at least for Isabel, even in a world so full of misery, there is still goodness.

Taken on face value, it is easy to harshly criticize Isabel Archer for being so readily manipulated into what obviously is a strained life. But Isabel's tale is one of tragedy and we adore her for the same reason that we pity her: because her story is just as tragic as our own. In *Portrait of a Lady*, we see an honest portrayal of a human life, of a young girl who suffers into wisdom and manages to preserve her own goodness despite the overwhelming

forces trying to crush her spirit. And above all, we admire her because even after being manipulated and used, and trapped in a painfully oppressive marriage, she still manages to reaffirm her existence, come into a full sense of her own being, and most importantly clings to the most humane and beautiful of virtues: love. And while the way she lives her life is not necessarily pragmatic, the fact remains that through her story we see how the autonomous human being can strive for freedom and grow through experience into a person of great moral integrity. William gives us the tool, and his brother refines it with all the nuances of reality. This is the real essence of pragmatism: a grim and honest portrayal of the beautiful tragedy of human life, through which comes to the moral truth of wisdom through our suffering.

A Thoroughly American Brotherhood

And so, as products of their mutual environments growing up, both Henry and William James came to occupy themselves with the same philosophical and moral questions regarding the freedom and responsibility of human beings. They both demonstrate for us the nature of the American spirit, to willingly and boldly strive to shape the world around them, subconsciously always knowing that some semblance of failure will always loom in our not-so-distant future. In William we see the preoccupation with efficiency, practicality, and of course individual freedom. And in Henry we see the refinement of those principles into greater virtues of love and moral growth. Ultimately, we see that the idealistic and pragmatic nature of the American spirit is clearly flawed, but still an immensely beautiful thing, forever characterized by a sense of hope and wonder. The individualistic tendencies of modern America might come off as harmful relativism, a

way for the selfish egoists of the world to pursue whims and simple pleasures by drifting further away from the virtues of eras long since past. But the proper, autonomous, and pragmatic approach to morality is not a corruption of past goodness, but a reveling in the glories of the present, of taking a world that we have, as disjointed and fragmented and anguished as it might be, and struggling against the evils inside and around us in an effort to relish the beauty of the world.

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