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# John Kaag, "Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life."

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**John Kaag.** *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life*. Princeton University Press 2020. 224 pp. \$22.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780691192161); \$14.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780691216713).

In his earlier book *American Philosophy: A Love Story* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2017), John Kaag explored what classical American thought has to say about the meaning and value of life. William James was one of the characters in that book, but in Kaag's new book, James is the star of the show. *Sick Souls* presents James's corpus as an 'existential life preserver' (4). Kaag tries to show that 'William James's entire philosophy, from beginning to end, was geared to save a life, *his* life' (3)—and that it also offers valuable advice to readers wishing to save their own lives. *Sick Souls* reads several of James's major works in tandem with his biography. This is not to say that Kaag treats these works reductively or sees their significance as merely biographical. Rather, he suggests that by learning about the origins of James's ideas, and about the uses to which James himself put these ideas, we can better appreciate their power. As in *American Philosophy: A Love Story*, Kaag adds another layer to this process by interweaving stories from his own life, stories that describe the personal crises that James has helped him to weather. On this point, Kaag says: 'I think William James's philosophy saved my life. Or, more accurately, it encouraged me not to be afraid of life' (5).

A slim book, *Sick Souls* is divided into a prologue and six chapters. The prologue, entitled 'A Disgust for Life,' begins dramatically by asking whether life is even worth living. (Readers of *American Philosophy: A Love Story* will recall that that book starts in much the same way.) The question of whether life is worth living was, of course, no idle one for James. In addition to giving a famous lecture on the topic, he had occasional thoughts of suicide and seems to have been haunted by the prospect that life is meaningless. In response to these worries, Kaag argues, 'James crafted what he called a philosophy of healthy-mindedness,' with his major works constituting 'an effective home remedy' for the sick soul (4). This philosophy of healthy-mindedness is not a panacea. James doesn't claim that the question of life's value has a simple, obvious answer. (And even if it did, Kaag points out, 'one surefire way to send jumpers off the edge is to pretend that you know something they don't: that life has unconditional value and that they are missing something that is so patently obvious' (172).) However, taken together, James's major works suggest that a reasonable answer to the question of whether life is worth living is 'Maybe' (9).

The subsequent chapters flesh out this claim. Chapter 1, 'Determinism and Despair,' explores how James's own existential malaise was fueled by his philosophical questions about free will. James had a privileged and sheltered youth. Encouraged by a wealthy father who wanted at least some of his children to accomplish great things, the young James travelled extensively, tried his hand at painting, and studied several different subjects before making important contributions to psychology and philosophy. One of his early enthusiasms was the stoicism of Marcus Aurelius. According to Kaag, James was drawn to stoicism by the idea that 'everything can be stripped from a person except his or her free response to the horrible situation in which he or she has been thrown' (27). Stoicism therefore treats the sick soul by reminding her of the power of individual freedom. But stoicism, James came to think, 'wasn't particularly suited to the perspective of modern science' (28). James came of age in a world rocked by Darwinism. He decided that if humans, like other living things, are produced by 'general laws of matter, rather than from the subordination of those laws to some principle of individuality' (32), then the stoic approach to life cannot deliver what it promises. By the late 1860s, James was desperate to find a worldview that would allow him to reconcile Darwinian evolutionary theory with individual freedom.

Chapter 2, 'Freedom and Life,' describes James's tentative steps out of this desperation. As Kaag tells it, James experienced a sort of rebirth in the spring of 1870, thanks to his reading of French thinker Charles Renouvier. Renouvier's essay 'On Liberty in Itself' persuaded James that the problems of freedom and determinism call for lived, existential responses rather than theoretical ones. I prove that I am free by *acting* as though I am free; I can 'believe in free will by simply exercising free will' (52). If this response seems 'self-deceptive or viciously circular' (52), James suggests, it may be because we misunderstand the relation between the intellect and existential, pragmatic considerations—a point that will be familiar to readers of 'The Will to Believe.' Kaag deepens our understanding of this Jamesian idea by tracing the ways James put it to use in his own life, especially in his decision to propose to Alice Gibbens.

'Psychology and the Healthy Mind' deals with the *Principles of Psychology*. That big book tries to trace the origins of human consciousness, using scientific methods but also trying to avoid reductionism. Kaag focuses on the book's discussion of habit, which James calls 'the great ballast of human cognition' (76). He suggests that James's interest in habit is linked to his experiences of midlife, especially the way the 'irrepressible but subterranean force of habit' (71) can leave us in unsatisfying ruts. James concedes that our habits exert powerful effects on us and in some ways limit our freedom. He insists, however, that we are not powerless over them. Habits can be cultivated and steered through the deliberate effort to 'adopt new routines' (79). Kaag ties this insight to James's view of emotions. Emotions are not locked away in our heads, but are bodily states that change as our behaviour changes. I do not slump because I am sad; I am sad because I slump. By forcing myself not to slump, James suggests, I may be able to banish my sadness. This might sound naively optimistic, and Kaag is careful not to suggest that James sees our power over our emotions is total. But neither is it zero. 'The choice of which habits to actively cultivate,' he claims, 'may not be entirely up to us, but it is also not wholly beyond our control' (92).

Chapter 4, 'Consciousness and Transcendence,' also deals with the *Principles of Psychology*. Here the focus is on attention and our ability to control what we notice. The chapter focuses largely on the notion of stream of consciousness as James presents it in the *Principles*. Kaag urges us not to 'cordon James's research' on this topic 'into an academic debate' (101). His investigation of the stream of consciousness is actually 'much more radical—and life-affirming' (101). What is at stake is our tendency toward 'tunnel vision' (109). Dominated by habit, we fail to notice the rich variations in experience, unreflectively assuming that 'one instant of experience is exactly like the next, an inability to recognize the difference between and therefore the significance of things' (109). James was interested in how the experience of altered states could help us to view conscious differently. Intrigued by Benjamin Blood's studies of anesthesia, James experimented with nitrous oxide, and thought that doing so taught him something important about consciousness. He did not think altered states put us in contact with some special realm closed off to everyday experience. Rather, as Kaag puts it, it is 'the feeling of "coming to"' that makes ordinary consciousness seem 'strange, slippery, but immediately present' (114). This awakening—which James calls 'a sense of *existence in general*' (118)—can be particularly important for the sick-souled. 'Sometimes,' Kaag says, 'simply witnessing how the world lives and moves might be reason enough to stay alive' (124).

In the next chapter, entitled 'Truth and Consequences,' Kaag reassesses James's relation to pragmatism, focusing on his lectures of the same name. In Kaag's view, pragmatism is far less central to James's work than is often supposed. 'Yes, pragmatism happened on the way,' Kaag writes, 'but it appeared so gradually that its formation actually took James by surprise' (119). What interests Kaag is that, by the turn of the century, James was actually 'living by a worldview' (127) that put existential and practical considerations front and centre. Calling that worldview pragmatism was 'an

afterthought' (127). Chapter 5 explores the ways in which James was not just, and not mainly, an academic philosopher. It deals with his work as a public intellectual, his critique of academic professionalization, his worries about institutional 'bigness' (147), and his teaching. The chapter also revolves around Kaag's own life, particularly his experiences as a new parent. The book's sixth and final chapter, 'Wonder and Hope,' tries to tie its many strands together. It revisits the topics of suicide and the value of life, and briefly discusses James's view of religion and his dalliances with spiritualism and parapsychology.

There is a lot to like about this book. Kaag is a terrific, engaging writer, and the links he explores between James's work and life are always interesting and sometimes fascinating. Some of the biggest questions raised in the book concern James's relation to pragmatism. As we have seen, Kaag downplays the importance of pragmatism for James's work. That's fair enough; James is a complex and multifaceted figure, as Kaag demonstrates quite well. Nevertheless, it sometimes seems as if his attempts to downplay pragmatism's importance for James rest on a narrow, restrictive understanding of what pragmatism is. For instance, Kaag says that 'pragmatism is usually regarded as a distinct position in epistemology, in other words, as a particular theory about the nature of truth and belief' (127). That 'usually' is much too strong. Even introductory texts on pragmatism tend to stress that there are many different views of what it is, and that a theory of truth and belief is only one of the options. For instance, Robert Talisse and Scott Aikin begin their *Pragmatism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Continuum 2008) by noting that, while some see pragmatism as 'an account of knowledge, belief, justification, inquiry, or truth,' others see it as a: 'metaphysical perspective,' 'a *method* of doing philosophy,' 'an *attitude* one takes toward philosophy itself,' or as a kind of '*therapy*, an antidote to the human compulsion to obsess over the traditional questions of philosophy' (2). A similarly narrow view seems to underlie the book's discussion of free will. When Kaag says that for James, 'rationality or the intellect is but one generative force in the creation and maintenance of our ideas' (53), and that practical and existential considerations matter too, he is actually voicing the central idea of pragmatism, or at least one strand of it. I suspect many defenders of pragmatism would claim that our task is to recognize how *complicated* the relation between rationality and practice is—not just oppose the two or choose one over the other. In short, *Sick Souls* is to be admired for showing that there's much more to James than there is in *Pragmatism*, the book. We should remember that there is much more to pragmatism, the movement, too.

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