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Twain on War and William James on Peace: Shoring up the Platform of the Anti-Imperialist League

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Twain and James were among the best known members of the Anti-Imperialist League (hereafter A-IL). In 1899, James helped organize a mass anti-war meeting in Cambridge, MA; he was elected as vice-president of the national A-IL in 1904, and continued to serve in that capacity until his death in 1910. After being away from America for nearly ten years, Twain announced upon his arrival in New York, 15 October 1900, "I am an anti-imperialist. I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land." On 13 January 1901, he agreed to serve as the vice-president of the New York chapter of the A-IL and did so until his death, also in 1910.

But Twain and James were more than A-IL celebrities; they were also influential leaders. Twain attended the New York chapter's only meeting in 1901, the same year he penned his biting commentary on economic and religious outreach, "To the Person Sit-

ting in Darkness." Those remarks, first appearing in the February 1901 *North American Review*, were reprinted as a pamphlet by the A-IL, eventually becoming its most popular publication. For his part, from the mid-1890s onward, James expressed his growing alarm with America's fascination with territorial expansion in letters to members of Congress and in Boston newspapers and essays in the *Harvard Crimson*. But despite these efforts, and even though notables like Andrew Carnegie, William Dean Howells, John Dewey and David Starr Jordan joined Twain and James (and nearly 9,000 other members), after McKinley's election in 1900 the A-IL was unable to slow down the jingoistic momentum of U.S. foreign policy. Nonetheless, in 1902 and 1903, increased awareness of American forces' brutal occupation of the Philippines gave the A-IL incentive to revive its campaign against militarism and expansion. For James, at least, candor about its own failures was the first step in any rejuvenation of the League.

In his 1903 address at the annual meeting of the New England chapter of the A-IL in Boston, James unflinchingly reports to the assembled A-IL:

Mr. Chairman: I think we have candidly to admit that in the matter of our Philippine conquest we here and our friends outside have failed to produce much immediate effect. "Duty and Destiny" have rolled over us like a Juggernaut car whose unyielding bulk the majority of our countrymen were pushing and pulling forward, and our outcries and attempts to scotch the wheels with our persons haven't acted in the least degree as a break.¹

Given his temperament, James predictably concludes his address with optimism for the League's future. And so, still convinced of the urgency and soundness of its goals, in 1904 James offered "Remarks at the Peace Banquet," followed by Twain's 1905 composition "The War-Prayer."

In these essays, Twain and James challenge the A-IL to redouble its efforts, but not before rethinking the grounds for its cause. That is, the rationale offered in the initial 1899 A-IL platform heavily relied upon events in American history (the Spirit of 1776 and the Civil War), American documents (The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution) and American heroes (Washington and Lincoln). Twain and James proposed that hereafter, for validation of its cause, the A-IL make use of fundamental psychological and moral principles derived from experience-funded and cross-cultural anthropological findings.

James on the psychology of war.

James was the final speaker at the closing banquet of the 13th World Peace Congress in Boston, 7 October 1904. To the consternation of his audience, James concentrated his

remarks on the “strength of our enemy” (845).² He argued that pacifists naïvely fail to appreciate how much humans’ ingrained fighting disposition makes war a chronic, attractive activity: “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*” (845-46). Surely his audience must have winced as he pressed on:

This is the constitution of human nature which we have to work against. The plain truth is that people *want* war. They want it anyhow; 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. . . . War, they [both soldiers and non-combatants] feel, is human nature at its uttermost. (846)

James goes on arguing that because “our permanent enemy is the noted bellicosity of human nature” (845) which makes humans prone to war, agencies such as the A-IL, the Peace Congress and the Association for International Conciliation will be futile if they seek an irenic utopia. “We do ill,” he continues, “to talk much of universal peace or of a general disarmament” (846). Instead, James advises, “We must go in for preventive medicine, not for radical cure” (846), and ends his short speech suggesting that peace makers’ hope for success rests upon their ability to “foster rival excitements and invent new outlets for heroic energy” (846). James’s prescription, that pacifists proactively invent substitute outlets and sublimated forms of the strenuous life, became the germ of his widely circulated and influential popular lecture, “The Moral Equivalent of War” (1910)³.

Twain on the morality of peace.

Twain’s “War-Prayer” shares the Jamesian premise of the allure of combat. It offers a brief, gem-like moral argument that divulges the incongruity inherent in the immorality of war, and posits, by indirection, the morality of peace. His “aged stranger” asserts that the gist of “The War-Prayer” argument is “ ‘Grant us the victory, O Lord our God!’ That is sufficient. The *whole* of the uttered prayer is compact into those pregnant words. Elaborations were not necessary.” I would go much further. When examined as a moral syllogism, Twain’s “The War-Prayer” can be reduced to notice of a stark internal contradiction. How can God, “the ever-merciful and benignant Father of us all,” both support and aid *us* while He also vanquishes and destroys *them*?

In his elucidation of praying for victory without appreciating “its full import,” and asking God to help our side and hinder theirs, Twain skillfully dramatizes the central insight of Immanuel Kant’s *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785).

Kant traces the logical implication that, while moral actions can be universalized, immoral ones cannot. Put in contemporary language, ethically correct deeds have "win/win" results while immoral actions have "win/lose" or "lose/lose" outcomes. Kant's categorical imperative, "Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law," necessarily implies that moral actions have to apply to all persons in all cases. Conversely, immoral acts entail exclusion for the agent and/or a special case exception. Twain's use of Kant's logic is bolder and even more direct: every prayer for victory in war is actually two prayers—an uttered "help us," and a silent "hurt them." Twain's aged stranger warns us to be careful when we pray for victory since two petitions are involved, and "both have reached the ear of Him who heareth all supplications, the spoken and the unspoken."

In a word, Twain's and James's essays on war and peace offered the Anti-Imperialistic League a valuable and informed critique: the A-IL cause can be rejuvenated if its platform is shorn up with adequate psychological findings and its moral imperatives expressed with philosophical clarity.

Notes

1 William James, "Address to the Anti-Imperialist League, November 28, 1903." *Report of the Fifth Meeting of the Anti-Imperialist League*. Boston: The New England Anti-Imperialist League, 1903. 25.

2 William James, "Remarks at the Peace Banquet." *Atlantic Monthly* 94 (December 1904): 845-47.

3 For more on James and strenuousness, see Patrick K. Dooley, "Public Policy and Philosophical Critique: The William James and Theodore Roosevelt Dialogue on Strenuousness." *Transactions of the C. S. Peirce Society* 38 (2001): 161-77.