

## Review of John KAAG, *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life*

Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2020

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## REFERENCES

John KAAG, *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2020, 210 p.

- 1 William James is a philosopher who gets under your skin. Easily. While, to a large degree, this has to do with his understanding of philosophy as a live (and lively) experiment in self-interrogation and conduct, an activity one might find herself performing while engaged in his work and because of it, further evidence of the mesmeric force upon the reader lies in the personal tone of his voice as well as in his ability to read through his times and foresee ours. Despite being the most famous philosopher of his generation (for sure in the US, and ranked quite high in Europe as well), James was *not* a philosopher's philosopher, and tried to widen the boundaries of philosophical practice to attract audience from without the university hall and seminar room. Part of his point and mission was exactly that of unleashing the philosophical potential in us all, testing our willingness to leave no stone unturned in the path to self-understanding. James indeed worked with an old-fashioned conception of philosophy as an art of living, and wrote accordingly. Nearly nowhere in his corpus do we find material which is not up for grabs and meant to be critically received and put to work. From his earlier work in psychology to his later entries into ethics, religion and epistemology, James was at his happiest when the conceptions and views put forward were *used*, rather than simply *taken*, by his interlocutors. James wanted us to try (in practice), rather than to abide (in theory). He himself was hardly happy with his

formulations, and repeatedly adjusted his work to meet a new challenge, personal or intellectual alike. Pragmatism was then, in James's hands, a project for (more) work to be performed rather than a doctrine to be received. Not a worldview to be trusted but rather a hypothesis to be tested. What proved to be particularly prophetic is the quality and breadth of observations into the human psyche and conduct which James amassed and weaved together, a tour guide to some of the most pressing issues we are still struggling with one hundred years on. James sticks with the reader more than the local sage or national hero in his ability to speak to the reader intimately and yet putting her in a much wider circle of acquaintances and concerns – a voice at once friendly and experienced counselling one from a standpoint both distant and innermost.

- 2 Writing about James without capturing this side of his work is as dangerous as misleading, sterile perhaps. Presenting and discussing his ideas without placing them in this metaphilosophical perspective means doing a violence to them as well as impoverishing our use of them. John Kaag is among those who took James's provocation for a lived philosophy to heart, and his book is designed as a personal dialogue with James through which distilling pills of his teachings as well as trying to put them to good work. Kaag is not new to the task, since part of his previous work has been devoted (also thanks to James, at least retroactively) to the exploration of philosophical figures as exemplars of examined lives to be digested as much as to be inspired by. Pragmatism as a whole (*American Philosophy: A Love Story*), Nietzsche (*Hiking with Nietzsche*), and now James are met and portrayed as travel companions in the vicissitudes of life. This does not mean to undermine the arguments, even the theories advanced by these figures, but rather to get invested in them, to be involved in them as (if) one's life depends on their truth.
- 3 The subtitle of the book under review leaves no room for doubt in this regard: "How William James Can Save Your Life." Each word of this phrase is telling, even though the meaning as a whole is a matter of emphasis. Kaag, likely because of *his own use of* James, stresses the "saving" bit, which in turn betrays the idea of an author whose power is redemptive and salvific. When one is on the verge of losing oneself, whatever one means by it, James would ("can") help us ("your life") to keep her on balance, sober, and rolling. Understood this way, James's is a philosophy which transforms one by aiding one not to give up – to despair, boredom, demoralization, nihilism, or all of the above. When things go south or into the blue, James might be there for you ("how"?) by reminding you of the uneven character of lives and reality, unmaking and possibly hindering those attempts to have clear-cut and ready-made solutions for what the world throws at you. But his pragmatism is also a tale of hope in one's (individual and collective) capacity to turn things around – a fallibilistic and melioristic faith in the healing over (and of) time. The therapeutic register of this approach and mindset lies in the reworking of the expectations we often overburden ourselves with, such as the pretension to be fully in charge of ourselves and of our relationship with others and the world, a pretension betraying a sense of self as boundless and affirmative, likely to be frustrated by those novelties we haven't predicted as well as by those old habits hard to die. James struggled against a deterministic world, that is a world in which our say is not called for, against those accidental factors closing off or at least limiting our movements, and those morbid traits threatening our mental sanity. Mastery, over one's mind and body, was a key issue for James: one which nearly completely absorbed him given his crave for freedom and fear of losing touch with the meaning of things, largely

a matter of freely choosing to attend to them. And yet, as said, such control, freedom, and autonomy are dangerous ideas to play with as one easily gets intoxicated with and by them, hence the discomfort when the world does not reflect us or welcomes our plans for it.

- 4 Despite I have some quarrel with the very word “save,” which to my European ears is way too compromised with a religious perspective and background, and would have replaced it with the more sober (and atheistic) “help,” “better,” or “soothe,” I am positively impressed by Kaag’s reading and use of James. The hinging on the therapeutic potential of James’s writings sounds about right to me, and the book reads as a compelling introduction to his thought from the point of view of someone whose life has been touched – and not simply informed – by it. In reading the book one gets the impression of a philosophy in the making, in the sense of a philosophy made real in the course of embodying – and not simply endorsing – it. As said, I would not have employed the concept of being saved, or rescued, or redeemed by James, as those suggest the idea of a destiny to be overturned or a life to be amended almost from without, but rather that of being aided, untapped, or spurred from within, as in a self in need of assistance when a certain confidence and ease in one’s path is threatened or estranged. Kaag is most precious when, in the progression of his tale, he presents James’s ventures into determinism, freedom, mental health, consciousness, truth, and hope as emerging from an earnest reflection on the many ways life can be put under pressure and eventually make it through the night. Kaag presents us with what James himself underwent and survived, showing how he tested his own conceptions on himself before handling them over to us. This is no small feat, as only a human being truly touched by such concerns is a philosopher worth reading. As Wittgenstein once said, famously, about James: “that is what makes him a good philosopher; he was a real human being.”
- 5 The scholarship exhibited by Kaag is thus inseparable from his appreciation of James as a live option. While it would be rather pointless to dispute over the particular bent given to each notion or concept discussed in the book, as that would mean betraying an anxiety of “getting James right” where no such thing should be possible if not as an exercise to distill a James most congenial to one’s personal and intellectual condition, I would here like to highlight some possible tension internal to Kaag’s rendering of James’s project – a tension possibly affecting James’s project itself, which would make the issue all the more pressing. The tension I have in mind is a familiar one for pragmatist *afficionados*, and pertains to the way in which we understand James’s overall call for a move from theory to practice, that is from asking the question about “what there is” to asking the question about “what happens if.” What I have in mind is the difference between an ontological and a fundamentally psycho-historical question and register, and more in particular the difference between the analysis of determinate phenomena as occurrences of more general laws of nature or culture instantiated in singular lives and as options whose reality (hence validity) depends on the liver in a far more radical way. While in the former case what is at stake in, say, freedom is a dynamic between certain elements (e.g., chance, willingness, regret, foreclosure, etc.) pertaining to how a certain account of the fabric of the world impinges on a determinate life, in the latter it consists in a personal elaboration on and of the consequences of running such elements together. Practice it is in both cases, and yet of

a rather different stripe: an ontology of practices as opposed to a psycho-history of practices.

- 6 Now, sometimes Kaag (writes as if he) takes James as endorsing option one while at other times as more prone to championing option two. That is, sometimes James is taken to be illustrating us the practical meaning of freedom (mental health, etc.) in terms of how we may actually inhabit it and live with it, embodying a concept whose meaning and life is however at least partially fixed in advance of such appropriation; while at other times freedom (etc.) is explored in terms of the effects it might have on us if we take it front and center and organize our life around it, hence spinning the fates of the concepts we live by *in the making* and with reference to their relevance in our psycho-historical constitution. This difference practically boils down to understanding James as either redefining some key concepts and phenomena after the particular experience and use we might make of them, or investing us with the responsibility to blaze our own conceptual and phenomenological trail through strokes of practice and check ourselves accordingly. Depending on the choice, the very use one might make of James will be rather different: either reading him as someone inviting you to try out the path he profitably if tentatively strolled for himself and see what one might make of it, or as someone whose most precious message and gift was that of encouraging us to explore the consequences of our own wanderings by measuring our own reaction to the scenes he plotted together.
- 7 Despite having said relatively little of the wealth of details about the various doctrines and views James put forward and their genesis, my focus on the metaphilosophical fabric and spirit of the volume was meant to offer a way into those. The volume is a welcome addition to the scholarship on James, and together with a few other gems – among which I list Jacques Barzun’s *A Stroll with William James* (The University of Chicago Press, 1983) and William Gavin’s *William James in Focus* (Indiana University Press, 2013) – convincingly advances a reading of James as a philosopher for those willing to engage in self-scrutiny, having spent the best part of his own personal and intellectual life accordingly and uncompromisingly.

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