

Review of *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life*. By John Kaag. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. 210 pp. ISBN 9780691192161. US\$22.95.

From Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* to Nadia Owusu's *Aftershocks*, telling one's story is popular and mandatory these days. After all, what can be more radically empirical than telling and retelling our experiences? John Kaag has become a master in this popular genre. His latest work is more than another Harvard romance like *American Philosophy*. Kaag is to be commended for reinvigorating the practice of philosophical autobiography. But, before we chastise the author for being too personal and clinical in the overall analysis, it is important to consider how transparent and candid he is with *intimate* details. Sure, one may quip that Kaag is deceptively manipulating the facts—that is for the author and readers to decide for themselves. But there is nothing wrong with a philosopher who opens up and forgets they are writing for the general public. If philosophers were more honest, they would have to admit the ways in which they imitate their intellectual heroes, or those they look up to for philosophical insight and guidance. There is no shame in following this method, but Kaag is one of the rare philosophers to demonstrate this affinity for biographical candor and openness.

Kaag is a faithful reader of his philosophical heroes. In the case of Nietzsche, he even adventured along the same peripatetic paths. There is a promising exuberance for life in James's personality and philosophy that can be a "lifesaver" to many. Kaag reports,

I think William James's philosophy saved my life. Or, more accurately, it encouraged me not to be afraid of life. This is not to say it will work for everyone. Hell, it's not even to say that it will work for me tomorrow. Or that it works all the time. But it did happen, at least once, and that is enough to make me eternally grateful and more than a little hopeful about the prospects of this book.¹

The great American writer Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens), whom James met while vacationing in Italy in 1892, would find pride in such a confession.

James confesses that reality and life can sometimes be harsh and tragically unrelenting. Our ability to confront this practically warrants the "live hypothesis"—the power to act "*as if* the world is a welcoming and tender place occasionally has the effect of making it so."² Throughout nature, and especially in the animal world out of which humans evolve, we have come to observe and seek forms of pamperedness and comfort.

We have come to develop expectations that anticipate finding means for sheltering tenderness. There is a good deal of psychological and existential encouragement in James's philosophy, similar to the self-help guides popular today. Popularization of philosophy has become fashionable as a type of self-help spiritual therapy or devolved in a self-absorbed genre of philosophical autobiography. This is a trend that points to a cultural climate that is highly anti-intellectual. Kaag attempts to make philosophy come alive in a nonchalant mood. What can easily be dismissed as narcissistic analysis may also be glimpsed as an openness that goes back to Socrates in the *Apology*, Pascal's *Pensées*, Montaigne's *Essays*, Pierre Hadot's work, and others. What screams through the pages of *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds* is that Kaag's James is more existential—one might say, Nietzschean—than readers of the American philosopher might be willing to accept. There is some truth in this comparison. Both Nietzsche and James think within the monstrosity of our times. And, according to the final chapter of Sloterdijk's *After God*: "If we were to interpret Nietzsche's interpretation of the monstrous in one word, that word could be

‘height.’ In James, it would undoubtedly be ‘variety.’”³ James and Nietzsche are both philosophers and preeminent psychologists of the nineteenth century, representing the rude awakening of individuals in the midst of widespread cultural decadence. But the danger of reading philosophy as a neo-religious asceticism is that it lends to the narcissistic illusion that one does not need community for self-transformation.

From Kaag’s divorce, to his daily five o’clock beer, to a litany of regrets, he reflects: “In hindsight, I think my mother was encouraging something a little different, something like ‘fake it till you make it’: will yourself to act in a certain manner, and your volition may alter, in positive ways, the state of affairs.”⁴ The book can read like updated therapy sessions. Perhaps this is a disclaimer for philosophizing autobiographically. Readers may find solace in the author’s incessant focus on his life, but I encourage you to consider how this may be an exercise enacting the *raison d’être* of James’s philosophy of *intimacy*. Kaag makes special note that James was not only close to his Harvard pupils but that

his students, unsurprisingly, loved the intellectual and emotional intimacy that his classes provided. James encouraged young adults to cultivate their own powers, and he regularly criticized colleagues who seemed more intent on gathering acolytes or perfect replicas of themselves than fostering the unique talents of each student.⁵

In a recent conflict with Harvard’s decision to deny him tenure, Cornel West cited Ralph Waldo Emerson and William James’s address “The True Harvard,” as examples of the “best of Harvard.” African-American philosopher William Ferris, who studied under James at Harvard, remarked in his 1913 masterpiece *The African Abroad* how James’s intellect brought a fresh kind of originality and greatness into philosophy. Ferris observes that in

New England transcendentalism and the anti-slavery movement we see this rugged strength blossoming into the fruit and flower of Christian kindness. But I do not believe the Anglo-Saxon

intellect has the versatility of the Greek mind, and except occasionally in a Professor William James, the scintillating brilliancy of the French mind, or the speculative depth of the German mind.⁶

Can James's philosophy be a life saver? What a burden! This sounds like a hyperbolic question, but it is reasonable on two fronts. First, I take James to be a consigliere of American philosophy—a guide of sorts, who can help us with our baggage. One of the impressive aspects of James's pragmatism and radical empiricism is his appeal to the traveler in us all—the James family was notoriously well-traveled. An important key to self-discovery lies in finding reliable guides for anchoring or giving orientation in one's life. Second, James helps navigate our journeys of self-care while encouraging us to enlarge our sense of empathy (intimacy!) for new places and people. James gives us antidotes intended to shield us from the emptiness of mass culture, including its consumeristic focus and directionless orientation.

One thing that marks Jamesian philosophy as American that comes through most clearly in Kaag's book is its obsessive desire to turn and look inward—to stir about over the agony of the self. The other aspect of James's philosophy we should take seriously is how our morals and beliefs depend so much on context. As life changes, so will our convictions and beliefs. There will always be a need to discern the difference between living and dead choices when it comes to our moral actions. Given that our beliefs and convictions will come and go, we retain value and meaning in our ability to sustain a willingness to live, and to keep on believing. In having the tenacity of will-to-believe we take pride in one's struggles and life battles. This is the mark of the life worth living. To be open to the possibilities of living in this way means to reject abandoning any desire or unwillingness to live. As Sloterdijk puts it, what is valuable about James's philosophy is how

Early on, he warned about an AIDS of convictionlessness. James made himself useful and won great renown by making the theoretical surpluses of his self-therapeutic experiments known.

He did so as an author and, even more, as a speaker. (This transmission of knowledge about self-healing has, by the way, remained an important mechanism in the modern market society for the formation of community and of a public, at least since the Protestant conversion literature of the seventeenth century.) And thus a not merely academic public get to know William James as the teacher of the right to life from an assisted élan and as the advocate of the ‘will to believe.’”⁷

Should Kaag consider revising the title to *Healthy Souls, Sick Minds*? The underlying narrative of the book is the tragic suicide of Steven Rose, and speculating how, perhaps, James could have saved his life. But Kaag is adamant that it would be wise to leave the questions at a “maybe.” This is not a satisfying answer to the mind. It has to decide and take either this way or that. Cognition is not in the habit of taking on “James’s ‘maybe’—the open question of life’s worth.”⁸ The reader will be pressed to ask: Does meaning come from the soul or mind? It would be false to assume that Kaag is simply conjuring up an old dichotomy. Rather, it is in soul that encompasses “a reality that exceeds all measure” or “adjusts” itself to an “unseen order.”⁹ James’s philosophy embodies a strong connection between soul and mind without doing injustice to either. But I think he has more to add related to the issues of soul and spirit, which might explain why the latter part of his career turned to ghost-hunting, spookery, and other paranormal research. There is a sense in which one can easily dismiss this period in James’s legacy as insignificant, or when he really went off the deep end. But that would be a hasty generalization and overly dismissive of the impact and influence these factors had on focusing and shaping James’s philosophical attention. As Kaag writes,

Exposure to wild country, like the far reaches of the White Mountains, can *bewilder* us, but perhaps this feeling of thoroughgoing puzzlement also makes us better students of experience and attunes us to the faintest surprises. Experience isn’t static. It is never monotonous, monochromatic, monovalent, or monolithic. It only seems that way when we fail to notice what

is happening at its borders and in its flux. James wrote that their house in Chocorua had “fourteen doors, all opening outwards.” Outwards—that is where James’s study of consciousness was directed.¹⁰

But in this rendition, Jamesian outwardness seems abstract and insufficient given our need to address how institutions and communal relations shape and mold any personal efforts at self-transformation. It still does not address the key matter of how much “saving my life” depends upon others, including rituals and practices through shared goals and identities. Is this go-it-alone attitude, along with a scathing disdain for collective efforts, a healthy recipe, either for the soul or mind? I find James’s indebtedness in this regard to be highly negligible and inexcusable. The question for me is how can tormented individuals get beyond their own mind or head and engage the soul of community?

If you are looking for a book that speaks to the social stigmas and obstacles of race, sex, gender, and identity, then one will be seriously disappointed. Kaag opens his inquiry with the philosopher’s *façon de parler* on such matters:

One’s race, sex, socioeconomic condition, and health are factors that are largely accidental. We are, in the words of German philosopher Martin Heidegger, “thrown” into the world, set adrift, and, through much of adolescence, live at the mercy of forces beyond our control.¹¹

But is it not the case that “belief flourishes best when it can get acclimatized”?¹² Our moods, attitudes, and instinctual actions are largely conditioned by our environments, including how racial and sexual factors play salient roles in determining our social conditions. For example, the engines of identity politics are driven by swelling socioeconomic divides and drastic inequalities accelerating before our eyes. But at the same time, and more importantly, identities can be constructive in telling us who we are while shaping our sense of belonging and expectations in the world with others. Can a book that

focuses on self-care afford to be so dismissive of the role that identity plays in our self-attention?

Kaag relies upon insights in the existentialist vein of heroic individuals dependent upon romantic flareups. The danger of skipping over sexual, gender, and racial floating signifiers within our cultural “thrownness” has less to do with the resulting limitations of analysis. It may be more urgent for us to question whether this approach serves as an implicit acceptance of a chauvinism of thought that can afford to be blind to the movements social justice change, in which the struggles for freedom play out. Clearly, Kaag’s take falls under the shadow of that Kierkegaardian vein that is skeptical of the “crowd,” or in the very least, takes the individual as a vital check on a passionless age upholding the publicity of the masses. Does James’s power to “save lives” mean that we should accept the status quo as “circumstances beyond our control”?¹³

Invoking Whitehead, a “bold humility” is needed to see beyond one’s own self-initiatives, to meaningfully engage the world.¹⁴ As Bob Neville writes of James’s take on moral goodness: “If we sit on our depression and feelings of hopelessness, we make ourselves unfree, but we should instead create ourselves, by the exercise of our free will and grit, to be moral agents.”¹⁵ Life crisis philosophy falls for the trap of seeking a deeper or higher self. Such are the yearnings of manic depression. Byung-Chul Han famously defined depression in his book *The Burnout Society* as “the sickness of a society that suffers from excessive positivity. It reflects a humanity waging war on itself.”¹⁶ Depression is a central theme of Kaag’s narrative precisely because he gives excessive attention to the self. It is like a vulture that hovers above or continually circles its prey—only a false otherness of the other comes from this self-infatuation. It is less concerned with transformative engagement with others and more about heroic resistance to the angst in the face of mortality. Does a resignation toward the world motivate Kaag’s reading of James? In all fairness, Kaag does mention that “privilege, comfort, and leisure” provide a context for depression.¹⁷ But complete self-absorption is not a healthy alternative in the face of what James calls

“Bigness” which involves institutional and theoretical threats to individual freedom.¹⁸ Even if one sides with James’s critique of “Bigness” as imperialistic and expansionist, he is light on confronting the tensions boiling throughout cultural and political relations.

The underlying short-coming of Kaag’s insightful book is its appeal to the cults of authenticity. It encourages a culture of intense narcissistic self-reference. Kaag is in danger of becoming that artist who Franz Kafka described as living under the

construct of self-indulgence. He mourns *himself*, he crowns *himself* with a wreath. With sweet tears he nourishes his corpse: The writer “dies (or rather he does not live) and continually mourns himself.” Instead of inhabiting the world, he inhabits *himself*. Self-centeredness, pathological clinging to the self, makes life impossible.¹⁹

In my view, Kaag does not adequately account for James’s naïve individualist philosophical orientation in which, as James Campbell rightly notes,

there is no recognition in James that individualism itself could lead to social problems. For him, human atavisms arise in groups, as his discussions of lynching and imperialism indicate. When individuals become part of something external to themselves . . . their ideality is abandoned. Their individual blindness becomes social blindness. When individuals choose their values in an intelligent and responsible fashion, however, and shape their lives around these vibrant values, social good results.²⁰

Eric Voegelin attempted to give James the benefit of the doubt in his first published book, *On the Form of the American Mind*. He identifies James’s philosophy of open selves as exhibiting a tenderness through pragmatism that converses with life and the world of others. Voegelin observes how James “likes nothing better than to replace rational concepts of monism and pluralism with the emotional ones of alienness and intimacy, thus opening perspectives

on social and political institutions. James attempts to solidify attention on the cultivation of a ‘warm landscape.’”²¹ Kaag only locates intimacy within James’s interactions with his students without mentioning how this concept is central to James’s radically empirical philosophy.

Let me close with a pet peeve connected to the criticism that the message of this book will attract authenticity cults. Kaag employs the term *zest* for “meaningful experience.”²² This is an unfortunate rendering of *zest*, and Alfred N. Whitehead’s usage of the term is more useful. For Whitehead, *zest* is the *intensity* of an experience—its enjoyment, not its meaning—that speaks to a wider range of adventure, making it difficult to bottle up or package into meanings.²³ Not only is the project of constant meaning-making exhausting, but it often comes too late, if not at all. Making sense out of our experiences is a messy and tricky business once life intervenes—that is the gist of James’s philosophy. Intense experience entails radical transitions or thresholds of possibilities. *Zest* has more to do with encountering the otherness of the other, on the other side of threshold experiences without any precondition for grasping meanings. In other words, *zest* is a qualitative *satisfaction* that lets oneself go. No overarching meanings or imperatives exist. Without this caveat, Kaag is in danger of using James to give a false hope and vanity through philosophy that claims that reasons can be given for why we endure the tragic hardships of life. I think this is a stretch and misses the crucial point: our experiences of the tragic compel and persuade us to look for the permanence of the possible in the tragic, regardless of what we claim it all adds up to in the end. Whatever justification or history that can be appropriated, it will most likely defy our minds and only appeal to our hearts. There is a power of soul behind the force of habit that our minds will doubt and struggle to accept, similar to Kaag’s admission that we have to be perpetually “sold on life’s value.”²⁴ In a certain sense, one can see how both Nietzsche and James advanced philosophies having overwhelming marketing power within our own time, and Kaag has collected the check. Even if one is prone to reject finding a paramilitary mission to rescue one’s life unrealistic, it is certainly

fashionable and popular. If we take Kaag at his word, and assume that philosophy can be a life-saving force, the question remains: does that in itself produce a false sense of security and comfort? His Jamesian answer resounds throughout the book: “maybe”! Such a proclamation is the best one can honestly do.

Myron Moses Jackson
 Xavier University
jacksonm31@xavier.edu

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NOTES

- ¹ Kaag, *Sick Souls*, 5.
- ² Kaag, 62.
- ³ Sloterdijk, *After God*, 218.
- ⁴ Kaag, *Sick Souls*, 64.
- ⁵ Kaag, 148–9.
- ⁶ Ferris, *Philosophical Treatise*, 192.
- ⁷ Sloterdijk, *After God*, 220.
- ⁸ Kaag, *Sick Souls*, 176–7. See James, *Varieties*, 44.
- ⁹ Kaag, 174.
- ¹⁰ Kaag, 121–2.
- ¹¹ Kaag, 11.
- ¹² Sloterdijk, *After God*, 180.
- ¹³ See Kaag, *Sick Souls*, 2, 1–2, 20, 25–6.
- ¹⁴ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 17.
- ¹⁵ Neville, *Metaphysics of Goodness*, 210.

- ¹⁶ Han, *The Burnout Society*, 11.
¹⁷ Kaag, *Sick Souls*, 5, 18.
¹⁸ Kaag, 155.
¹⁹ Han, *Good Entertainment*, 90.
²⁰ Campbell, "Habits in a World," 246–7.
²¹ Voegelin, *Form of the American Mind*, 59–60.
²² Kaag, *Sick Souls*, 153-58.
²³ Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 273-83.
²⁴ Kaag, *Sick Souls*, 171.