

Moral equivalents of greed

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Abstract The author considers James' (1910) essay *The Moral Equivalent of War* and applies some of its ideas to another pressing problem of our times, which for short is called *greed*, but can be described more precisely as the working out of the possessive market society under the conditions of neoliberalism and great technological power. James considered that pacifists had the best arguments, but failed to persuade mainstream society. The same can be said today of the critics of neoliberalism. There is need for radical change away from an unjust and dysfunctional economic system, but mainstream society is unwilling to try new ideas. The present author adapts James' idea and considers benign and malign forms of greed. What we all desire, more than huge monetary assets, is self-respect and social respect. There are already many rewards that are not primarily monetary. In a radically different culture, which rejected the principles of unlimited accumulation and almost unlimited convertibility, benign rewards would motivate constructive activity. The moral equivalents of greed briefly discussed here are—Honours and prizes for merit (administered justly); Celebrity (important in society); Luck (gambling, with certain constraints, could be benign); Power (rewarding in itself, so large monetary gain need not go with it); Services (people making important contributions to society could concentrate their commitment); Temporary custody of public treasures (a privilege prized by some). The essay ends by linking James' idea, the Faustian bargain myth, and the necessity of hope.

Keywords Moral · War · Greed · Sustainability · Economics

1 The continuing relevance of William James' *The Moral Equivalent of War*

William James' *The Moral Equivalent of War*, presented as an address (James 1906) and in 1910 published as an essay (Burkhardt 1982), elicits an enduring fascination, almost as much for its defects as its virtues. James recognised complexity and valued ambiguity, contradiction and paradox. Some of this might well be guessed by anyone coming for the first time across this title. On reading the essay, furthermore, one quickly becomes aware that James, although an ardent pacifist, admired certain military virtues, and he was very serious about this and not by any means ironic. His main purpose was to emphasise that though the rational case for pacifism is extremely strong, the case seems not to be *heard* by many. While many things concerning war and related violent organised acts have changed during the subsequent century, this basic point remains as valid and relevant as it was then, hence the continuing interest in the essay; see for example Roland (no date). Indeed, humanity's failure to progress far with the programme of rendering war an obsolete, culturally unacceptable, institution shows more clearly than ever the need to attend to James' implied question—*why*? One of the principal differences between James' time and now is that almost every educated person is aware in some sense that our human culture is now problematic in a broader way than the acceptance of the institution of war; broader than the mere (!) existence of military arsenals capable of destroying civilisation and much more besides; broader than our will to build these things; broader than our willingness to use them in an omnicidal act (even if, admittedly, such an act has not occurred during the approximately 60 years that it has been possible). We now recognise an interlinked range of planet-wide self-destructive practices which are leading to a

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