

InPresence 0027: The Moral Equivalent of War with Jeffrey Mishlove

Video Transcript - *New Thinking Allowed* with Jeffrey Mishlove
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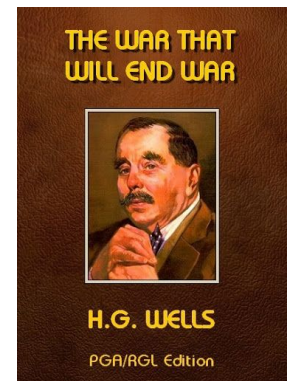
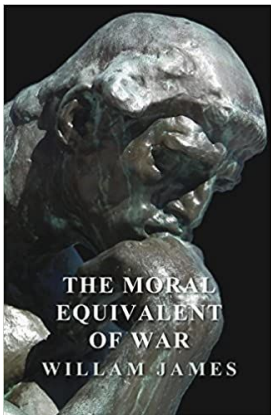
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(00:39) Hello, I'm Jeffrey Mishlove and today I'd like to talk about William James' classic essay, "The Moral Equivalent of War." The essay was published in 1910, just a few years before the outbreak of the First World War - the war that many people believed was going to be the war to end all war, which it certainly wasn't. [It] was also the month of William James' death when that essay was published, so in some ways it represents, along with his theory of radical empiricism, the culmination of his life's work.

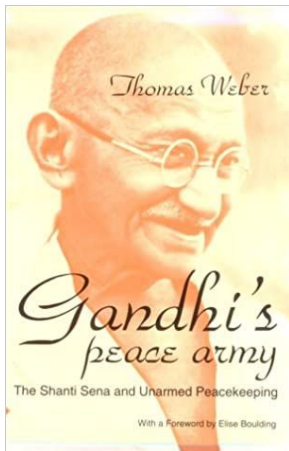
(01:17) William James was born in 1842, so he lived through the American Civil War. In fact, he had two brothers who fought in the Civil War and he himself even volunteered to fight in that war, before he became a pacifist. However, he was sent home because of ill-health and didn't fight. His brothers had their lives basically ruined by the war. They came home misfits and addicted to alcohol and never achieved the kind of greatness known in the James family. William and Henry, who avoided war, are the two brothers who achieved greatness, not Robertson and Wilkie. He also lived through the Spanish-American War as well. By the time he came to write "The Moral Equivalent of War," he was a confirmed pacifist, and he says so in the essay.



(02:21) The essay is quite unique because although it's a very strong statement against war itself, he begins by saying he's not going to say a word about the horrors of war - they're all so self-evident. We all know what war does, it maims and kills and destroys lives and ruins communities. He said people have known that forever and it has never stopped war. The obvious arguments against war have done no good whatsoever. So, James was saying, "What can we do, how can we reach deeper?"

(02:59) He thought, let's look at the positive virtues associated with war. War offers men in particular an opportunity to be manly. It's a very masculine activity, not soft and feminine, but a hard and masculine opportunity to test yourself, an opportunity to achieve glory, to do something heroic, to sacrifice yourself in the name of the community as a whole. These are all good, admirable things.

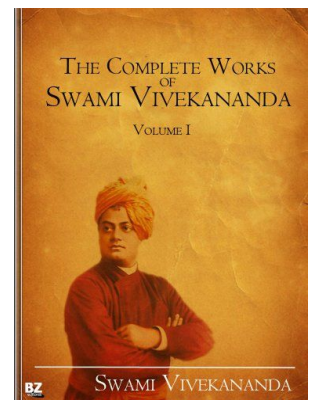
James felt if we're going to find a way to end war, we have to keep these positive virtues. Ending war cannot become simply a feminine activity. It has to be one that reinforces the male virtues.



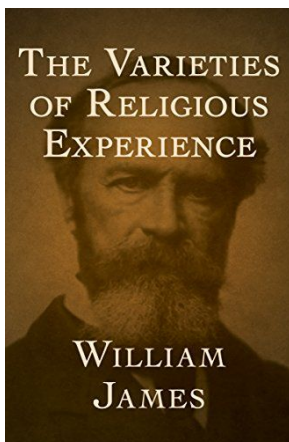
(03:52) So, for James, “The Moral Equivalent of War” was creating an army of men who would go out and do good things in the world, peacefully. They might build bridges or build skyscrapers or work in the fisheries in the cold months of December. It's not so different really from what Mahatma Gandhi wrote about when he talked about the need for armies for peace. One can say that Gandhi may well have been influenced by William James’ thinking in this regard, and successfully so too, if we look at the liberation of India.

(04:37) James envisioned that there would be all sorts of important projects that people could engage in that would really test them, give them an opportunity for self-sacrifice. I suppose you could say the Peace Corps is a similar idea. Or, I've heard of people talk about putting on the light blue uniforms of the United Nations and marching unarmed into conflict areas in order to separate the warring parties, being willing to risk your life but not willing to take a life. That's the fundamental idea. The essay has had a lot of influence. It's probably the most influential essay written by a pacifist in the history of philosophy, perhaps even in the history of pacifism itself. It's had an influence on the entire psychological profession, I would hazard to say. Other people have written many, many commentaries and many, many variations of James’ idea.

(05:49) Now, I'd like to go a step further because as we've discussed, William James was a great scholar of religion. Even though Hinduism was virtually unknown in his own day and age in the United States, James studied it. He actually became a close acquaintance of Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu monk who came to the United States at the age of 29 in 1893 to speak at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. He traveled throughout America and Europe, a highly educated man familiar with Western logic and philosophy.

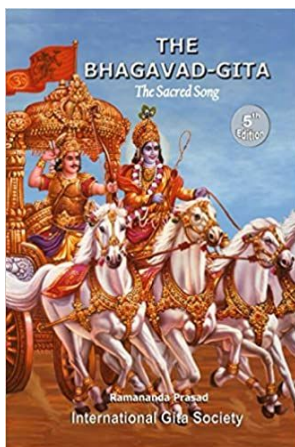


William James was very pleased to make his acquaintance.



(06:35) In James’ great book, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, you'll see that he quotes extensively from Vivekananda. He attempted to practice meditation and yoga breathing exercises. He was quite interested in experiencing the sort of mystical states of consciousness that seemed almost second nature to Vivekananda. Although James acknowledged his personality didn't lend itself very well and maybe the same strenuous moral fiber that he urged when it came to pacifism, he was unable to muster when it came to spiritual disciplines.

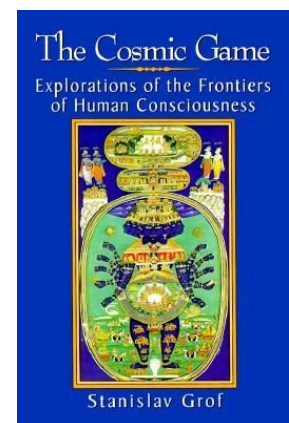
(07:16) But he spoke highly, he thought highly of Vivekananda and even referred to him as Master. There's much to be said about that relationship. And yet, at the same time, he had important differences that are related to this question of pacifism. You see, the Indian subcontinent has given birth to a number of great religions, the Jain religion, the Hindu religion, the Buddhist religion. The Jain religion in particular is one that stresses pacifism. Orthodox Jains will walk down a sidewalk carrying like a feather duster in front of them brushing away any insects that might be in their path so that they can avoid accidentally killing an insect. They believe in never harming another living creature. The flag of India has the Jain symbol, the wheel on it, the symbol of Mahavira, the founder of the Jain religion, a great sage who lived 2,500 years ago.



(08:30) On the other hand, the Hindu religion is one in which the great spiritual doctrine, perhaps the most sacred text in all of Hinduism, is the *Bhagavad Gita*, the song of God. And the song describes a battle. Two opposing armies are lined up on a great battlefield about to go to war with each other for reasons that seem, in retrospect, kind of petty, kind of trivial. But there they are, they are lined up, the princes on each side. And the great prince on one side is Arjuna. He is in his chariot about to enter battle and he speaks to his charioteer, who happens to be a blue fellow named Krishna.

(09:23) Krishna, as it turns out, is actually the incarnation of the deity Vishnu and Arjuna complains to Krishna about having to fight. He says, "These are my cousins. How can I go to war against them? It's wrong! I must not do this!" At that point, Krishna reveals himself in all of his majesty to Arjuna. The text says he grew brighter than ten thousand suns. There's an interesting, I will call it a paradox here, but perhaps a corollary is a better word. Robert Oppenheimer, the developer of the first atomic bomb at Alamogordo - when that bomb exploded in a test explosion, he described it the same way. He said, "Brighter than ten thousand suns," as if the atomic bomb was the equivalent of the deity.

(10:26) Therein does lie the paradox, because Krishna then explains to Arjuna what we could call a cosmic perspective. It's a perspective that I like in many ways. I argue for it. Stanislav Grof has written a wonderful book about it called *The Cosmic Game*, and it's a certain sense of detachment in which Krishna says, "Don't worry, you can go into war. It's fine, you've never created a single life. You can't destroy a single life. Really, it's up to God to do all of that." It's not so different from people who say, "You know, kill them all and let God sort it out later."



(11:13) Well, Krishna convinces Arjuna to go into battle. He says, "It's your duty, your Dharma. You have to do your Dharma. That's the most important thing." It's really a very eloquent argument in favor of war and violence. Krishna, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, having had God himself revealed to him personally, does. He goes into battle and wins the war.

(11:40) Now, William James, on the other hand, found that attitude to be honest disgusting. He just couldn't handle it. He says, "Well, first of all, it's monistic." It means that we are one with everything. Swami Vivekananda would say yes, that's exactly right, we are one with everything. That means we have nothing to be afraid of, nothing to fear, nothing can ever hurt us. William James, a psychologist that he was, felt that, "Well, I think you're really very afraid, and I'll tell you what you're afraid of. You're afraid of taking a strong moral stance and doing the right thing. You're afraid of being strenuous in pursuit of what is good. If everything is all the same, it's all kind of namby-pamby. You're living a shallow, hollow life, and I reject that."

(12:39) James argued for moral strenuousness. He believed that we are not guaranteed to have a better, more perfect society. It will only happen if we make it so and we have to sacrifice, we have to sometimes endure pain in order for that to happen. He expected to do it non-violently and with great vigor, but when he argued for the moral equivalent of war, he meant it as an alternative to the *Bhagavad Gita* version. He meant, however, that those who enter the armies of peace will be every bit as committed, every bit as heroic, and will test and challenge themselves as much as any other soldier in a violent war.

(13:23) Also, James believed in what he called pluralism. He didn't believe in monism. He felt that consciousness itself, while it may be true that all consciousness is connected, there's another sense in which all consciousness is unique. Every person is a distinct individual, no matter what else we have in common at the deep root of our being. I wake up every morning and I'm me. I'm not you. So, I want to leave you with this question, what can you do in your life to more strenuously, more forcefully, live up to your highest values? Thank you for being with me. (14:24)

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