

IN SEARCH OF A MORAL EQUIVALENT OF WAR: AN INTRODUCTION

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Conference Proceedings: “The Life and Afterlife of William James’s ‘The Moral Equivalent of War’: Contexts, Reception, Legacy.” Presented at Society for US Intellectual History on Saturday, 28 October 2017, Dallas, Texas. Panelists: Marilyn Fischer, Trygve Throntveit, and Paul Croce. Comments by Alexander Livingston. Chaired by John Kaag.



William James's essay, "The Moral Equivalent of War," has inspired, provoked, and baffled readers for over a century. An artifact of a nineteenth-century world not yet shattered by the horrors of trench warfare, the existential threat of nuclear annihilation, or consolidation of the military-industrial complex, the essay has surprisingly remained a beacon for a dizzying array of projects and proposals for waging war against war. Dramatic arts, farming, missionary service, nonviolent direct action, and space travel are only some of the many proposals for moral equivalents of war the essay has provoked.¹ It has been claimed as the inspiration for Franklin Delano Roosevelt's creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps as well as for Benito Mussolini's Battle for Grain.² Few other works of self-professed utopian speculation can claim such direct, enduring, and diverse real world influence.

The essay's vibrant and contested uptake as a practical proposal is all the more striking for the contrast with its scholarly reception. "The Moral Equivalent of War" is often described as an admirable but "weak" attempt to apply the insights of pragmatism to politics.³ In the words of Gerald Myers, its proposal for abolishing war is "naïve" and "could never function as the panacea that James claimed it to be."⁴ More pointedly, even sympathetic readers have concluded that James's proposal is myopic for its simple account of the causes of war, elitist for its singular focus on educating the "luxurious class," chauvinistic for its romanticization of manliness, and ecologically catastrophic for its celebration of channeling aggression into a war against nature.⁵ If the essay has had such capacious influence in the century since its publication, it is perhaps, as John Dewey suggested, due more to its suggestive title than to James's substantive ideas about abolishing war.⁶

The essays collected in this symposium reconsider "The Moral Equivalent of War" with a hundred years' hindsight. Each offers a critical perspective on what's living and what's dead in James's essay for confronting the challenges of war and politics in the twenty-first century. All three look beyond the familiar portrayal of "The Moral Equivalent of War" as James's "one weighty essay

devoted to a political theme” to reconsider it in light of the renewed scholarly attention to James’s long-overlooked contributions as a political philosopher.⁷ A new generation of scholarship has debunked the old common sense that, in the words of Cornel West, “James has nothing profound or even provocative to say” about politics.⁸

One reason James’s political philosophy has received such scant study until recently is the slight attention political institutions receive in his work. “James,” M.C. Otto observed, “treated certain important social facts as he might have brushed against strangers in a crowd.”⁹ The very idea of a *moral* equivalent of war, in contrast to a *political* response to the dangers of militarism through international organizations, might seem to endorse Otto’s conclusion. But as Marilyn Fischer shows in her erudite contribution, reading “The Moral Equivalent for War” in historical context reveals that James saw his moral equivalent as a compliment to pacifist demands for a legal system of international arbitration rather than its alternative. Indeed, Fischer demonstrates how the essay’s very form models the case for conciliation that united critics of war at the turn of the century. Trygve Throntveit similarly illustrates how James’s essay contains a model for the role of institutions in a pragmatist polity. But if institutions play a greater role in James’s vision for a world without war than has previously been noticed, so too does the essay hold lessons for the limits of strictly institutional approaches to politics. Paul Croce argues that the essay’s lesson for peace in the Middle East is its call to attend to the ethical aspects of reconciliation if political disagreement is to avoid spiraling out of control into recrimination and violence.

The necessity and insufficiency of institutional mechanisms for securing peace or social change point towards another frequently misunderstood facet of James’s political thought. If institutions remain in the background of James’s writings, it was because the psychic life of power and its practical consequences for politics lay in the forefront. “The Moral Equivalent of War” cuts a path between, on the one hand, the pious moralism of Christian pacifists

like Leo Tolstoy who simply denounced the evils of militarism and, on the other, the scientific rationalism of Andrew Carnegie with his faith that humanity was fated to evolve beyond warfare, to underscore the deepest sources of human aggression and the challenge of devising a realistic political response to war that takes men as they are—not as they might be. “We must cheat our foe, politically circumvent his action,” James told the World Peace Congress in 1904, “not try to change his nature.”¹⁰ Each essay included here examines how elements of James’s radical empiricist psychology, such as instinct (Fischer), the social self (Throntveit), and attention (Croce), inform his distinctive approach to politics. The authors in this symposium disagree, however, as to whether or not James’s politicization of psychology and psychologization of politics offer us valuable optics on power and persuasion. Throntveit and Croce each find critical insights in James’s psychological approach for responding to cycles of violence, while Fischer worries that focusing narrowly on the psychological dimensions of war reduces the search for a moral equivalent to a merely “a niche problem” once institutions for arbitration are secured.

This brings us to the third and thorniest element of James’s political thought these essays touch on. James was an unapologetic admirer of the strenuous life: the manly life of risk, adventure, and effort. This is the vision of the good life Theodore Roosevelt sought to embody in his charge up San Juan Hill and in his plea for white Americans to embrace the duty of colonial rule over their emerging global empire. It is therefore puzzling that James, an avowed pacifist and anti-imperialist, would share the militarist’s vision of the good life and seek to repurpose it for pacifist ends. Fischer argues that this craving for strenuousness is an artifact of a Gilded Age anxiety about elite cultural degeneration that no longer speaks to our contemporary moment. If so, then is “the Moral Equivalent of War”—and by extension James’s political philosophy—simply a curio of a bygone historical era with nothing to teach us today? Throntveit challenges this way of framing the issue. His essay argues that the social self’s desire for esteem lies

at the root of the hunger for war to consider how this same drive can serve contemporary projects of civic renewal in higher education. Croce similarly offers a competing reading of the essay's diagnosis of war that foregrounds the continuing value of cultivating virtues of disciplined self-control as a "psychological prelude" to political engagement in divided societies.¹¹

James's world is not ours. "The Moral Equivalent of War" is the artifact of an elite antiwar movement animated by a faith in civilizational progress towards perpetual peace that a century of total wars has disabused us of. The essay's canonization in the archive of American antiwar writing has created an "aura" around it, Fischer notes, that obscures the distance separating it from the realities of modern warfare. She echoes Dewey's conclusion that James would have profoundly revised his account had he witnessed the barbarity of the First World War.¹² Yet it is precisely because of the distance separating past and future that we ought to return to "The Moral Equivalent of War." That the United States is currently engaged in a project of endless war in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, Niger, and elsewhere around the globe; that conservatives from David Brooks to Steve Bannon continue to bemoan the emasculating "softness" engendered by consumer culture and celebrate the exercise of American military abroad as a source of civic regeneration; that global antiwar movements are the weakest now that they have been in decades; that we need now, more than ever, an alternative to warfare as an accelerating climate crisis renders old borders and boundaries increasingly unstable; we would do well to continue thinking with and against James's bold and inspiring proposal for a world without war.

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NOTES

¹ See MacKaye, "A Potential Substitute"; Clark, "Farming as a Moral Equivalent"; Cavert, "Missionary Enterprise"; Horsburgh, *Non-Violence and Aggression*; Hoffman, "The Moral Equivalent of War?"

² Myers, *William James*, 444; Stewart, "The Mentors of Mussolini," 864–65.

³ Cotkin, *William James*, 150.

⁴ Myers, *William James*, 444.

⁵ This is not to say that the essay is without its defenders. For thoughtful responses to these charges see Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition* and Kaag, "A Call to Arms?"

⁶ Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 79.

⁷ Westbrook, *Democratic Hope*, 53–54. Key contributions to this emerging body of scholarship include *inter alia* Miller, *Democratic Temperament*; Koopman, “Politics of Personal Freedom”; Ferguson, *William James*; Albrecht, *Reconstructing Individualism*; Throntveit, *William James*; Livingston, *Damn Great Empires!*; Bush, *Democratic Individuality*; Rondel, *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*. This recent body of literature builds on the earlier groundbreaking contributions by Cotkin, *William James* and Coon, “One Moment in the World’s Salvation.”

⁸ West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 60.

⁹ Otto, “On a Certain Blindness in William James,” 188.

¹⁰ James, “Remarks at the Peace Banquet,” 122.

¹¹ I offer a response to this question that charts a path different from those pursued by the essays included here in Livingston “*In Extremis*.”

¹² Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 80.