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The Moral Equivalent of War

By William James (1842 - 1910)

Read by:	Douglas Harvey	Language:	English
Length:	38 minutes	Style:	Solo
Genre(s):	Non-Fiction, Essays, Speeches, Public Policy		

Product Formats and Options					
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This essay is based upon a speech given at Stanford University in 1906, William James' last public utterance and is the original expression of the idea of non-military national service. While acknowledging the horrors of war and its motives, he also acknowledges the benefits that accrue when groups of people address themselves to a common purpose evident in military behavior. The modern reader will no doubt find certain attitudes regarding sex, race, and conquest of nature outdated. Nonetheless, one can't help but admire the enlightened principles that have led to the establishment of the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Peace Corps, VISTA, and AmeriCorps, and will likely be part of the effort to deal with global warming and climate change.

The following from the essay is the gist of James' thesis.

"If now -- and this is my idea -- there were, instead of military conscription, a conscription of the whole youthful population to form for a certain number of years a part of the army enlisted against Nature, the injustice would tend to be evened out, and numerous other goods to the commonwealth would remain blind as the luxurious classes now are blind, to man's relations to the globe he lives on, and to the permanently sour and hard foundations of his higher life. To coal and iron mines, to freight trains, to fishing fleets in December, to dishwashing, clotheswashing, and windowwashing, to road-building and tunnel-making, to foundries and stoke-holes, and to the frames of skyscrapers, would our gilded youths 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."

William James (January 11, 1842 – August 26, 1910) was an American philosopher and psychologist considered by many to be one of the most influential thinkers of the nineteenth century. He was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts into a wealthy and gifted family: his father was a noted Swedenborgian theologian, his brother was the brilliant novelist Henry James, and his sister was the diarist Alice James. Trained as a physician, he offered the first psychology course in the United States and helped found the principles of functional psychology, earning the label of "Father of American Psychology". As a philosopher, he developed the principles of radical empiricism and is considered along with John Dewey and Charles Sanders Pierce as one of the great figures in the school of pragmatism. James wrote widely on many topics and is best remembered for his Principles of Psychology, Essays in Radical Empiricism, and The Varieties of Religious Experience.