William James: The First Peace Psychologist

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William James, the first peace psychologist, would have felt at home in the Psychologists for Social Responsibility as well as the Division of Peace Psychology. He was a most distinguished scholar and also an insistent public voice on issues of war and peace. He was deeply opposed to imperialism and the "war fever" with which it was associated. It was the political issue on which he spent most thought and effort. He was at one time Vice President of the Anti-Imperialist League and he published eight or more articles and letters in newspapers as well as making speeches against the Monroe Doctrine, the Spanish-American War, the colonization of the Philippines and Cuba, the Venezuelan incident, etc. (Perry, 1948, p. 245).

A letter published in the *Boston Evening Transcript* on March 1, 1899 provides a good sense of James's spirited involvement in this issue:

We gave the fighting instinct and the passion of mastery their outing ... because we thought that ... We could resume our permanent ideals and the character when the fighting fit was done. we now see how we reckoned without our host. We see ... what an absolute savage ... the passion of military conquest always is, and
how the only safeguard against the crimes to which it will infallibly drag the nation that gives way to it is to keep it chained forever ... We are now openly engaged in crushing out the scariest thing in this great human world - the attempt of a people long enslaved to attain to the possession of itself, to organize its laws and government, to be free to follow its internal destinies according to its own ideals ... Why, then, do we go on? First, the war fever; and then the pride which always refuses to back down when under fire. But these are passions that interfere with the reasonable settlement of any affair; and in this affair we have to deal with a factor altogether peculiar with our belief, namely, in a national destiny which must be "big" at any cost ... We are to be missionaries of civilization, and to bear the white man's burden, painful as it often is! ... The individual lives are nothing. Our duty and our destiny call, and civilization must go on! Could there be a more damning indictment of that whole bloated idol termed "modern civilization" than this amounts to? Civilization is, then, the big, hollow, resounding, corrupting, sophisticating, confusing torrent of mere brutal momentum and irrationality that brings forth fruits like this! (from Perry, 1948, pp. 245-6)
James was drawn to and repelled by military passion. He admired the heroic and courageous actions associated with the military but was horrified by the savagery and destructiveness that can result from military fervor. According to a number of scholars (e.g. Bjork, 1988; Cotkin, 1990; Feinstein, 1984; Perry, 1948), much of his writings and his personal, psychological difficulties reflected an ambivalence similar to his feelings about military passion. They also reflected his attempt to resolve this ambivalence. Heroism—characterized by intense, self-willed, freely chosen, courageous, and strenuous purposeful action—was the antidote to boredom, doubt, passivity, depression, pessimism and neurasthenia: the *tedium vitae* of wealthy, intellectual Americans between 1880 and World War I (Cotkin, 1990).

As Cotkin (1990, p. 71) indicates, James pitied individuals trapped in doubt and conducted a moral offensive against lives wasted "in a weltering sea if sensitivity and emotion," spent without "a manly concrete deed." In his writings, James repeatedly declared his admiration for the heroic. In the *Principles of Psychology* (James, 1890, p. 1181), he stated:

The world thus finds in the heroic man its worthy match and mate; and the effort which he is able to put forth to hold himself erect and keep his heart unshaken is the direct measure of worth and function in the game of human life. He can *stand* this Universe. He can meet it and keep up his faith in it in presence of those same features which lay his weaker brethren low. He can still find a zest in it, not by "ostrich-like forgetfulness" but by pure inward willingness to take the world with those deterrent objects there.
And hereby he becomes one of the masters and the lords of life. He must be counted with henceforth; he forms a part of human destiny.

According to James, moral energy "is made great by the presence of a great antagonist to overcome ... it is action in the line of greatest resistance" (James in "The Feeling of Effort," 1880). Wars, earthquakes, shipwrecks, or moral chasms are the great revealers of what men and women are able to do and bear" (James in "Energies of Men," p. 134).

What accounts for James's emphasis on the heroic? Two interrelated lines of explanation have been offered by scholars. One emphasizes personal, psychological issues and the other stresses intellectual, philosophical considerations. In both the personal and philosophic arenas, James's emphasis on the heroic served the function of overcoming dilemmas which James suffered during lengthy periods of doubt, debility and depression. Some scholars trace his psychological difficulties to the complex relations within his family - particularly stressing James's reluctant submission to the benign tyranny of his father who vigorously opposed his ardent desire to be an artist (e.g. Feinstein, 1984). In contrast, Cotkin (1990, p. 21) suggests that the general contours of James's psychological crisis "were the common property of his generational cohort. A problematic relation between fathers and sons, grave uncertainties over vocational direction, and neurasthenic disabilities were the shared inheritance of James's generation - at least among those members from his social class background."
According to Cotkin, the Civil War was a self-defining event for his cohort as well as for James. Those, such as James, who did not participate in it felt a sense of failure and guilt as well as doubts about their manliness and courage. They were haunted in the post-war years by uncertainties about themselves which were reflected in an inability to make vocational and other decisions. No doubt James's earlier ambivalent relationship with his father (who pressured James not to participate in the war) intensified his post-war emotional crisis.

During James's years of debility and depression, experienced most intensely in the latter part of the 1860s and the earlier part of the 1870s, James not only wrestled with questions of self-identity, he was also pondering the central philosophical issues of the nineteenth century: free will or determinism, idealism or materialism, optimism or pessimism. There was undoubtedly a reciprocal influence: James transformed his own struggle with indecision and melancholia into the text of his psychology and philosophy: and James's resolution of philosophical issues helped him to confront his own psychological malaise.

There are too many facets to James's rich contributions to psychology for a summary to be presented here. However, I would like to emphasize that the focus on the "heroic" in "The Moral Equivalent of War" relates to a central theme in his work. James viewed the universe to be uncertain and insecure, but as having endless possibilities rather than as being mechanistically determined. Individuals could act and through their actions transform their world.
As Cotkin (1990, p. 101) points out: James's philosophical vision featured heroic, directed individuals acting in the face of uncertainty and adversity. Much of James's psychology is an attempt to explicate the conditions which foster or hinder and individual's ability to act purposefully and decisively. He discusses how the stream of consciousness reflects simultaneously the internal and external world; how its focus can be determined by attention, choice, habit, will and the self. He indicates how through exercise of one's will in a systematic manner one can create habits which will enable one to be free of debilitating doubt and also enable one to act decisively and courageously in adverse circumstances.

In James's view, "effort of attention is ... the essential phenomenon of will." Volitional effort is required whenever a rarer and more ideal impulse is called upon to neutralize others of a more instinctive and habitual kind; it does so whenever strongly explosive tendencies are checked or strongly obstructive conditions overcome (James, 1892, p. 442). The ideal impulse appears as "a still small voice which must be artificially reinforced to prevail." If that voice is persistent enough one can engage in actions which could lead to intense pain, inquiry, social disapproval, or death. Similarly, it could enable one to resist the strong temptations of sensual pleasure, wealth, or adulation.

It is interesting that, in the same sentence, James refers to the hero and the neurotic subject (p. 443) as people who need much of the ability to reinforce an ideal impulse through volitional effort. It was only through heroic effort that he was able to overcome his own neurotic propensities to doubt and melancholia.
Deutsch, "William James: The First Peace Psychologist"

James died in August of 1910. Despite his declining health, "The Moral Equivalent of War" was written and published in February by the Association for International Conciliation (Leaflet No. 27). Perry (1948, p. 229) indicates that "over 30,000 copies of the leaflet were distributed, and it was republished in popular magazines: McClure's Magazine, August 1910; The Popular Science Monthly, October 1910; and Atlantic Readings. Letters of approval poured in from all quarters, not only from confirmed pacifists, but from many, including army officers, who were attracted by James's candid recognition of the psychological and moral claims of war."

I have not made a systematic survey of the citations and use of "The Moral Equivalent of War" by social scientists. There are undoubtedly more that I can recall from the many years in which I have been involved in peace psychology. I could only identify two references to James's article by social scientists despite a quick look at the indices of the many books that I have on my shelves in this area. 2 One is in a SPSSI book, Human Nature and Enduring Peace edited by Gardner Murphy (1945) and the other is in a paper of mine, "Psychological Alternatives to War" (Deutsch, 1962). This has been an unfortunate neglect. I am delighted that this first member issue of Peace Psychology may stimulate more discussion of the psychological issues raised by the first peace psychologist.

There is no need for me to summarize James's article since it is reprinted in this Journal. However, I would like to comment on it from the perspective of a current peace psychologist. First a personal reaction. When I read it more than
fifty years ago, I was thrilled. I had recently been involved in combat flying with the U.S. Air Force in World War II and was upset by its destructiveness and was thinking of alternative, more constructive ways of managing conflict. Although James repeats some of the psychological nonsense of his time (e.g., in his reference to “innate pugnacity”), basically he was rejecting the fatalistic view that war was inevitable because of human nature. Before World War II, this was a widely espoused foolishness by popularizers of psychology. For James, the appeal of the military and of war did not come primarily from people’s basic negative predispositions (such as innate pugnacity) but from their desire to face challenge and adversity and in so doing fully express and realize their virtuous potentials. In his view, successful military action requires such virtues as fidelity, cohesiveness, tenacity, heroism, conscience, education, inventiveness, economy, wealth, physical health and vigor.

From my own experience in the military, the day-to-day lives of soldiers as well as their intermittent episodes of combat are not dominated by aggressive thoughts, feelings or actions. They are more dominated by the values and virtues found in most hierarchical, self-contained organizations - civil or military - which require some of the virtues mentioned by James for their effective functioning. However, heroism and courage are rare in the military as well as in civil life. Moreover, those who seem heroic in the military are often not particularly so in civil life.
As an academician, James was a pre-eminent psychologist-philosopher who was profoundly involved with the basic issues in his fields of study. It was heartening to me to know that James felt it was appropriate for him to be both a 'pure' scholar and a scholar-citizen who could express vigorously his perspectives on important social issues. It helped reinforce the model that Kurt Lewin had provided for me of the tough-minded and public-spirited scholar. There are subtle pressures on many of us who do theoretical and experimental research to stay out of the arena of public controversy. James provides a model of active, responsible public engagement on controversial issues.

I turn now to consideration of the substance of "The Moral Equivalent of War" from the perspective of a contemporary peace psychologist. My discussion points out some of its limitations but, to begin with I wish to re-emphasize the merits of James's proposal which still warrant our attention. First, as I pointed out above, it rejects the misguided view - still widely-held and propagated - that war is an inevitable consequence of human nature. Second, it points out that participation in the military and in military actions can serve important and worthwhile psychological functions. The evils of war frequently result from actions which express positive human virtues. James, here, was anticipating Hannah Arendt's The Banality of Evil in his statements that the destructiveness of war results not only from such social virtues as duty, conformity, loyalty, cohesiveness. And, third, it draws the very valuable conclusion that militarism and war are unlikely to disappear until new civic enterprises and institutions are
developed which can provide a satisfactory alternative for the psychological dispositions which are fulfilled in the military.

Although I would express James’s last two points somewhat differently, these valuable points are still not sufficiently emphasized in current peace psychology. The political-military-industrial complex does serve important psychological, political, and economic interests and it can only function if these interests of individuals, groups, and organizations are reasonably well satisfied. The interests underlying the continuation of this complex can, naturally, be expected to resist change unless alternative ways of satisfying them are developed and made salient. James’s suggestions for a moral equivalent of war were a good beginning, but few of us have followed his lead by developing suggestions for practical alternative ways for satisfying the interests that perpetuate the political-military-industrial complex which is so conducive to war. Nor have we followed his suggestion that those who find war to be repugnant ought to enter more deeply into the aesthetical and ethical point of view of their opponents. Unless they do so, they are unlikely to have much influence on them.

There are a number of significant limitations of James’s article. These limitations arise primarily out of its narrow focus. It centers on individual, personal traits associated with the manly virtues evoked in confronting the risks of hardships connected with war (as in military combat or, alternatively, a “war against nature”). There is no mention in his paper of women, children or older men; as though, the only ones implicated in the cause or prevention of war are young men from the “luxurious classes” whose masculine identities have not yet been strongly established. This is a very partial perspective which much impairs
its relevance to modern life. The relationship among sexism, war, and a patriarchal society are not considered (see Martin, 1987, for a feminist perspective on James's paper). James ignores the obvious fact that it is largely middle-aged and older men -- the dominant figures in the political-military-industrial complex -- who make the decisions leading to war. Rarely, do they seek to engage in actions which would expose them to the risks and hardship of personal involvement in combat. They do, however, create the "hype" which glorifies militarism and produces war fever among susceptible young men.

The paper's individualistic focus on individual personal traits abstracted from their social context is also very limiting. The importance of political, economic, religious, educational and family institutions in shaping character traits and values and in determining war or peace is not discussed. Hence, there is no consideration of the role of conflicts over power, economic interests, and ethnic identity in leading to war. Nor is there any discussion of the possible ways that education might foster more constructive resolution of the conflicts among individuals, groups and nations that are inevitable in life.

The phrasing of the moral equivalent of war as "a conscription of the whole youthful population to form for a certain number of years a part of the army enlisted against nature." (italics added) is very unfortunate. It casts nature in the role of an enemy which must be conquered. While this view of nature was common among James's contemporaries, many of us now recognize that if we harm nature, we harm ourselves. From today's perspective, it was quite misguided to associate human virtue with the goal of conquering nature.
Earlier in this paper, I suggested that James's ambivalent relationship with his father and his self-doubts enhanced by not have served in the Civil War led him to overestimate the virtues (e.g., heroism, bravery, loyalty, hardiness) to be found in the military. His glorification of the military inadvertently, had the consequence of making his proposed moral equivalent to war very pale and weak as an alternative. This glorification, combined with his muddy and contradictory discussion of the roots of human pugnacity, blunts his own proposal.

Let me conclude by indicating how appropriate it is that "The Moral Equivalent of War" is published in this first issue of the Journal of Peace Psychology. It demonstrates that peace psychology has had a long and illustrious history and that, from psychology's earliest days a number of its most eminent and influential scholars have become publicly engaged with psychological issues related to war and peace. It also suggests that peace psychology has advanced considerably since its earliest days but that there are important insights still to be harvested from those who have preceded us.
References


Footnotes

1 In writing this paper, I have been aided immensely by reading a number of biographies and commentaries about the life and work of William James. I have found George Cotkin's (1990) book, William James, Public Philosopher, especially valuable.

2 Biographers of William James do, of course, refer to and discuss this paper in the context of his life and times.

3 I include a current exemplification of ideas similar to the ones expressed in "The Moral Equivalent of War" from National Public Radio's "Morning Edition." October 18, 1993 Segment #14: Rival Gang Members Learn New Skills as Firefighters

BOB EDWARDS, Host: The South Central Panthers is a special on-call fire fighting unit, most of whose members were once rival gang members in Los Angeles. After training most of the summer with the US Forest Service, the Panthers have helped put out 42,000 acres of brush and forest fires in California. Forestry officials say members of the rival gangs quickly overcame hostilities and learned to work together on neutral turf. The project has been so successful that the Forest Service
now anticipates hiring some of the Panthers full-time. Commentator Bebe Moore Campbell says the idea of turning gang members into firefighters is a new variation of an old approach.

BEBE MOORE CAMPBELL, Commentator: A few decades ago, and even today, when a teenage boy showed signs of juvenile delinquency, old folks would advise, "Send him to the Army. The Army will straighten him out." The thinking was that, while the macho world of fighting men and machines would entice a would-be trouble-maker, the accompanying aspects of discipline, hard work and a regular paycheck would tame his wayward spirit – or, at least redirect it so that, ultimately, the boy and society benefited. Although the military failed to turn around all boys, a lot of old guys will tell you, "If I hadn't gone into the Army, I'd a' wound up in jail."

Although the US Army of the '90s is laying off soldiers, the South Central Panthers seems to be having an impact on the lives of young gang-bangers similar to what old folks had in mind. Trading street Uzi's for water hoses isn't as far-fetched as it sounds. The members of the Panthers are used to -- perhaps even addicted to -- danger. The violent elements of natural disasters mimic some aspects of gang life. And the violence factor is important, for many fatherless young men, without the role model of a nurturing male, equate being violent with being a man.