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## Virtus and Peace

### Synthesis in 'The Moral Equivalent of War'

by William James

#### Delineating Peace and War

Epidemics and wars are similar—to paraphrase Georges Bernanos: they have no beginning nor end. But although war has been cyclical throughout history, unlike epidemics and natural disasters, war is based on intentional human choice. And unlike catastrophes that can be defined scientifically, war and its counterpart—peace—have evaded conclusive definitions. Of the two, describing peace has been especially elusive, so much so that it has been called ‘an eschatological endeavor—a final version to come at the end of time’ (James, 15).

While there are many definitions of peace, perhaps the one most fitting for an analysis of James’s essay ‘The Moral Equivalent of War’ is the work of Johan Galtung, the founder of modern peace and conflict studies and of the Oslo Peace Research Institute. In brief, Galtung conceives of a typology of four human needs (‘The Basic Needs Approach’). One is the need for security or freedom from violence. This results in the first level of peace, which Galtung terms ‘negative peace,’ that is, ‘the absence of direct violence between states engaged in by military and others in general, and of massive killing of categories of human in particular’ (‘Positive and Negative Peace,’ 173). Or as he more simply notes in *Peace by Peaceful Means*, at this first level ‘peace is the absence/reduction of violence of all kinds’ (9).

However, Galtung also states in the same work that another layer of peace exists: non-violent and creative conflict transformation (9). This layer is ‘positive peace’ and addresses the need of freedom from structural violence. That is: freedom from repression; freedom from economic misery; and freedom from alienation. (It is interesting to note that the root meaning of ‘freedom’ is from the Old English *freod*

‘affection, friendship, peace,’ *friga* ‘love,’ *frìðu* ‘peace.’) ‘Positive peace’ is based on ‘reciprocity, equal rights, benefits and dignity’ (‘Positive and Negative Peace,’ 173). Peace theory is intimately connected not only with conflict theory, but equally with developmental theory (Galtung, ‘Violence and Peace,’ 13). Reducing peace to the simple cessation of violence, without social justice, will never result in lasting peace:

War reduction theories appeal to most people because they deal directly with the use of force and weapons. They are, however, limited because they focus on immediately observable symptoms rather than on deeper underlying causes. Theories of peace creation go beyond buffering existing international relations. They focus on balancing and restructuring of the world system. (Beer, 16)

Galtung’s configuration of peace is unlike many definitions because it ultimately considers the root impediments to lasting peace. In this respect it resonates with the earlier Universal Charter of Human Rights (1948) and the papal encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963). Though written almost a century before Galtung’s work, it will be seen that James’ ‘The Moral Equivalent of War’ is also about peace as *a social goal* with a direct method to achieve elements of ‘positive peace.’

#### War: Violence and Virtus

Definitions of war vary and often directly or indirectly reflect the political or philosophical background of the author. Nevertheless, most descriptions of war include the concept of violence. A classic example is von Clausewitz, who goes beyond his well-known aphorism that war ‘is the continuation of policy with other means’: ‘War is nothing but a duel on an

extensive scale... an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will, directed by political motives and morality.... War is an act of violence pushed to its utmost bounds' (Bk I, 101, 103). While the technology of war has changed, peace theorist Robert Holmes affirms that 'war by its nature is organized violence, the deliberate, systematic causing of death and destruction... whether the means employed are nuclear bombs or bows and arrows' (*On War and Morality*, 180).

If the presence of violence constitutes the base line of war (i.e., 'negative war')—much as the absence of violence constitutes Galtung's 'negative peace'—would it be possible to speak of 'positive war' and what connection it might have with James's work? Such a war matrix may be explored visually if one compares two very different renditions of actual combat, the first battle of Tannenberg (1410), by Alphonse Mucha and Jan Matejko respectively. Despite differences in style (Art Nouveau and 19<sup>th</sup> century Polish historicism), both artists portray features of the war in which Polish, Lithuanian, and Ruthenian forces successfully fought the German Teutonic Knights, who attempted to convert the mainly Slavic pagan tribes to Christianity through Catholic colonization.

Mucha's 1924 painting, number 10 of his monumental 20-panel *Slavic Epic*, depicts the morning after the battle. In somber tones, the scene consists of the dead on the battlefield, not only the ethnically-diverse Slavic soldiers, but the Teutonic Knights as well. The Polish King Wladyslaw surveys the aftermath of violence not as a hero, but with horror at the cost of freedom. Victory is not the major theme here; rather, aspects of 'negative war' are more prominent.

Matejko, in contrast, presents the battle in turbulent action. While his 1878 painting shows violent confrontation, it also brings out certain positive personal effects of warfare: courage, self-reliance, confidence, leadership, comradeship, organization—among others. Unlike Mucha's work, Matejko shows both the Polish King and the Lithuanian Grand Duke in partnership together. The notion of chivalry is also present due to the number of knights included in the painting. Victory is the overriding emotion of the work with the central triumphant figure of Witold (Vytautas) the

Grand Duke enrobed in red.

Traditionally, theorists have looked at the positive *after-effects* of war: the elimination of repressive governments and injustices, among others. One may, as in the Matejko work, examine positive characteristics *in bello* that were historically termed *virtus*. For the Romans, *virtus* was originally associated with the battlefield (Schrader, 87). However, Roman society saw the four cardinal virtues of a military commander (prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude) as mainly external virtues to serve the state, a position James will take. The original four qualities have often been expanded to an imposing list of 'military virtues': justice, obedience, loyalty, courage, wisdom, honesty, integrity, perseverance, temperance, patience, humility, compassion, discipline, professionalism (Skerker et al. 2019). Instead of a strong emphasis on individual heroic action in the Greek tradition, these martial *virtus* qualities were seen to lead to civic duty—a focus essential to 'The Moral Equivalent of War.'

### Genesis and Context of 'The Moral Equivalent to War'

James was a pacifist living in the aftermath of the American Civil War and much opposed to the jingoism he saw in United States foreign policy. He was also, a member of the Anti-Imperialist League. He firmly believed that 'negative war' was anachronistic and would eventually disappear. It is important to remember that during James's lifetime many domestic and international peace organizations were founded along with the establishment of the Geneva and Hague conventions, and in 1904 James was invited to address the 13<sup>th</sup> Universal Peace Congress in Boston. Among the 500 members attending were such peace advocates as Jane Addams and Baroness von Suttner, William Dean Howells, and Booker T. Washington. Both Addams and James 'tried to articulate an alternative to the *psychological* allure of war' (Schott, 241; italics mine). In fact, James had planned to work more on the subject of military psychology before his death in 1910 and thought he might one day write a book called *A Psychology of Jingoism and Varieties of Military Experience* (Myers, 601).

In terms of context, one should also remember

the general male attitude towards women at the time, since both the 1904 speech and the 1910 'The Moral Equivalent' center on male initiatives— 'Let the soldiers dream of killing, as the old maids dream of marrying' ('Address', 268). (The Congress had a separate venue for most women to present and discuss.) James's speech appeared two months later in *The Atlantic* and was later published as 'Remarks at the Peace Banquet' in *Memories and Studies* (1911).

The 'Address' contains two major themes that will inform 'The Moral Equivalent.' The first of these is that the psychological inclination to war will always be with us:

Our permanent enemy is the noted bellicosity of human nature. Man, biologically considered, and whatever else he may be in the bargain, is simply the most formidable of all beasts of prey, and, indeed, the only one that preys systematically on its own species. We are once for all adapted to the military *status*. A millennium of peace would not breed the fighting disposition out of our bone and marrow, and a function so ingrained and vital will never consent to die without resistance, and will always find impassioned apologists and idealizers. (267)

Long periods of peace cannot eliminate this war 'DNA' in humans. And the chief reason is that 'war has an omnipotent support in the form of our imagination' (267), which is thrilled by war.

The plain truth is that people want war. They want it any how; for itself, and apart from each and every possible consequence. It is the final bouquet of life's fireworks. The born soldiers want it hot and actual. The non-combatants want it in the background, and always as an open possibility, to feed imagination on and keep excitement going. Its clerical and historical defenders fool themselves when they talk as they do about it. What moves them is not the blessings it has won for us, but a vague religious exaltation. (268)

The second theme that James briefly introduces (but only develops thoroughly in 'The Moral Equivalent') is the solution—to channel this war inclination:

But 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, and multiply the precedents; foster rival excitements, and *invent new outlets for heroic energy*, and from one generation to another the chances are that irritation will grow less acute and states of strain less dangerous among the nations. (268, italics mine)

### ***Virtus: Joining the 'War Party' and the 'Peace Party'***

'The Moral Equivalent of War' was originally given in 1906 as a speech at Stanford University. It was later published in 1910. As a realist and pragmatist, James begins 'The Moral Equivalent of War' by echoing his belief that the need for war is inherent in humans, thus giving the position of his opponents, the 'war party.' However, he then proceeds to give the history of Greek and Roman warfare and their atrocities, making it clear that he condemns 'negative war' and its violence: 'History is a bath of blood. The *Iliad* is one long recital of how Diomedes and Ajax, Sarpedon and Hector *killed*. No detail of the wounds they made is spared us, and the Greek mind fed upon the story' (*Memories and Studies*, 269). Believing in a progressive evolution of society, James felt that 'negative war' was no longer acceptable to modern rational nations: 'At the present day, civilized opinion is a curious mental mixture. The military instincts and ideals are as strong as ever, but they are confronted by reflective criticisms.... Innumerable writers are showing up the bestial side of military service' (273). (Part of this 'reflective criticism' was directed at Japan and Germany.)

Again, in a conciliatory fashion, James notes that the search for lasting peace has often been hindered by the 'peace party' itself: 'I see how desperately hard it is to bring the peace-party and the war-party together, and I believe that the difficulty is due to certain deficiencies in the program of pacifism which set the military imagination... strongly against it' (274). Pacifists 'ought to enter more deeply into the aesthetical and ethical point of view of their opponent' (283). James continues to point out that the 'war-party' fears a world in which the

military values of *virtus* would be absent.

Instead, James concludes that ‘war is, in short, a permanent human *obligation* (277). This is because the military virtues (the military character) preserve ‘hardihood.’ A world without *virtus* would fall into stagnation, a ‘pleasure economy,’ and ‘degeneration.’ It might well see war as no more than relief from boredom: ‘Man lives by habits indeed, but what he lives for is thrills and excitements. The only relief from habit’s tediousness is periodical excitement. From time immemorial wars have been, especially for non-combatants, the supremely thrilling excitement. There is not a man in this room, I suppose, who doesn’t buy both an evening and a morning paper, and first of all pounce on the war column’ (‘Address,’ 303). Indeed, ‘martial virtues must be the enduring cement; intrepidity, contempt of softness, surrender of private interest, obedience to command, must still remain the rock upon which states are built’ (288). Thus, James suggests a compromise in which ‘the martial type of character can be bred without war’ (292), without the horrors of ‘negative war.’ James predicts that peace will not be permanent ‘unless the states, pacifically organized, preserve some of the old elements of army-discipline’ (287).

How will the military *virtus* be utilized? James holds that civic duty is the solution as ‘all the qualities of a man acquire dignity when he knows that the service of the collectivity that owns him needs him’ (285). The solution that James proposes is not a military conscription, but ‘a conscription of the whole youthful population to form for a certain number of years a part of the army enlisted against *Nature*’ (290):

To coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to fishing fleets in December, to dishwashing, clothes washing, and window washing, to road-building and tunnel-making, to foundries and stoke-holes, and to the frames of skyscrapers, would our gilded youth be drafted off, according to their choice, to get the childishness knocked out of them, and to come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas. (291)

James ends ‘The Moral Equivalent of War’ by declaring, with a reference to H. G. Wells, that

‘the conceptions of order and discipline, the tradition of service and devotion, of physical fitness, unstinted exertion, and universal responsibility, which universal military duty is now teaching European nations, will remain a permanent acquisition when the last ammunition has been used in the fireworks that celebrate the final peace’ (295).

### Utopia or Relevancy

‘The Moral Equivalent of War’ is one of the more widely read works of William James. It provided the catalyst for creating in the United States alone the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Depression, the Peace Corps, Job Corps, VISTA, Americorps, and other civic organizations. The same title was used by President Jimmy Carter in 1977 in a speech to address national issues of energy. It can be asked if Galtung himself was influenced by the essay:

The argument made here is not to abolish the military but to give it new tasks. That institution has had very bad habits in the past, such as attacking other countries and nations, and other classes, usually at the behest of the ruling elites, killing and devastating through external and internal wars. But there have also been virtues: good organization, courage, willingness to sacrifice. The bad habits have to go; not necessarily the military, and certainly not the virtues. (*Peace by Peaceful Means*, 5)

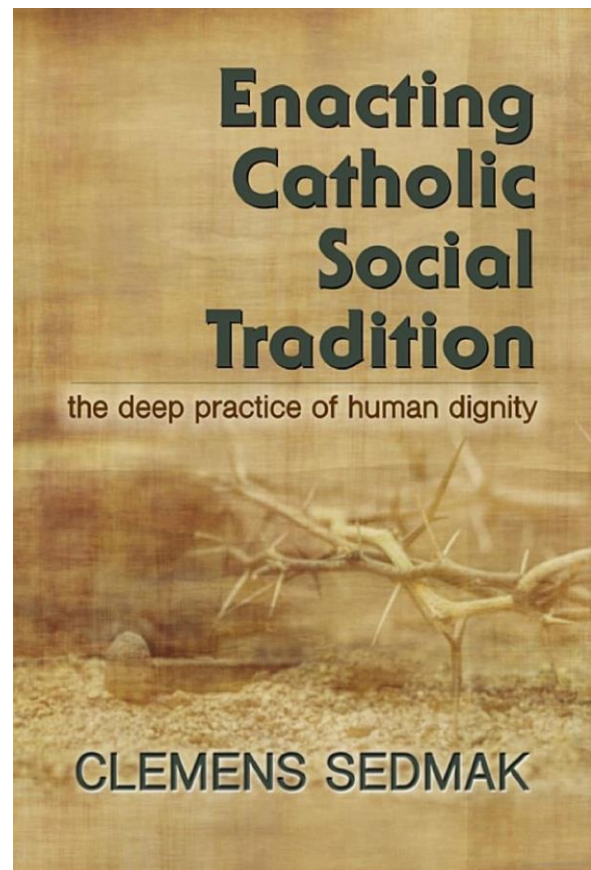
Criticism of James’s essay usually centers on his relegating women to the private sphere and proposing conscription primarily to affluent white males (Schott, 253). His solution has been called ‘incredibly daft’ in respect to the fight against nature: ‘This proto-Ayn Randian line of thought means taking the human will and pouring it into Industry in order to build monuments such as railroads and skyscrapers celebrating human achievement to the detriment of the biosphere’ (Taggart, 15). Of course, instead of damaging the planet, activists today follow James’s civic advice and work for the world’s betterment. His solution for ‘positive peace’ has also been termed ‘naïve’ as ‘a social program intended for national utilization’ (Myers, 444). Nevertheless, ‘what survives is the notion that there may be a moral equivalent



for the pugnacious impulse' and that for those who continue to hope that war can be avoided, James' conviction that there are ways of sublimating aggressive emotions is supportive' (ib.).

Although set in a particular time frame, 'The Moral Equivalent of War' is unique in that it strives for compromise and conciliation, uniting the values of 'positive war' along with those of 'positive peace,' presented in what is known today as Rogerian argumentation. James' work also looks at the psychological impetus to war. Generally, thinkers have emphasized the cause of war as 'necessity,' Livy's '*iustum enim est helium quihus necessarium*' (war is just for those for whom it is necessary). But as Arendt maintains: 'Conquest, expansion, defense of vested interests, conservation of power in view of the rise of new and threatening powers, or support of a given power equilibrium—all these well-known realities of power politics were not only actually the causes of the outbreak of most wars in history, they were also recognized as 'necessities'' (3). Unfortunately, Arendt, unlike James, fails to add the psychological aspect of war which may act independently from 'power politics.' Finally, 'The Moral Equivalent of War' considers 'one of the classic problems of politics: *how to sustain political unity and civic virtue in the absence of war or a credible threat* (Roland 2015). His work is obsolete only if we concur with Bernanos, that 'the modern state no longer has anything but rights; it does not recognize duties anymore.'

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