

“THE MORAL EQUIVALENT OF WAR”: WILLIAM JAMES’S MINOR VARIATION ON COMMON THEMES

MARILYN FISCHER



Unlike other scholars who interpret William James’s “The Moral Equivalent of War” in light of the author’s other writings, I read the essay as James’s contribution to conversations being held within the pre-World War One international peace movement. The essay shares the vocabulary, images, and patterns of reasoning widely employed by others in the movement. James’s analysis of violence described a standard frame of mind at that time. Like many of his contemporaries, he assumed that war had contributed to social cohesion and strenuousness in the past, but that this was no longer the case. Like them, he assumed “civilized nations” were moving into a socialist future without war. His specific proposal to enlist young men to fight against nature was not original. Reading James’s essay through this lens demonstrates that it was at best a minor variation on commonly held themes.



James must have had fun writing “The Moral Equivalent of War.” For such a ponderous topic, the essay’s dominant tone is playful. James pokes at the militarists and mockingly toys with his main interlocutors, barely hinting how much he agrees with them. The essay’s few nervous undertones reflect anxieties widely shared at that particular point in time. James was a master rhetorician; his ability to shape his speeches for specific audiences contributed greatly to his popularity as a public lecturer.¹ James prepared the contents of “The Moral Equivalent of War” for organizations central to the pre-World War One international peace movement. In the nineteen-aughts, members of this large, vigorous movement held conferences, formed international associations, and generated much literature.² James wrote the essay as a participant in this movement, where the images and patterns of reasoning he employed were common currency. He presented preliminary versions at the Thirteenth Universal Peace Conference held in Boston in 1904, and in a 1906 speech to Stanford University students, commissioned by the Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration. The essay was published in 1910 as a pamphlet for the American branch of *Conciliation Internationale*.³

Scholars typically approach the essay by reconstructing its argument and interpreting it in light of James’s other writings. This approach leads to misreadings of the text because it omits a preliminary step. The essay’s philosophical content cannot be identified until after the essay is placed in the context of the peace movement’s discussion about war and peace. While the essay contains argument, its central argument is not contained in the text. Some of its definitions and premises were so widely shared that there was no need to give them more than passing reference. What today sound like key philosophical moves were sometimes insider jokes or rhetorical flourishes for generating emotional energy. My reading reveals that James’s essay, while clever and vivid, was at best a minor variation on common themes. This reading demonstrates that recent assessments of the essay are overblown

when they describe James's "infectious and innovative" approach that presents his "boldest idea for a pragmatist political institution."⁴

I begin with the essay's title and then organize my discussion around the three sections that constitute the essay's form. Contemporary commentators have not viewed the essay as having this form, but doing so is critical to interpreting it. The form was a familiar one, used most notably in essays titled "War" by Emerson, Ruskin, and Zola.⁵ The form's timeline and categories were articulated by Herbert Spencer in *Principles of Sociology* and served as scaffolding for peace advocates' debates.⁶ In the past, Spencer writes, war was a necessary engine for human progress. He felt that this is no longer the case. Civilized nations, that is, the advanced nations of Europe, Great Britain's settler colonies, and the United States, have now reached the point that wars among themselves can only be regressive. Spencer predicts that in the future, wars between civilized nations would cease.⁷ James's essay conforms to this pattern. It begins in the dark past (on instincts and memory), moves to the mixed present (where James makes the militarists' case), and predicts a brighter future (James's statement of his own position). His purpose in writing "The Moral Equivalent of War" was not to theorize violence or argue for pacifism. James's aim was to find a way to "conciliate" remaining and potential militarists to the fact that war was becoming a thing of the past.

THE TITLE: "THE MORAL EQUIVALENT OF WAR"

The essay's title is a catchy variation on a popular phrase. Throughout the nineteenth century, many people found the term, "moral equivalent," useful for a range of purposes. In 1844, Rev. Hubbard Winslow explained that Jesus's atonement was "a full moral equivalent for the penalty due to sinners."⁸ Hepworth Dixon didn't think capital crimes such as "breaking a hop-band or cutting down a tree" were moral equivalents of death.⁹ Charles and Carrie Thwing agreed with the legal standard that divorce should only be granted in cases of "adultery or its moral equivalent."¹⁰

James's addition of "war" to "moral equivalent" is the first I've found. In *Varieties of Religious Experience* James writes,

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.¹¹

He proposes voluntary poverty as a strenuous moral equivalent. Others quickly proposed their own moral equivalents of war, including children's play when appropriately directed, being as athletic in one's Christianity as the Old Testament prophets, and for the "army of the Lord" to fight "ignorance, cruelty, selfishness, and disease" while evangelizing the world.¹²

THE PAST: INSTINCTS AND MEMORIES

In 1910, James turned from voluntary poverty as war's moral equivalent to the question of war itself. He begins the essay by describing how in early tribal times, instincts of pugnacity and love of glory operated in males at full force as they hunted, killed, and looted other tribes. Ancient Greek wars were wars of plunder. James quotes Thucydides on how the Athenians' cruelty gave them dominance over the Meleans, and comments,

We inherit the warlike type; and for most of the capacity of heroism of which the human race is full we have to thank this cruel history. . . . Our ancestors have bred pugnacity into our bone and marrow, and thousands of years of peace won't breed it out of us.¹³

Through all this breeding humans acquired capacities for strenuous endeavor and social cohesion.

James's account assumes, with Spencer, that human history is the story of civilization's evolution from the stage of savagery to

its present-day achievements. Theorists after Spencer paired their understanding of civilization's history with evolutionary psychology. James's *Principles of Psychology* played a central role in turning psychology into an evolutionary and experimental science, replacing the old Lockean introspective model. These theorists regarded primitive instincts as an inheritance from our animal ancestors. They are sturdily embedded in the human psyche and provide the energy that fuels action. The capacity to reason, a more recent evolutionary acquisition, in itself lacks the power to oppose destructive instincts or to motivate action.¹⁴ The history of civilization is the very long story of humans developing habits, customs, and cultures through which social and sympathetic instincts, with reason's aid, came to channel destructive instincts along constructive pathways.

James's account of human instincts in "Moral Equivalent" differs from versions by his peers only in its one-sidedness. He omits the contributions of the social and sympathetic instincts that others discussed at length and that he had discussed in *Principles of Psychology*.¹⁵ There, James writes that humans have all the instincts that lower animals have, and more.¹⁶ Many of these instincts can be roughly sorted into two categories: destructive instincts of "jealousy and antagonism" and constructive instincts of "sociability and helpfulness."¹⁷ While instincts themselves are reflexive responses to stimuli, the organism's experiences shape its specific responses, with reason making its contribution.¹⁸ Instincts persist when they become attached to habits; without such attachment, instincts are apt to fade away. In humans, the "fighting and the chasing instincts" are among the most primitive, and thus, especially "hard to eradicate."¹⁹ But, James writes, they can be "inhibited by sympathy, and by reflection calling up impulses of an opposite kind, civilized men lose the habit of acting out their pugnacious instincts in a perfectly natural way."²⁰

James's account in "Moral Equivalent" of how memory preserves war ideals also suffers from one-sidedness. In *Principles of Psychology* James clarifies that memory is not sheer recall. A memory is a complex object in which "perception, imagination,

comparison and reasoning” are all synthesized together.²¹ These elements function as “hooks” of associations on “which [a memory] hangs,” creating “a network of attachments by which it is woven into the entire tissue of our thought.”²² In “Moral Equivalent,” James writes that memories of war from ancient times to the U.S. Civil War formed such a network and constituted “a sacred spiritual possession” for many. These memories hook onto ideals of courage, self-sacrifice, and strenuous endeavor, and so, James notes, quoting Shakespeare, we remember Brutus as “the noblest Roman of them all.”²³ Memories and ideals lie deep, too entangled to be dislodged by rational objections to war.²⁴

Again, James’s text omits what his audience knew well, that Greek literature contains an ambiguous mix of war images. At a time when the classics were standard educational fare, James’s contemporaries could also hook their Civil War memories onto ancient images of war’s victims. Their memories would have retained the lament of Hecuba, the Trojan queen, from Euripides’ *The Trojan Women*. As she held her murdered grandson, she cried,

“ . . . Tis I,
 Old, homeless, childless, that for thee must shed
 Cold tears, so young, so miserably dead. . . .
 O vain is man,
 Who glorieth in his joy and hath no fears:
 While to and from the chances of the years
 Dance like an idiot in the wind!”
 The chorus replies:
 “Mother of misery,
 Give Death his song!
 Aye and bitterly
 We too weep for thee,
 And the infinite wrong!”²⁵

James’s contemporaries could agree with him that “our ancestors have bred pugnacity into our bone and marrow,” but they

also knew that our ancestors had bred images of war's incalculable pain into our bone and marrow, as well.

James's contemporaries could fill in what his essay's text omitted. The single-focused ferocity of the essay's opening may have served as a rhetorical cue that a reversal was about to take place. Decades earlier, art critic John Ruskin had opened his famous anti-war address by thundering that all great art has come from battle-hardened, warring nations; this was declared just before he directed equal thunder at war's barbarity.²⁶

THE PRESENT: THE MILITARIST'S CASE

For James, civilized peoples are no longer in the age of plunder. Reason has done its work, at least partially. James writes that "reflective criticism" has reshaped "civilized opinion," leaving civilized people with "a sort of double personality," as war-linked instincts and ideals encoded in memory still tug within an individual's psyche. This double personality also maps onto what James calls the "peace-party" and the "war-party."²⁷ He identifies himself with the peace-party and calls himself a "pacifist."²⁸

In the nineteenth-aughts, pacifism and its cognates were new words. *Pacifisme* entered the movement when Emile Arnaud uttered it at the 1901 Universal Peace Congress in Glasgow.²⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary's* first entry for *pacifist* is from 1906. People who sought to reduce the occasions for war were called pacifists.³⁰ In 1908, the *Temps* of Paris dubbed Theodore Roosevelt, of Rough Rider fame, "a true pacifist" for his work on a treaty between the U.S. and Japan.³¹ The 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica* begins its very lengthy entry on peace by stating that peace no longer simply refers to the absence of war. Peace now refers to active efforts to set up mechanisms for resolving international disputes, thereby avoiding war. As evidence, the entry includes long lists of arbitration treaties established between May 1903 and June 1910, as well as international agreements regarding customs, monetary systems, etc.³²

James's essay and its preliminary versions assume this expansive definition of pacifism. James never mentions moral or

religious absolute prohibitions on the use of violence, which came to define the term after World War One.³³ The 1904 Universal Peace Congress where James gave the first version of the essay was full of talk about conciliation and arbitration. The Congress was indeed universal in that it was an international gathering of the peace-party's most august members. Its Vice-Presidents represented seventeen countries.³⁴ Six past and future Nobel Peace Prize recipients attended; of these, Bertha von Suttner and Jane Addams each addressed the Congress three times.³⁵ Many in attendance were international lawyers and businesspeople, working to create a legal regime of treaties and arbitration methods for settling international disputes.³⁶

In his address to the Peace Congress, James described human bellicosity in vivid terms, but reassured the audience that while reason is feeble, its effects over time have been additive in gradually bringing human behavior under control. Keep the army and navy, James recommends, and let people's imaginations thrill at the prospect of war. Meanwhile, "organize in every conceivable way the practical machinery for making each successive chance of war abortive. Put peace men in power, educate the editors and statesmen to responsibility. . . . Seize every pretext, however small, for arbitration methods."³⁷ With these in place, James predicts, one would find that incidents that might lead to war had "managed to evaporate."³⁸ The main point of his address, like that of many others at the Congress, was to reinforce the call for arbitration.

James and the internationalists in the audience shared Spencer's belief that the use of violence among civilized nations was diminishing and that peaceful relations among them were becoming a reality.³⁹ To these internationalists, the history of civilization was a story of the gradual substitution of law for force. At the Congress, Professor Ludwig Quidde, a member of the German parliament and future Nobel Peace Prize recipient, and Dr. W. Evans Darby of the British Peace Society summarized the historical background leading to this moment. Among early clans the "right of the feud" was an accepted use of violence. During the Medieval, era lords and kings established legal proceedings for

settling private disputes, and in the following centuries, elaborate systems of policing, adjudication, and punishment were codified. While interpersonal violence was not eliminated, it was brought under systems of legal control. The challenge for James's generation was to establish similar mechanisms for controlling violence among nation-states, thus substituting law for force in the international arena.⁴⁰ In his address at Stanford University James again recommended arbitration treaties to tamp down the impulses to war.⁴¹

James and his contemporaries defined war in terms of organized violence among civilized nations.⁴² The use of violence by a great power to control its colonies was considered a domestic matter, akin to internal policing. The British used the term "punitive expeditions" to refer to military operations in their colonies to subdue tribes that did not accept their rule. This explains the seemingly odd remark with which James concluded his Universal Peace Congress address.

The last weak runnings of the war spirit will be "punitive expeditions." A country that turns its arms only against uncivilized foes is, I think, wrongly taunted as degenerate. . . . It has a conscience. It will still perpetrate peccadillos. But it is afraid, afraid in the good sense, to engage in absolute crimes against civilization.⁴³

Just a few minutes earlier, the audience had heard Booker T. Washington describe Belgian atrocities in the Congo. I imagine Washington was not pleased to hear such actions described as mere "peccadillos."⁴⁴

In keeping with his contemporaries' understanding of pacifism as seeking alternatives to war for settling disputes, James states in "Moral Equivalent" that his aim is to find "the most promising line of conciliation" between the peace-party and the war-party.⁴⁵ He reveals his rhetorical strategy for doing so in a fleeting reference to essayist John Jay Chapman's advice to "move the point."⁴⁶ The

phrase comes from Chapman's discussion of Friedrich Froebel's method of education in which Chapman writes, "The human organism responds in kind. Strike a man and he strikes, sneer and he sneers, forget and he forgets. If you wish to convince him that you are right, concede that from his point of view he is right, then move the point and he follows."⁴⁷ This is just what James does. He impersonates members of the war-party, presents their case for militarism, and then slides them right over into the peace-party. Commentators who read the essay as a straight presentation of James's views miss all the fun he has impersonating the militarists. His contemporaries had the background knowledge that enabled them to recognize James's humor.

Now, James's militarists are not bloodthirsty plunderers; they are civilized. He calls them "reflective apologists."⁴⁸ This is consistent with the widely held belief that civilized people, even militarists, had gotten their pugnacious instincts fairly well under reason's control. The essay's final two sentences, while offensive, make this point clearly.

The amount of alteration in public opinion that my utopia postulates is vastly less than the difference between the mentality of those black warriors who pursued Stanley's party on the Congo with their cannibal war-cry of "Meat! meat!" and that of the "general-staff" of any civilized nation. History has seen the latter interval bridged over: the former one can be bridged over much more easily.⁴⁹

James here assumes that his earliest ancestors lived much as these Africans still lived.⁵⁰ He thought the distance between himself and the civilized militarists was far less than that between Stanley and these Africans. While James opens the essay stating that "the war against war" will be "no holiday excursion or camping party," he did not think it would be all that hard.⁵¹

James couldn't resist having a bit of fun by making Homer Lea his primary exemplar of a contemporary militarist. He bypasses the

well-known and far weightier German militarists such as Moltke, Bismarck, Bernhardi, and Treischke.⁵² James gives three paragraphs to Homer Lea, whose recently published book, *The Valor of Ignorance*, was, at that moment, providing much copy for the scaremongers.⁵³ Lea warned that the Japanese had the desire and the military capability to gobble up the Philippines and Hawaii, and waltz across the U.S.'s defenseless West Coast, all in less than a month. Short, thin, and sickly, Lea was rejected by the U.S. army. He went to China, somehow got "Lieutenant-General" appended to his name, and tried to raise an army to reinstate the deposed Chinese Emperor.⁵⁴ Military leaders derided Lea's book, *The Independent* mocked its "highfalutin' style," and the Lake Mohonk Conference thought that "irresponsible . . . demagogues" like Lea posed a much greater danger to the U.S. than did Japan.⁵⁵

In his guise as militarist, James also pokes fun at his intellectual counterparts with whom he largely agrees. His main interlocutors in the essay are American economist Simon Patten and English political theorist G. Lowes Dickinson. In keeping with the loose documentation practices of the time, James casually drops their names once and then engages in repartee with them throughout the essay without naming them again.⁵⁶ For example, James's militarists would be so offended by Patten's advocacy of a "pleasure-economy," that they might mistakenly think it recommended lives of self-indulgent amusement. These militarists would find Dickinson's "exquisite dialogue" among an aristocrat, a laissez-faire banker, and a socialistic professor "mawkish and dishwatery," just as James said.⁵⁷ James's claim that "merciless scorn" for inferiors is "the keynote of the military temper," matches what Dickinson's professor tries to get the aristocrat to admit—that he holds Nietzschean contempt for the weak.⁵⁸ The aristocrat demurs, fancying himself more philosopher-king than *Übermensch*.

James gives a few paragraphs to a certifiably serious militarist, the Dutch ethnologist, geographer, and sociologist Sebald Rudolf Steinmetz.⁵⁹ Here James tucks in what he did not need to explain to his audience, that "militarism" refers to the view that "war . . . is

the essential form of the state.”⁶⁰ This statement, though brief, is key to understanding discussions of war and peace before World War One, and key to decoding James’s essay. The contrary of “militarism” is not “pacifism,” but “industrialism.” The terms originated with Auguste Comte, who used them to structure his sociology.⁶¹ Herbert Spencer gave them contemporary currency by placing them within an evolutionary frame and using them as names for sociological types of societies. Spencer writes that a militarist society is organized primarily to defend itself against external attacks. Its social institutions, including religion, governance, the economy, and the household are all hierarchically ordered, like the military itself. By contrast, an industrial society is organized principally for the benefit of its own members. Relations in governance, the economy, and the household are voluntary and characterized by free exchanges. Here “industrial” refers to forms of social relations through which activities, including economic production, take place. It should not be confused with “industrialized,” or the use of machinery in production. Spencer points to the “Esquimaux,” living in virtual isolation, as having a near-perfect industrial society.⁶²

Now we see why James could put the words of Dickinson’s aristocrat into the militarists’ mouths. “Militarism” names the family of hierarchically ordered societies to which aristocracies belong. Because a democracy is based on consent, it is not inherently structured by social hierarchies, and thus cannot be militarist by definition. This does not preclude a nation’s having a military and being willing to use it.⁶³ Pre-World War One peace advocates were trying to move the arena of international relations from militarism, in which disputes are resolved by force, to industrialism, where disputes are addressed through negotiation and adjudication.

THE FUTURE: A PEACEFUL, SOCIALISTIC STATE

James makes his own position perfectly clear. He calls militarism “nonsense” and asserts that war has become “absurd and impossible from its own monstrosities.”⁶⁴ He agrees with the

widely disseminated view of Polish economist Jean de Bloch who had published six volumes of statistical data covering every aspect of war between industrialized nations. Bloch concluded that victory in any conventional sense was now impossible, for neither side could escape absolute catastrophe.⁶⁵ James continues, "I devoutly believe in the ultimate reign of peace and in the gradual advent of some sort of a socialistic equilibrium. . . . I look forward to a future when acts of war shall be formally outlawed among civilized peoples."⁶⁶ Like Patten and Dickinson, he places his vision of the future within some sort of a collectivist or socialistic frame.⁶⁷

James doesn't explain what he means by his anticipated socialistic future. Of the many versions of socialism prevalent at the time, James's seems closest to some of the British variants. Rejecting Marxist interpretations, their proponents told the story of political and social evolution from feudalism toward democracy. The late eighteenth century revolutions signaled the advent of political democracy. Democracy in industry had begun to evolve with the rise of labor unions. Democracy was now evolving in the social arena as municipalities assumed responsibility for sanitation, utilities, local transportation, public health, and education. These versions of socialism advocated a guaranteed, decent standard of living for all. The aim was to enable all of society's members to become creative, flourishing contributors to the health of the whole community.⁶⁸ This description echoes the view presented by Dickinson's socialist professor, who simply calls his position "democracy."

James was not worried about how to end war; that was in the process of being taken care of. What he and the militarists worried about was degeneration, particularly into "effeminacy and unmanliness."⁶⁹ James's masculinist fears fit within a larger conversation among Victorians, whose optimism about civilization's progress hovered over deep insecurities.⁷⁰ They feared civilization's very success would also lead to its downfall. Ruskin describes this fear at the mid-point of his war essay, just before pivoting from immoral wars to honorable ones.

We talk of peace and learning, and of peace and plenty, and of peace and civilization; but I found those were not the words which the Muse of History coupled together; that, on her lips, the words were—peace and sensuality, peace and selfishness, peace and corruption, peace and death.⁷¹

Biological research reinforced Victorian anxiety. In *Degeneration*, English zoologist Edwin Ray Lankester projected from his study of marine parasites that the upper classes were “tending to the condition of intellectual barnacles” as they became increasingly parasitic on the laboring class.⁷²

James acknowledges the two aspects of this fear of degeneration—the loss of social cohesion and loss of capacity for strenuousness. The militarists maintained that these aspects are avoided when pugnacious instincts are both disciplined and released through military activity. At this point, remember James’s self-assigned task in the essay—to conciliate the militarists to the peace-party. How can he assuage the militarists’ feelings of loss at the coming socialistic peace? How can he assure them that they needn’t fear degeneration? This is where James, in Chapman’s words, “moves the point.” To shape his appeal to the militarists’ sensibilities, James adapts ideas from Patten and Dickinson and adds a reference to H.G. Wells. In signaling his agreement with these theorists, James compresses vast swathes of theorizing into a few phrases, in order to avoid losing sight of his primary objective of conciliating the militarists.

Right after stating his own position, James concedes that “a permanently successful peace-economy cannot be a simple pleasure-economy,” and that “martial virtues” must provide a peace-economy’s “enduring cement.”⁷³ Yet the peace-economy he goes on to describe is precisely Patten’s pleasure-economy, minus the label. Throughout human history, Patten writes, people have lived in a “pain or deficit economy” in which poverty was inescapable. Poverty is like war—it exacerbates the destructive

instincts of pugnacity, fear, and hostility. The poor live with the “sheer animal terror” that food scarcity provokes. Poverty represses the “constructive instincts,” which, if released, could inspire imaginative responses to problems and foster generosity toward others.⁷⁴ Patten surveys recent advances in agriculture, transportation, and labor-saving machinery as evidence that we are no longer condemned to scarcity, but can move into a “pleasure and surplus economy.”⁷⁵ Restating his position in Spencer’s vocabulary, Patten notes, “The military state is gradually being displaced by the industrial state.” Patten proposes to abolish poverty by public guarantees of a decent standard of life and employment. This will release creativity and a spirit of cooperation and generosity, all characteristics of a genuine democracy.⁷⁶ In the process the old habits and ideals of scarcity will drop away. Patten notes, for example, that “service-altruism,” or voluntary charity to the poor, will become unnecessary, replaced by “income-altruism,” as people cheerfully pay taxes to support adequate material provisioning for all.⁷⁷ If James disagrees with Patten at all, it may be in wishing Patten had paid more attention to what James calls “martial virtues.”

James does say that his vision is “an infinitely remote utopia just now,” but other statements indicate that the process is well underway. Individuals, James writes, increasingly feel “civic passion” replacing military passion. Priests and doctors already exhibit virtues of self-sacrifice for the common good. Only a spark of “skilful (sic) propagandism,” James notes, is needed to light up the “whole population.”⁷⁸ In James’s peace-economy, as in Patten’s pleasure-economy, social cohesion can be achieved by replacing military honor with civic honor as the collectivity’s glue.

James’s proposal for how to avoid degeneration while on the path toward a peaceful, socialistic future is designed to ensure that no males can escape strenuous toil. He begins by saying that “the whole youthful population” should be conscripted to fight against nature. They should work in coalmines, foundries, and on fishing fleets, build skyscrapers and roads, and wash dishes, clothes, and windows. However, it becomes clear that James’s primary concern

is that privileged males—he calls them “gilded youth”—should have these experiences in order to pay their “blood-tax” and have “their childishness knocked out” of them.⁷⁹ Perhaps James assumes that future military and political leaders, those who would direct the nation toward or away from militarism, would be drawn from the ranks of gilded youth. One can ask, though, whether the majority of citizens, those who spend their lives digging and building and washing, would ever finish paying off their “blood tax.”⁸⁰

James’s proposal to turn the fight against other people into a fight against nature was not original. English biologist Alfred Russel Wallace observed in 1899 that the martial virtues of “heroism and self-sacrifice” could be acquired outside of the military. He proposed organizing “great industrial armies” and employing them “in that great war which man is ever waging against Nature.”⁸¹ English economist John Hobson replied to C.H. Pearson’s worry that without war, civilized people will lose their capacity for strenuousness. Hobson stated that as people become more highly civilized, they turn their energies to struggling with the environment rather than with other peoples.⁸² We might grit our teeth at others who made the same proposal. Geologist and former slave-owner Joseph Le Conte, in his thoroughly racist book, *The Race Problem in the South* (1892), proposed that peoples of European and of African descent be separated geographically and allowed to develop on their own without outside interference. In this way, people’s “combative instincts” would be redirected toward nature, rather than against other people.⁸³

After making his specific proposal, James again “moves the point” in his crystalline statement, “I believe as he does.”⁸⁴ This follows a long quotation from *First and Last Things: A Confession of Faith and Rule of Life*, by H.G. Wells. It is a gorgeous book—quite Jamesian, only calmer. Wells thinks that every individual’s distinctiveness matters, even when that individual is the “wheel-smashed frog in the road and the fly drowning in the milk.”⁸⁵ His image of socialism reads like an elaboration of James’s conception of the social self.⁸⁶ Rejecting Marxism and technocratic versions of

Fabian socialism, Wells identifies socialism with the awakening of collective consciousness, an awareness that we are all parts of each other, as our biology and our very thoughts partake in the same flow of life.⁸⁷

The most important sentence in the passage from which James quotes is the sentence he cuts out. Wells's paragraph begins, "In many ways, war is the most socialistic of all forces."⁸⁸ Viewed internally, the military is already structured the way Wells—and James, Patten, and Dickinson—anticipate the coming socialist society will be. For those inside the military, food and employment are guaranteed, ego-enhancing stimuli are diminished, and identification with the interests of the whole is encouraged. Social cohesion is thus achieved.⁸⁹ James's proposal to enlist youth in a fight against nature reads like a version of what H.G. Wells claims European countries were already accomplishing through universal military service.

This gives another reason why James does not think it will be all that hard to conciliate militarists with the peace-party. The author acknowledges that life in the barracks is "very congruous with ancestral human nature."⁹⁰ Within the barracks, soldiers' constructive instincts are already organized into habits and patterns of daily life that are congruent with a peaceful, socialistic future. For James's militarists, conciliation is simply a matter of detaching memories from the war ideals and hooking them to ideals of peace.

Thus, James's proposal is not a moral equivalent *for* war; that was being taken care of by international lawyers and the intense efforts at social reconstruction by those on Patten's list—social settlements, industrial cooperatives, and labor unions.⁹¹ James's variation is minor because it addresses a niche problem, that of conciliating the militarists by asking them to transfer their well-honed habits of strenuousness and social cohesion from ideals of war to ideals of peace. The militarists' need is psychological and can be serviced in other ways than war. James's essay complements what he recommended at the Universal Peace Congress a few years before. Don't try to argue the militarists out

of their beliefs, but organize society so that the need for military action “manage[s] to evaporate.”⁹²

Is that it? Is James’s moral equivalent of war just a conciliation tactic? A way to get gilded youth tempted by militarism to move their hooks of memory from fighting people to fighting nature? The reading I give here works in that it makes sense of James’s words within the historical and intellectual context of his day and uses that context to fill out the essay’s meaning. James knew this literature well; his essay echoes its phrases. While the content of the essay is unoriginal, “A Moral Equivalent of War” is a vivid and rhetorically compelling presentation of how peace advocates before World War One understood their task.

And yet . . . I can’t shake the sense that I’ve missed something. Literary scholar Gillian Beer writes, “Books do not stay inside their covers. Once in the head they mingle. The miscegenation of texts is a powerful and uncontrollable force.”⁹³ Now texts also mingle in the head with events. The lifespan of James’s essay was exceedingly short; James died six months after it was published. Eulogies for the “greatest American philosopher” quickly appeared in print. As one of James’s last writings, the essay acquired a sacred aura; its afterlife had begun.⁹⁴ Four years later, as the guns of August released their fury, it became impossible to read James’s essay with the nonchalance of elites in 1910. Nothing I have said detracts from the high seriousness with which later readers approach the text. Our memories of World War One and its century-long bloody aftermath shape how we apprehend texts written just beforehand.

University of Dayton
mfischer1@udayton.edu

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Albert, Sidney P. “Gilbert Murray.” *Modern British Dramatists, 1900–1945*. Part 2: M–Z. Detroit: Gale, 1982.

- Bailey, Thomas A. "The Root-Takahira Agreement of 1908." *Pacific Historical Review* 9 (1940): 19–35.
- Barclay, Thomas. "Peace." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Vol. 21. 4–16. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1911.
- . "War." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Vol. 28. 305–11. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1911.
- Beer, Gillian. "Darwin's Reading and the Fictions of Development." *The Darwinian Heritage*. Edited by David Kohn. 543–88. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- Bevir, Mark. *The Making of British Socialism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Bloch, Jean de. *The Future of War in its Technical, Economic, and Political Relations*. Translated by R. C. Long. Boston: Ginn & Company, 1899.
- "Books on Various Topics." *Independent* 67 (1909): 1147–49.
- Brink, B. Deane and Paul Smith. *Athletes of the Bible: A Study Course for Boys and Young Men*. New York: Association Press, 1914.
- Brown, Arthur Judson. "International Arbitration as Affected by New World Problems in the Far East." *Report of the Sixteenth Annual Meeting of the Lake Mohonk Conference on International Arbitration* (1910): 31–39.
- Campbell, James. *Experiencing William James: Belief in a Pluralistic World*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2017.
- Ceadel, Martin. *Semi-Detached Idealists: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854–1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Chapman, John Jay. *Causes and Consequences*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898.
- Chickering, Roger. *Imperial Germany and a World Without War: The Peace Movement and German Society, 1892–1914*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975.
- Churchill, Winston. *The Story of the Malakand Field Force: An Episode of Frontier War*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1898.

- Comte, Auguste. *System of Positive Polity*. Vol. 4. Translated by Richard Congreve. New York: Burt Franklin, 1877.
- Cooper, Sandi. *Patriotic Pacifism: Waging War on War in Europe, 1815–1914*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Crook, Paul. *Darwinism, War and History: The Debate over the Biology of War from the “Origin of Species” to the First World War*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Darwin, Charles. *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1871.
- Dickinson, G. Lowes. *Justice and Liberty: A Political Dialogue*. New York: Doubleday, 1909.
- Dixon, Hepworth. *John Howard and the Prison-World of Europe*. London: Jackson and Walford, 1850.
- Dixon, Thomas. *The Invention of Altruism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. “War.” *The Complete Works*. Vol. 11. 149–176. New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1905.
- Euripides. *The Trojan Women*. Translated by Gilbert Murray. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1905.
- Hobson, John. “The Scientific Basis of Imperialism.” *Political Science Quarterly* 17 (1902): 460–89.
- James, William. “The Moral Equivalent of War.” *Popular Science Monthly* 77 (October 1910): 400–12.
- . “The Moral Equivalent of War.” In *Essays in Religion and Morality*. 162–73. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- . *The Principles of Psychology*. 2 Vols. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1890.
- . “Remarks at the Peace Banquet.” In *Essays in Religion and Morality*. 120–23. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- . *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1985.
- . *Essays in Religion and Morality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

- Johnson, George E. "Play as a Moral Equivalent of War." *Work with Boys: A Magazine of Methods*. Vol. 11 (1911): 69–84.
- Kaag, John Jacob. "A Call to Arms?—Militarism, Political Unity, and the Moral Equivalent of War." *The Pluralist* 4 (Summer 2009): 108–24.
- Kirkup, Thomas. *A History of Socialism*. London: Adam and Charles Black, 1892.
- Lankester, E. Ray. *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism*. London: Macmillan, 1880.
- LeConte, Joseph. *The Race Problem in the South*. New York: Appleton and Company, 1892.
- Lea, Homer. *The Valor of Ignorance*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1909.
- Livingston, Alexander. *Damn Great Empires! William James and the Politics of Pragmatism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Martin, Jane Roland. "Martial Virtues or Capital Vices? William James' Moral Equivalent of War Revisited." *Journal of Thought* 22 (1987): 32–44.
- Maynard, Constance Louisa. *The Moral Equivalent of War*. London: Church Missionary Society, 1905.
- McDougall, William. *An Introduction to Social Psychology*. Boston: J. W. Luce, 1909.
- McLachlan, James. "Defenselessness of the Pacific Coast." *Infantry Journal* 7 (July 1910): 1–32.
- Myers, Gerald E. *William James: His Life and Thought*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986.
- Official Report of the Thirteenth Universal Peace Congress*. Boston: The Peace Congress Committee, 1904.
- Patten, Simon. *The New Basis of Civilization*. New York: Macmillan, 1907.
- Patterson, David S. *Toward a Warless World: The Travail of the American Peace Movement, 1887–1914*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976.
- "The Progress of Science: William James." *Popular Science Monthly* 77 (October 1910): 413–14.

- Rees, Simon. "The Enigmatic Homer Lea." *Military History* 21 (October 2004): 58–64.
- Ruskin, John. "War." In *The Crown of Wild Olive*. 139–219. London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1866.
- Schott, Linda. "Jane Addams and William James on Alternatives to War." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54 (1993): 231–54.
- Spencer, Herbert. *The Data of Ethics*. New York: American Publishers, 1879.
- . *The Principles of Sociology*. 2 vols. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1881.
- Stanley, Henry M. *Through the Dark Continent*. London: S. Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1878.
- Stocking, George W. *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology*. New York: Free Press, 1968.
- Sumner, William G. "The Conquest of the United States by Spain." *The Yale Law Journal* 8, no. 4 (1899): 168–93.
- Throntveit, Trygve. *William James and the Quest for an Ethical Republic*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Thwing, Charles Franklin and Carrie F. Butler. *The Family: An Historical and Social Study*. Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1886.
- Tylor, Edward B. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*. 2 vols. London: John Murray, 1871.
- "The United States and Japan," *Times* (of London), Nov. 30, 1908, 7.
- van der Wusten, Herman. "Sebald Rudolf Steinmetz." *Geographers: Biobibliographical Studies* 24. Edited by Patrick H. Armstrong and Geoffrey Martin. 109–23. London: Bloomsbury, 2004.
- Wallace, Alfred Russel. *Studies Scientific and Social*. 2 vols. London: Macmillan, 1900.
- Webb, Sidney. *English Progress Towards Social Democracy*. London: Fabian Society, 1890.
- Wells, H. G. *First and Last Things: A Confession of Faith and a Rule of Life*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1908.

- Winslow, Hubbard. *The Christian Doctrines*. 110. Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1844.
- Winterer, Caroline. *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780–1910*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.
- Zola, Émile. "War." *The North American Review* 170 (April 1900): 449–63.

NOTES

¹ Stob in *William James and the Art of Popular Statement* gives an extended analysis of James's rhetoric in his lectures for popular audiences.

² General works on the pre-World War One international peace movement include Cooper, *Patriotic Pacifism*; Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealist*; Chickering, *Imperial Germany and a World Without War*; and Patterson, *Toward a Warless World*.

³ James, *Essays in Religion and Morality*, 120, also see 251–53.

⁴ Myers, *William James*, 444–45; Throntveit, *William James and the Quest for an Ethical Republic*, 133.

⁵ Emerson, "War"; Ruskin, "War"; Zola, "War."

⁶ See Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution*, 117.

⁷ Spencer gives a summary of his position in *Principles of Sociology*, vol. II, 663–67.

⁸ Winslow, *The Christian Doctrines*, 110.

⁹ H. Dixon, *John Howard and the Prison-World of Europe*, 219.

¹⁰ Thwing and Thwing, *The Family*, 178–79.

¹¹ James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 292–93.

¹² Johnson, "Play as a Moral Equivalent of War"; Brink and Smith, *Athletes of the Bible*, 21; Maynard, *The Moral Equivalent of War*, 16, 10.

¹³ James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 162–64.

¹⁴ James, *Principles*, vol. II, 393.

¹⁵ See for example, Patten, *The New Basis of Civilization*, 34–36.

¹⁶ James, *Principles*, vol. II, 393.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 409. Evolutionary thinkers typically categorized the instincts as self-regarding vs. other-regarding, egoistic vs. altruistic, or for self-preservation vs. for reproduction. Those in the latter category of each pair were considered responsible for the development of the moral sense and of ethics. See, for example, Darwin, *Descent of Man*, Chapter 3 on the evolution of the moral sense, and Spencer, *The Data of Ethics*, Chapters 11–12 on egoistic and altruistic instincts.

¹⁸ James, *Principles*, vol. II, 390–91.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 412.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 414.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 648–52.

²² *Ibid.*, 662.

²³ James, “Moral Equivalent of War,” 164.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 162–163.

²⁵ Euripides, *The Trojan Women*, 69, 71. This is from the translation by English classicist Gilbert Murray, whose translations were particularly popular at that time. See Albert, “Gilbert Murray,” 62. Until the late nineteenth century, many colleges required knowledge of Greek and Latin for admission. Students subsequently devoted much of their college coursework to the classics. Chautauqua sessions and women’s clubs included heavy doses of the classics in their offerings for the middle-class (Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 1–2, 144–47).

²⁶ Ruskin pivots from praising war to condemning it in “War,” 152–55.

²⁷ James, “Moral Equivalent of War,” 164–65.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 165.

²⁹ Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists*, 158.

³⁰ Chickering, *Imperial Germany and a World Without War*, 14–26.

³¹ "The United States and Japan." The article was most likely referring to the Root-Takahira Agreement, signed on November 30, 1908. See Bailey, "The Root-Takahira Agreement of 1908."

³² Barclay, "Peace," 4–16.

³³ Chickering, *Imperial Germany*, 15–16; Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists*, 309.

³⁴ *Official Report*, 4.

³⁵ The winners in attendance included William Randal Cremer (1903), Bertha von Suttner (1905), Ernesto Teodoro Moneta (1907), Henri La Fontaine (1913), Ludwig Quidde (1927), and Jane Addams (1931).

³⁶ For deliberations by businesspeople, see *Official Report*, 102–16. For a history of this dimension of the pre-World War One peace movement, see Patterson, *Toward a Warless World*, chapters 7–8.

³⁷ James, "Remarks at the Peace Banquet," 123

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ For a survey of theorists who held this view, see Crook, *Darwinism, War and History*, Chapter 4.

⁴⁰ For Quidde's address, see *Official Report*, 67–69. For Darby's address, see *Official Report*, 69–73.

⁴¹ James, *Essays in Religion and Morality*, 251–52.

⁴² See Barclay, "War."

⁴³ James, "Remarks at the Peace Banquet," 123. As one example, see Churchill, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, 304, 308.

⁴⁴ For Washington's address, see *Official Report*, 258–60.

⁴⁵ James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 165.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁴⁷ Chapman, *Causes and Consequences*, 110.

⁴⁸ James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 165.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 173. The incident is from Stanley, *Through the Dark Continent* (vol. 2, 200–01), published in 1878. Many authors had referred to the incident before James.

⁵⁰ Anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor gave an extended analysis of this view. He called such peoples “survivals” and thought that civilized peoples could learn about their deep history by studying these groups (*Primitive Culture*, vol. 1, 19).

⁵¹ James, “Moral Equivalent of War,” 162.

⁵² See Chickering’s discussion of German militarism, *Imperial Germany and a World Without War*, 392–402.

⁵³ James, “Moral Equivalent of War,” 166–67. James McLachlan, U.S. Representative from California, gave a speech using strong terms to the House of Representatives that presented Lea’s criticisms of the U.S. military’s lack of preparedness (McLachlan, *Defenselessness of the Pacific Coast*).

⁵⁴ Rees, “The Enigmatic Homer Lea.”

⁵⁵ For the military’s response to the book see Rees, “The Enigmatic Homer Lea,” 60. For *The Independent*, see “Books on Various Topics,” 1149. For the Lake Mohonk Conference, see Brown, Arthur Judson, “International Arbitration as Affected by New World Problems in the Far East,” 32.

⁵⁶ James, “Moral Equivalent of War,” 168, 169.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 170, 169.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 169; Dickinson, *Justice and Liberty*, 15–21.

⁵⁹ van der Wusten, “Sebald Rudolf Steinmetz.”

⁶⁰ James, “Moral Equivalent of War,” 167.

⁶¹ In his “Law of the Three Stages,” Comte associated theologism (the first stage) with militarism and the third stage (science or positivism) with industrialism. For a summary, see *System of Positive Polity*, vol. IV, 572–73.

⁶² Spencer, *Principles of Sociology*, vol. II, 568–642. For Spencer’s comment about the Esquimaux see vol. I, 541.

⁶³ At the time, the statement that democracies could not be militarist, was uncontroversial. See Sumner, “The Conquest of the United States by Spain,” 185.

⁶⁴ James, “Moral Equivalent of War,” 170.

⁶⁵ Bloch, *The Future of War*.

⁶⁶ James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 170.

⁶⁷ At the time, "collectivism" and "socialism" were often used interchangeably (T. Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism*, 232).

⁶⁸ See Webb, *English Progress Towards Social Democracy*; Kirkup, *A History of Socialism*. Bevir gives an excellent account of the history and variety of British variants of socialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in *The Making of British Socialism*.

⁶⁹ James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 291; "Moral Equivalent of War," 170. Contemporary scholars have criticized the masculinist elements of his essay. See Schott, "Jane Addams and William James on Alternatives to War"; Martin, "Martial Virtues or Capital Vices?"

⁷⁰ Livingston gives an overview of anxieties in the Gilded Age that centered on loss of strenuousness and manly virtues with the closing of the frontier in the U.S. (*Damn Great Empires!*, 77–85).

⁷¹ Ruskin, "War," 152–53.

⁷² Lankester, *Degeneration*, 60.

⁷³ James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 170.

⁷⁴ Patten, *New Basis of Civilization*, 9–10, 25, 43–44.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 9, 14–27.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 26–27, 43, 69, chapters 7–8.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 85–87.

⁷⁸ James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 171–72.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 171–72.

⁸⁰ James's statement, "The best thing about our 'inferiors' today is that they are as tough as nails, and physically and morally almost as insensitive," itself sounds insensitive ("Moral Equivalent," 169). Kaag hypothesizes that James hoped that by performing physical labor alongside non-elites, elite young men would gain a sense of how people outside their class lived ("A Call to Arms?," 119–20).

⁸¹ Wallace, *Studies Scientific and Social*, Vol. 2, 387.

⁸² Hobson, "Scientific Basis of Imperialism," 478–80.

⁸³ Le Conte, *The Race Problem in the South*, 394.

⁸⁴ James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 173.

⁸⁵ Wells, *First and Last Things*, 66.

⁸⁶ James, *Principles*, vol. I, chapter 10, "The Consciousness of Self."

⁸⁷ Wells, *First and Last Things*, 92–93, 131–32.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 214–16.

⁹⁰ James, "Moral Equivalent of War," 173.

⁹¹ Patten, *The New Basis of Civilization*, 103.

⁹² James, "Remarks at the Peace Banquet," 123. Patten makes the same point: old patterns of thought will disappear, not because people have accepted reasons against them, but because they have had new experiences (Patten, *The New Basis of Civilization*, 27).

⁹³ Beer, "Darwin's Reading and the Fictions of Development," 548.

⁹⁴ *Popular Science Monthly* reprinted the essay in its October 1910 issue: "It is here reproduced as a tribute to the memory of William James" (400). Immediately following was a eulogy that began, "Is there left to us in this land a man so great as William James? If the list of our leaders is scanned . . . is there a single one to be placed beside him?" ("The Progress of Science," 413).