

# WILLIAM JAMES AND THE ANTI-WAR CAMPAIGN: “ON THE MORAL EQUIVALENT OF WAR” AND A “CERTAIN BLINDNESS IN HUMAN BEINGS”

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## ABSTRACT

*This essay explores several philosophical objections to war in William James’s “On the Moral Equivalent of War” and “On a Certain Blindness.” More concerned with the interiority of war than just war theory, James provides a modicum of guidance if not also consolation to those readers who object to “war and forms of peace that mean the same thing as war,” i.e., social practices that are inwardly inconsistent with good will toward all life. The strength of one’s opposition to war depends on the correctness of one’s position, certainly, but it also requires a better understanding of the permanent enemy among us, namely, “the bellicosity of human nature.” Beyond the mere intellectual conviction that war is morally unacceptable, or that it is one’s “bounden duty to resist settling reasonable disputes in a violent manner,” one is also obliged – suggests James – to translate one’s beliefs into an active yet non-violent resistance to the human proclivity to settle disputes “quickly, thrillingly, tragically, and by force.”*

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Now the trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed. Uncle Andrew did.

C.S. Lewis, *Chronicles of Narnia*,  
“On the First Joke and other Matters.”

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, quipped Saul Bellow, we became increasingly “cerebral but not too smart.” In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I suspect, we shall succeed in making ourselves – as Lewis turns it – “stupider than we really are.” By the time that Secretary of State Powell claimed – in April 2003 – that “the hostilities phase is coming to a conclusion” and that it was “time for all of us to think about the post-hostilities phase,” my thoughts were already plagued by conscientious objections, both *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, to our conflict in Iraq. Beyond the formal objections to war, as well as to “forms of peace that mean the same thing as war,” which is by no means irrelevant to contemporary non-violent anti-war campaigns, I believe that we still have something valuable to learn from William James about our prospects for slaying what he calls “the permanent enemy,” namely, “the noted bellicosity of human nature” (845). Although he was a self-proclaimed “pacifist” and an unabashed anti-imperialist, James was compelled to prescribe “preventive medicine” rather than “a radical cure” (846) in his address to the 13<sup>th</sup> World Peace Conference in 1904.

But before discussing James’s “Moral Equivalent of War” and “On a Certain Moral Blindness,” I wish to begin with a literary image as well as a personal account of my own uneven response to the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. For those interested merely in the argument, this will seem beside the point; but for a philosopher like James, this emotive context is by no means unimportant.<sup>1</sup> I then turn to the inwardness of waging war and the motives for opposing war not only in James but also in Kant as well as Gandhi and Anscombe. By way of conclusion, I focus on what James calls our “bounden duty” to oppose certain forms of war as well as certain forms of peace that mean the same thing as war.

### ***THE UNCLE ANDREW SYNDROME***

When describing the founding of Narnia, Lewis suggests that “what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing: it also depends on the sort of person you are.”

Ever since the animals had first appeared, Uncle Andrew had been shrinking further and further into the thicket. He watched them very hard of course, but he wasn’t really interested in seeing what they were doing, only in seeing whether they were going to make a rush at him. Like the Witch, he was

dreadfully practical. He simply didn't notice that Aslan was choosing one pair out of every kind of beast. All he saw, or thought he saw, was a lot of dangerous wild animals walking vaguely about. And he kept on wondering why the other animals didn't run away from the big Lion.

When the great moment came and the Beasts spoke, he missed the whole point; for a rather interesting reason. When the Lion had first begun singing, long ago when it was still quite dark, he had realized that the noise was a song. And he had disliked that song very much. It made him think and feel things that he did not want to think and feel. Then, when the sun rose and he saw that the singer was a lion ('only a lion,' he thought to himself) he tried his hardest to make believe that it wasn't singing and never had been singing – only roaring as any lion might in a zoo in our own world. 'Of course it can't really have been singing,' he thought, 'I must have imagined it. I've been letting my nerves get out of order. Who ever heard of a lion singing?' And the longer and more beautifully the Lion sang, the harder Uncle Andrew tried to make himself believe that he could hear nothing but roaring (75).

This passage in Lewis reads like a parable, an allegory, and an admonitory lesson. It would be reckless or rash to apply, except perhaps in passing, the lesson of Uncle Andrew to our protracted conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. To argue about who suffers most from the Uncle Andrew syndrome, or who the animals represent, who is a lion, Who is Aslan, what is the text and melody of the song, why Uncle Andrew didn't like the song, and the like, misses the most interesting point about the process by which Uncle Andrew became stupider than he really was. The most pressing point concerns the formulation of a process by which we might become less stupid than we have become. This literary reference is intended to serve the same function as the ones that James felt compelled to use, e.g., Wallace Stevens, in his essay "On a Certain Moral Blindness."<sup>2</sup>

### ***THE PLAGUE OF PHILOSOPHICAL POSTSCRIPTAE***

In the early aftermath of 9/11, I turned to William James's 1910 "Moral Equivalent of War" for consolation; but consolation is not what I found there. Rather than bemoaning the

“bestial side of the war-regime” or providing a defense of pacifism or even a “promising line of conciliation,” James delivers “a dismal forecast” if not a paean to the higher aspects of militaristic sentiment and virtue. James understood how desperately hard it was to bring the peace-party and the war-party together; not altogether unlike Niebuhr, though they differ in so many other ways, James apparently believed that “we should fight their falsehood with our truth, but we must also fight the falsehood in our truth.” At least part of the difficulty, thought James, was “due to certain deficiencies in the program of pacifism which set the military imagination against it.” But I now realize, some ten years later, that James’s deflating analysis in the “Moral Equivalent of War” essay should be read against the backdrop of his other writings on the theme: e.g., his 1899 “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,”<sup>3</sup> the 1903 “Address to the Anti-Imperialist League,”<sup>4</sup> and his 1904 “Remarks at the Peace Banquet.”<sup>5</sup>

When we went off to war against Iraq, in March 2003, I pushed aside my reflections on the inwardness of waging war in James and Kant. After that, after our retaliation shifted from Afghanistan to Iraq, I found myself shell-shocked; the academic protests and pleading provisos seemed half-hearted to me. Though I attended quasi-collegial debates about what constitutes the lesser evil from the perspective of just war theory, the sort of discussions that abounded in academia in the wake of the war, arguments patently unsound because based on false or at least merely speculative premises,<sup>6</sup> I found it difficult – even for someone considered to be a philosopher – to espouse if not also defend the old Socratic dictum that ‘it is better to suffer possible evil than to inflict it.’<sup>7</sup>

Much has happened since then, but there are several rather conspicuous things that haven’t happened that probably should have. I begin with myself, a closet conscientious objector. My passivity has rendered me complicit. On the anniversary of 9/11, this year, not unlike last year, my students and I discussed Gandhi’s doctrine of Satyagraha. In 1940, Mohandas Gandhi made the following appeal:

Your statesmen have declared that this is a war on behalf of democracy. There are many other reasons given in justification. You know that all by heart. I suggest that, at the end of the war, whichever way it ends, there will be no

democracy left to represent democracy. This war has descended upon mankind as a curse and a warning. It is a curse inasmuch as it is brutalizing man on a scale hitherto unknown. All distinctions between combatants and non-combatants have been abolished. No one and nothing is to be spared. Lying has been reduced to an art. . . . It is a warning that, if nobody reads the writing on the wall, man will be reduced to the state of the beast, whom he is shaming by his manners. I read the writing when the hostilities broke out. But I had not the courage to say a word. God has given me the courage to say it before it is too late.

The writing on the wall was not illegible, neither then nor now, even to someone trained to suspend judgment as long as possible. I fear that it is already too late for us to right the wrongs inflicted on Iraq, as well as our self-inflicted wounds, body and soul, but perhaps it is not too late for us to improve ourselves – that is, for us to *turn back* toward or discover for the first time our better selves.

Even if it is true that President Truman “slept like a baby” the evening after agreeing to drop bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with the caveat that it would be a purely military target, which is absurd because bombs the size of cities do not discriminate between combatants and innocent civilians, I should like to think that the first night – when one is still in denial – was the easiest in what proved to be a long series of restless dark nights of the soul. (Some of us are still in a state of protracted denial.) This was certainly Miss Anscombe’s view at the time. Before the United States entered the Second World War, in 1939, Roosevelt denounced what he called

the ruthless bombing . . . which has resulted in the maiming and in the death of thousands of defenseless men, women, and children, has sickened the hearts of every civilized man and woman, and has profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity. If resort is had to this form of inhuman barbarism during the period of the tragic conflagration with which the world is now confronted, hundreds of thousands of innocent human beings who have no responsibility for, and

who are not even remotely participating in, the hostilities which have now broken out, will lose their lives.

And indeed they did. Innocent human beings are still losing their lives, almost daily, at the hands of terrorists of varying degrees, in Iraq and Afghanistan. And perhaps that was the case also under the old regime, though in different form. But I am interested in Roosevelt's point concerning what he considered to be the reaction to war, and the inhuman barbarism that accompanies warfare, in the hearts and "conscience of every civilized person": heart sickening and profoundly shocking. To engage in war will require us to overcome this heart sickness and to mollify the objections of one's individual conscience if not "the conscience of humanity." (Are our hearts still heart-sickened, is our conscience still profoundly shocked? Has the voice of conscience been muted? Do wars sanction hatred, so long as it masquerades under the guise of patriotism?<sup>8</sup> Are we deafened to its whispers? Did it never exist? If it did, how did it die or where did it go? Has our collective moral conscience become uncivilized?)

*We fail morally whenever we placate, cheaply, the demands of our individual or collective human conscience.* On the occasion of war, and events leading to war, on questions of life and death, and to a conscience formed in a certain manner, our conscience will require us to object in word and deed to national decisions with which we would not want to be associated. *Not listening to one's conscience*, to what Plato called his inner voice, *not acting conscientiously*, i.e., in displaying one's willingness to act in opposition one's own conscience, or even merely *allowing one's conscience to become malformed or insensitive* constitute variant moral failures to fulfill the demands of conscience; these shortcomings, from a psychological point of view, may well require from us – in an effort to improve ourselves – something akin to confession if not repentance and compensation for wrongs committed. I must myself confess – at least to myself, out of reverence for the moral law within me – that I have been, practically, and to my regret, a closet conscientious objector to the war in Iraq. It is, at best, a sin of omission – a failure to act at a time when I should have. Increasingly, though imperceptibly in the beginning, it amounts to a failure in civic courage. These things continue to pique my conscience.

**JAMES AND THE MORAL EQUIVALENT OF WAR**

What we now need to discover in the social realm is the moral equivalent of war; something heroic that will speak to men as universally as war does, and yet will be as compatible with their spiritual selves as war has proved itself to be incompatible (James, *VRE*: 292).

The war against war, as well as the war against forms of peace which are synonymous for “war expected,” wrote James in 1906/1910,<sup>9</sup> “is going to be no holiday excursion or camping party.” In the following section of this essay, I want to draw on two philosophers – first James and then Kant – as offering some guidance to us in our present threat of war. As philosophers and moral psychologists, James and Kant wanted to understand the *inwardness* of war-waging in order to better define the progressive task of political moralists in times of war (as well as in times of peace which mean the same thing as war).

Often, we do well to imagine the best of “what might be” in order to judge rightly the shortcomings of “what actually is.” This vision, if sufficiently vivid and vital, will have a leavening effect on society. This is, I take it, the importance of utopian literature from Plato to Rawls. But sometimes, as suggested in Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, the “best” functions as an enemy of the “good.” (It should be admitted also that the good-enough, whatever placates or assuages one’s conscience, is occasionally if not often the enemy of the better or best.) It is one of the great tragedies of aggregate existence, claimed Niebuhr, that we are unable to realize collectively what our conscience demands individually (1932/1960: 9). At the same time, conceding the difficult optimism involved in the crusade, I want to side with James who thought that it was “our bounden duty” to believe in an “international rationality” and thus an alternative to war in “every conflict of honest interests.”<sup>10</sup>

Wars are waged, among other places, within the imagination. Our collective imagination, and nationalism, is set afire by stories of military virtue: courage, self-sacrifice for the common good, loyalty, discipline, the capacity to trust, hardihood and cooperation. The military virtues loom large in our national – and for some of us, our individual –

imagination. This allegedly explains why James spends the bulk of his essay surveying the mythology of military virtues, drawing careful attention to tales of great courage yet illustrating also the extreme brutalities of war. James wants us to understand the opposing view, something he attempts to diagnose – similar to Freud, later, in *Civilization and its Discontents* – as a collective neurosis. To fail to understand the emotive context inherent in alternative perspectives, or to refuse to listen to the other side, constitutes – for James – a form of moral blindness. James understands that we honor the fallen by making their cause sacred to us; but James also suggests that this human tendency expresses a psychological principle rather than a moral argument. Perhaps the brutalities of war demand, because it is unthinkable to say that it was all in vain, a justification if not also revenge; our heroes and heroines are often those who revenge the good cause for which blood has been spilled. Loyalty to the dead is sometimes translated into the psychology of revenge, which asks no questions; our loyalty to unborn generations, who are difficult to imagine, pales by comparison.

Perhaps our success as a force for peace requires a form of discipline and courage not altogether unlike that typically assigned to military virtue. Or more to the psychological point, and James's main idea in this "Moral Equivalent of War" essay, it is only possible to weaken the war impulse by displacing or otherwise transferring the emotive context of military virtues away from the forum of war to, for example, the forum of civil service. (This suggestion animated the formation of the Civilian Conservation Corps as well as VISTA and the Peace Corps.) But is courage still courage, independent of the (virtuous or vicious) cause for which it is exercised? To take a stand against war, perhaps even in principle, as a pacifist might, does not mean that one is opposed to these military virtues, nor is it necessarily opposed to those soldiers within whom these martial virtues are personified; nor does it mean that the conscientious objector lacks these very virtues simply because they are applied to a different *albeit related* campaign, e.g., against human suffering or the bellicosity of human nature.

One need not be unpatriotic or cowardly – or selfish or lacking in all loyal relationships or undisciplined or weak or isolationistic – to oppose the drive to wage war. Our ethical heroes should also include men and women who overcome the tendency toward war in order to establish an enduring peace. Many pacifists, I consider myself but one case in point, are profoundly grateful for the sacrifices made by soldiers in defense of our national ideals of



freedom and democracy. (Many branches of my own family tree have been chopped-off prematurely, though voluntarily, by war; and I was myself in the military when I was a young man.) One of the shortcomings of our contemporary collective imagination is expressed in our national tendency to view a citizen's protest against war as unpatriotic if not treasonous; there is an analogical failure of our imagination to think that gratitude toward those who have sacrificed themselves for us in war constitutes an endorsement of war. And while it is possible to see or half-see things from the other perspective, or even from a wide array of perspectives, which is what the logic of plurality requires of us, it is still possible to disagree or oppose the efforts of those who see things differently than we do.<sup>11</sup>

According to John Lachs, there are really four distinct forms of blindness that James conflates in his "On a Certain Blindness" essay – namely,

the primary form of blindness in James' line of sight is the failure to see how others view the world. This actually consists of two disabilities, the first that of not being able to see the world the way others see it, and the second that of closing our eyes to the divergent devotions of other people. . . [but] there is also a third form of blindness, that concerned with the emotive tone of experience or the way life feels to other people, . . . [together with an] inevitable corollary of such ignorance [i.e., the emotive tone of other people's experience] is a fourth sort of blindness, namely that to who others are (Lachs, 2008, 2 – 10; see <http://williamjamesstudies.org/3.1/lachs.html>.)

Our national psyche has changed significantly since the tragedy of 9/11, to be sure, and changed wildly since 1906/1910, when James was reflecting on the civil war and the Spanish-American war as well as the increasingly imperialist sentiment in America (and abroad); and certainly there is a greater chance of mass destruction now, due to advances in military technology, *but the psychology of terror may be essentially the same now as it was then*. Despite the anachronisms involved, William James may well provide some guidance to philosophers of a certain temperament at a time when we are already beginning to go deaf from the war drums. "The practical consequence of such a philosophy," writes James in the Preface, "is the well-known democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality – is, at any

rate, the outward tolerance of whatever is not itself intolerant” (TT: 4). Following Richardson, “James’s anti-imperial activism was not incidental; it grew naturally from his advocacy of pluralism and individual self-determination and from his conviction that we are mostly blind to the vital centers of the lives of others” (2007: 385).

Terrorism is devised to weaken if not destroy the enemy’s imagination: We can now imagine, or half-imagine, that what happened to the innocent victims of 9/11 could happen to us, or to those we love, and the more often we rehearse what happened on that day (watching, as we do, the unthinkable happen over and over again), the more insecure we feel. We wage war when we are afraid, or threatened, either in life or limb or perhaps even financial liability; we might even feel less afraid when we are part of a community mobilized to protect itself from the aggressor – in which case, it is the fear itself that links us to one another. Sartre goes so far as to say that there is no such thing as a ‘we-subject,’ but only an ‘us-object’ – i.e., it is only when we are objectified together that we develop a group identity.<sup>12</sup> (It should come as no surprise that national identities are reinforced if not invented by rehearsing an emancipation narrative, the story about how we overcame those who oppressed and objectified us.) At some point, we will display our finest military virtues in overcoming – to use James’s phrase – “the fear of emancipation from the fear-regime.” Inevitably, one might be tempted to say, outward-directed fear of an enemy turn to peripherally-directly fear of the enemy among us. This, perhaps, is the decisive damage done by terrorism. Fear unifies people. But can we, really, and in a sustained fashion, be unified also by hope? Can we even imagine it? Can we solicit the military virtues into a force opposed to war? Can we imagine a life liberated from all fear-regimes? How might it be accomplished? An “anti-fear campaign,” which could plausibly develop parallel to and interwoven with unavoidable militaristic campaigns, calls for visionaries who are committed absolutely to the ultimate purpose for going to war – namely, to secure a world in which the destinies of people “shall nevermore be decided quickly, thrillingly, tragically, by force.”

This anti-war campaign, James knew, is not for the weak-of-heart, but rather for those dedicated – with all courage, self-sacrifice, loyalty, discipline, hardihood, wisdom, and cooperation – to our collective emancipation from the reign of terror, to blue skies unclouded by the brutalities and aftereffects of war. But the regime of fear will not leave willingly when

our answer to fear-regimes is a larger regime of fear – i.e., when one patriotic leviathan is replaced by another. How will Palestinian and Israeli children free themselves from the fear of war, of terror, of personal violence used to promote dishonest or even honest if not ultimately noble interests? To overcome, to curtail or even contain, a terrorist will require a preparedness to meet threatening forms of terror with greater terror; but if the victory is resistance, and it has slowly become something very much like that, then it is a fight to the death if not cultural genocide. Though I understand those who argue that marching to war is a human obligation, a sacred duty to one's family and country, one established either by utilitarian considerations or by pangs of loyalty to those who have died bravely, let us not forget the oft neglected obligation to struggle against what Kant called the 'state of war' (i.e., "the tendency always to find a new pretext for war").

### ***KANT'S PERPETUAL PEACE***

Every up-to-date dictionary should say that 'peace' and 'war' mean the same thing, now *in posse*, now *in actu*. It may even reasonably be said that the intensely sharp competitive *preparation* for war by the nations *is the real war*, permanent, unceasing; and that the battles are only a sort of public verification of the mastery gained during the 'peace'-interval (James, 1910).

By 1904, and anticipating the world conflict on the horizon, James suggested that the anti-war campaign was weakened by "much [talk] of universal peace or of a general disarmament" (846). But James was certainly familiar, by virtue of his work with the World Peace Council, with Kant's institutional strategies for securing universal or perpetual peace. In 1795, when 'the wild cry of freedom' was not infrequently heard in the streets of Germany, during the French Revolution, Kant wrote a philosophical sketch of several preliminary articles for establishing perpetual peace among nations. In theory, no conflict exists between politics and morality; but in practice, the conflict will always exist – indeed, Kant seems to think that this is how it should be, since the conflict serves as "a whetstone of virtue." Politics and morality

unite in “resolutely standing up to evils and sacrifices that must be taken on”; on certain occasions, the collaborative relationship consists rather in “detecting, squarely facing and conquering the deceit of the evil principle in ourselves, which is the more dangerously devious and treacherous because it excuses all our transgressions with an appeal to human nature’s frailty.”

Political moralists part ways with politics, however, whenever politicians begin to treat morality as if it were

a universal *doctrine of prudence*, i.e., a theory of maxims by which to choose the most efficient means of furthering one’s own interests, which is to deny that morality exists at all. Politics says, “Be ye wise as serpents,” to which morality adds (as a limiting condition) “and as innocent as doves (*Perpetual Peace*, 2006: 94, Ak. 8:370).<sup>13</sup>

Whenever the two maxims cannot coexist, however, once Machiavellian strategies of retaining power are adopted, there emerges a non-trivial incompatibility between politics and morality.<sup>14</sup> But as a conflict of honest interests, the disagreement is open to civil civic debate and collective deliberation and – at least in principle – arbitration and reconciliation. If it is our duty to protect human rights or, as Kant puts it, “make the state of public right actual,” and if indeed that is our espoused moral justification for intervening in other nations, we must ourselves accept and adhere to – by the principles of reciprocity as well as publicity – that same standard or maxim. If a nation is unwilling to bend a knee to international justice, by which we simultaneously and publicly submit ourselves to a higher authority [*Form der Publizität*], personified in allegedly unbiased institutions such as the United Nations, the resisting nation poses a very real threat to civil society; nations facilitate international cooperation only by fulfilling the necessary preconditions for negotiating genuine conflicts of interests. Even Hobbes believed that “nature provides inducements, both passional and rational, for seeking peace.”

In his *Perpetual Peace*, Kant provides us with a set of regulatory principles for assessing “international rationality.” Of particular relevance, I think, is the *Sixth*:

No nation at war with another shall permit such acts of war as shall make mutual trust impossible during some future time of peace: Such acts include the use of Assassins (*percussores*), Poisoners (*venefici*), breach of surrender, instigation of treason (*perduellio*) in the opposing nation, et cetera (2006: 70, Ak. 8: 346).

These stratagems are dishonorable, says Kant, because “[s]ome level of trust in the enemy’s way of thinking [*Denkungsart*] must be preserved even in the midst of war, for otherwise no peace can ever be concluded and the hostilities would become a war of extermination.” (President Eisenhower understood this militarist thought all too well.) I think that James is thinking along these lines when he mentions his “bounden duty.” Peace without some level of trust would be permitted to occur, wrote Kant, “only in the vast graveyard of humanity.”<sup>15</sup> Kant was concerned not only with the harm done to those nations who unjustly fall prey to a mightier nation’s distrust, he is worried also about those nations who triumph by the means of dishonorable stratagems. “Once they come into use, these intrinsically despicable, infernal acts cannot long be confined to war alone.” One of the great tragedies of war is that the mindset of a soldier [*Denkungsart eines Kriegers*] has a natural proclivity to “carry over to peacetime and thus undermine it.” One of the tasks of political moralists, as Kant called himself, is to protect or defend our national conscience and dove-like moral legitimacy at a time when the skies are darkened by war hawks. If morality is set aside in times of war, it will tend to be set aside also whenever there are rumors of war – at which point, recalling the quote with which this section of the present essay began, James thinks that war and peace begin to mean the same thing.

### ***PACIFISM AND PACIFICISM***

Philosophical pacificism,<sup>16</sup> as James calls it, or what Alexander refers to as political pacifism,<sup>17</sup> broadly construed, is a socio-political movement animated by the desire to provide an alternative to the institution of war. So stipulated, it is possible – suggests Alexander – that “there could be pacifists even in a world in which war had been abolished, or one in which there were no states.” Pacifism as distinct from “political pacifism,” or what James called

“pacifism,” is the position of the absolutist who says that “one may not kill another person under any circumstances.”<sup>18</sup> Miss Anscombe, who might be classified as a pacifist but by no means a pacifist, once suggested that the illusion of pacifism had “corrupted enormous numbers of people.”<sup>19</sup> But in the case of James, as well as Royce, it was perfectly consistent to be a “pacifist” as well as a “*via media* pacifist.” The anti-war campaign, which is not for the weak-of-heart, says James, may require both dispositions.

Thomas Friedman, who referred to the 9/11 tragedy as the beginning of World War III, recognized from the beginning how difficult it would be for us “to fight the terrorists as if there were no rules, and preserve our open society as if there were no terrorists.”<sup>20</sup> The moral restraint displayed in times of war, we might imagine, is the foundation from which future wars might be avoided. Perhaps the position of the philosophical *pacifist* – a doctrine advocating non-violent resistance to war and all forms of peace that mean the same thing as war – is intended to have a leavening effect on society, one that – one hopes, with difficult optimism – secures a *pacifist* compromise, which insists “that it is possible and desirable to settle international disputes by peaceful means.” The future I am willing to make certain compromises in order to secure is a society in which – citing again Niebuhr – there would be “enough justice, and in which coercion will be sufficiently non-violent to prevent . . . complete disaster.”<sup>21</sup> What is enough justice? At what point is coercion sufficiently non-violent? What constitutes, really, apropos of war, complete disaster?

### **TENTATIVE CONCLUSION**

The question of what is to be done in Iraq, certainly, and Afghanistan, but also now in Iran and indeed in America is still – in 2012, i.e., almost a decade into what Powell called the “post-hostilities phase” – up for grabs. The hostility phase is ongoing. In Iraq and Afghanistan, as elsewhere, the traditional strictures of just war theory are – *de facto* if not *de jure* – altogether ignored. The endgame is absurd. There are no winners. Where do we go from here? What is to be done? Who can ultimately guarantee perpetual peace, human rights, freedom, democracy, generosity, magnanimity, and the like? At what cost? What means are justified? How are we to distinguish honest from dishonest interests?

It is sometimes said that the first virtue lost to war, the first casualty, is truth; second, it is said, goes our conscience; and third, as a speculative hypothesis, is the democracy and freedom on behalf of which we allegedly marched off to war in the first place.<sup>22</sup> The endgame, one might predict, if not absurd, is – at best – dismal. J. Wm. Fulbright once claimed that “having people understand one’s thought creates greater security than another submarine” – which we might amend with “another sortie of bombs.” But explaining one’s ideas is not enough; we must seek a means of putting our ideas into action.

Satyagraha, Gandhi’s policy of non-violent non-cooperation, is a movement that “aims at translating ideas into action.” The moral idealism that animates our non-violent opposition to war, similar to King’s strategy of non-violent but active resistance, which requires a stage of purification, must be expressed in sincerity and humility. Humility of that sort is an achievement. The strength of the movement, the social idealist will say, relies “upon the correctness of the position.” Perhaps that is the present problem. Non-violence, Gandhi teaches us, in its active form, is “good will toward all life” – pure love as described in the Hindu scriptures, in the Bible, and also in the Koran. Resist, actively but non-violently, all forms of ill will against life – i.e., conscientiously objecting to actions and policies as well as arguments that are inwardly inconsistent with good will toward all life.

Political idealism, perhaps even philosophical pacifism, is itself a collateral casualty of war. Camus defined the absurd as what happens when a rational mind confronts an indifferent if not bellicose universe.<sup>23</sup> Is not the first bounden duty – a duty of the imagination not unlike Niebuhr’s ‘difficult optimism’ – to believe that the universe is not indifferent to our folly, that the political community is not indifferent to the suffering of innocent children, and that the situation is not absurd? The task of translating pacifistic ideas into action is difficult because it requires a sustained conviction about the correctness of the position and also, quite simply, because it requires courage – at least the courage to voice one’s conscience. Without insisting on peace at any cost, as a philosophical pacifist, I consider it to be my bounden civic duty – to my fellow citizens but also to my children and to myself as an individual – to conscientiously object to disingenuous and unjust war stratagems as well as forms of peace that mean, at least inwardly, and following the logic of pluralism, the same thing as war. For James, but also for Kant and Gandhi as well as Niebuhr and Roosevelt, each person – and each community of civilized persons – has a ‘bounden duty to resist settling reasonable

disputes in a violent manner.’ Political pacifists and conscientious objectors are required to agitate for arbitration as an alternative to war, certainly, but it is also our bounden duty resist the “bellicose constitution of human nature” which makes us stupider than we really are. Courage is required of us not only to resist the wicked instinct to settle matters “quickly, thrillingly, tragically, by force,” but also to “speak out as individuals whatever truth, however unpopular, that is in you.”<sup>24</sup>

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Although both parties, i.e., the peace-party and the war-party, as James calls them, claim that their position is more rational or more prudent or otherwise more realistic than that which is espoused by the opposition, James insisted – from the outset, in his “The Sentiment of Rationality” (1878) – that rationality is itself a feeling or emotion. “In the whole discussion,” writes James in *The Moral Equivalent of War*, “both sides are on imaginative and sentimental ground. It is but one utopia against another, and everything one says must be abstract and hypothetical.”

<sup>2</sup> Richardson explains the function of narrative in James in the Prologue to *William James in the Maelstrom of American Modernism*: “[James] understood, and he said repeatedly, how hard it is to really see things, to see anything, from another’s point of view. He had a number of blindnesses himself. But he did not abandon the effort to understand others, and he proposed that wherever some part of life ‘communicates an eagerness to him who lives it,’ there is where the life becomes genuinely significant. He himself looked for what he called the ‘hot spot’ in a person’s consciousness, the ‘habitual center’ of his or her personal energy. James understood the appeal of narrative, and so it is with a narrative that he made his point about joy” (2006: 7). Richardson is referring to James’s use of Stevenson’s “Lantern Bearers” in the opening pages of “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” (1899).

<sup>3</sup> In that text, James comments on the logic of plurality: This plurality, he writes, “commands us to tolerate, respect, and indulge those whom we see harmlessly interested and happy in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us. Hands off: neither the whole of truth nor the whole of



good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands” (BB, 264).

<sup>4</sup> William James, “Address to the Anti-Imperialist League, November 28, 1903.” *Report of the Fifth Meeting of the Anti-Imperialist League*. Boston: The New England Anti-Imperialist League, 1903. James declared his anti-imperialist commitments in 1900: “I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land.”

<sup>5</sup> William James, “Remarks at the Peace Banquet.” *Atlantic Monthly* 94 (December 1904): 845-47.

<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to argue the case when so much of the factual information is unavailable. No sound conclusions can be drawn without accurate premises. Secrecy of information stymies non-speculative analysis. “Plausible deniability” has been used as a stalling tactic since, at least in recent political history, the time of the Oliver North hearings.

<sup>7</sup> This was, however, for the record, the collective response of the American Philosophical Association, Central Division, which met in Denver, as bombs were falling on Baghdad, in March of 2003.

<sup>8</sup> “During times of war,” writes Howard Thurman, in his *Jesus and the Disinherited*, written in 1949, “hatred becomes quite respectable, even though it has to masquerade often under the guise of patriotism” (1976: 74).

<sup>9</sup> Although “The Moral Equivalent of War” was not published until 1910, James had been ruminating on the idea for a long time; already in 1902 James discusses the inner strength of the person who voluntarily accepts poverty, on the principle of refusing to enjoy anything that others do not share, as a viable candidate for the moral equivalent of war in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (see 253 ff., 292). The first version of the essay surfaced as a talk, “The Psychology of War,” to the Stanford student assembly in 1906; it was there that James suggested that “the wars of the future must be waged inside of every country, between the destructive and the constructive ideals and forces” (ERM: 251-52).

<sup>10</sup> Is this a reasonable dispute? There are, at the very least, reasonable grievances on both sides: though drawing the lines between the sides is practically impossible. Increasingly, the lines of resistance are smeared if not occasionally indecipherable. Distinguishing the “we” from the “they,” the “us” from “them,” even in the most harmless manner, as a means of contrast and clarification and self-identity, is perhaps an inevitable evil because it destroys the imagination. It must be terrible to die for a dishonest interest or, as the Vietnam veteran John Kerry put it, “to ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake.”

<sup>11</sup> In his own example, James describes the difference in perspective on the value of a pristine woodland that is about to be clear-cut. James is heart-broken, not necessarily for good environmental reasons but rather because he enjoys viewing those woods from the ridge of a nearby mountain. But the owner of the property is inflated by the prospect of taming that land and turning it into useful farming ground. Though James comes to see or half-see it from the farmer's point of view, he still believes – and not just as a mountain climber – that the farmer should leave the woodland standing (see *MEW*, 1910).

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956; also *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, trans. Sheridan-Smith. London: New Left Books, 1974.

<sup>13</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, trans. D. Colcasure. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> As a guide for those caught in such conflicts, where “the boundaries of morality do not yield to Juniter (the protector of power),” Kant suggests a motto culled from Vergil's *Aeneid*, VI, 95 (Lind): “Do not yield to misfortune, but press on more boldly/ than your fortune allows you.”

<sup>15</sup> In the “Moral Equivalent of War,” James claims that “[h]istory is a bath of blood” and that “Greek history is a panorama of jingoism and imperialism – war for war's sake.” The “slaughter bench of history,” thought Hegel, himself an observer of the terror that followed the French Revolution, is the consequence of an unquenchable thirst for freedom and recognition when compounded by two of Hobbes's inducements to war, namely, diffidence and vainglory.

<sup>16</sup> Rooted in Latin, ‘*pax*,’ meaning peace between states, pacificism was introduced into English, via the French, in about 1901 and expressed “an opposition to war as a means of resolution to conflict between states” or “the doctrine or belief that it is possible and desirable to settle international disputes by peaceful means.” Magellan, we learn, used it to name the Pacific Ocean due to its outwardly calm appearance. One form of the word, ‘*pacifik*,’ appears in Nathan Bailey's *Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, in 1721, suggest “making peace or appeasing.” In Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, first published in 1755, “*pacifick*” was further defined a “peace-making, mild, gentle, appeasing.” Within the span of just more than thirty years, the word morphed from an active verb to include the use of it as an adjective; rather than thought in motion, *pacific* was a character trait.

By 1927, the *New Century Dictionary* cross-references ‘*pacificism*’ with ‘*pacifism*,’ and includes as part of its definition the “derogatory sense, the spirit, attitude, or procedure of those who

insist on peace at any cost.” These days, in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), pacificism is cross-referenced to pacifism and offers two definitions: (a) rejecting war and violence as a matter of principle, as well as (b) advocating a peaceful policy as the first and best resort. Specifically under ‘pacifism’ appears the following: “By ‘pacifism’ I mean the advocacy of a peaceful policy; by ‘pacifism’ (a word invented in the twentieth century) the doctrine of non-resistance.”

Perhaps the definition offered by Ayto in the *Twentieth Century Dictionary* (1999) will serve us best. Explaining the distinct Americanization of the term, he presents a succinct etymological history of ‘pacifism,’ creating the idea that perhaps the best way to understand what ‘pacifism’ means is to observe what the word eventually came to mean in its new form: “Pacifism first appeared in 1902, but the derivative pacifist is first recorded in 1906. At first a neutral term, it acquired decidedly contemptuous overtones during World War I.”

<sup>17</sup> “Political Pacifism,” *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 29, 2003; also see ‘On the Distinction between Pacifism and Pacificism’ in Barbara Bleich and Jean-Daniel Strub (eds) *Pafizismus: Ideengeschichte, Theorie und Praxis*, Bern: Haupt Verlag, 2006 pp. 107-24. Alexander defines pacifism as “a doctrine concerning political morality, and in particular political institutions. In the light of this, it is striking how many recent philosophical discussions of pacifism—mainly, but certainly not only, those that are hostile to it—characterize it predominantly if not exclusively as what might be called a doctrine of personal refusal” (596).

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Nagel, “War and Massacre,” in Marshall Cohen, Thomas Nagel, and Thomas Scanlon (eds.) *War and Moral Responsibility* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 3-24, at p. 6. Similarly, claims Alexander, Narveson claims that the pacifist is distinguished by believing “not only that violence is evil but also that it is morally wrong to use force to resist, punish or prevent violence” ( see “Pacifism: A Philosophical Analysis,” p. 63).

<sup>19</sup> See Anscombe’s “War and Murder,” in *Nuclear Weapons: A Catholic Response* (London and New York, 1961): “Now pacifism teaches people to make no distinction between the shedding of innocent blood and the shedding of any human blood. And in this way pacifism has corrupted enormous numbers of people who will not act according to its tenets. They become convinced that a number of things are wicked which are not; hence seeing no way of avoiding wickedness, they set no limits to it” (56-57).

<sup>20</sup> In “World War III” of *Longitudes and Attitudes* (Anchor Books: 2003), 33; originally published in *New York Times*, 9/13/2001.

<sup>21</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (Scribner: New York), 1960, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Let us not forget the observation made by Shakespeare: "Beware the leader who bangs the drums of war in order to whip the citizenry into a patriotic fervor, for patriotism is indeed a double-edged sword. It both emboldens the blood, just as it narrows the mind. And when the drums of war have reached a fever pitch and the blood boils with hate and the mind has closed, the leader will have no need in seizing the rights of the citizenry. Rather, the citizenry, infused with fear and blinded with patriotism, will offer up all of their rights unto the leader, and gladly so. How do I know? For this is what I have done. And I am Caesar."

<sup>23</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1960), 21.

<sup>24</sup> William James, *Essays in Religion and Morality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 251.