



PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

Journal of the APPA

Volume 18 Number 2 July 2023

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Book Review

John Kaag, *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life*.
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. 978-0691192161. 224 pages.

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At the end of a lecture “Create Dangerously,” Camus invokes the image of Nietzsche after his break with Lou Salome, crushed and uplifted by the work he had to carry on alone, lighting bonfires in his walks through the mountains overlooking the Gulf of Genoa. Camus states that he sometimes judges certain men and ideas by how they would appear in front of those flames. I have my own standard when it comes to reviewing books for this journal: how would they appear to the philosophical practitioner seated not in front of a raging inferno but a troubled client. Will the tome assist in the work of uplifting the spirit, reducing the despair, calming the anxiety, lessening the trauma, or easing the grief? With such a standard, you might understand how a book with a subtitle “How William James can Save your Life” is bound to get my attention. But does the content live up to what’s on the cover?

The book combines a more or less chronological account of the events of James’ life and explication of some central philosophical ideas with Kaag’s personal observations of how these ideas have impacted his life and might help save yours (or mine). The first chapter, “Determinism and Despair,” interspaces an account of the young James’ despair in the 1860s with a description of the problem of determinism. Louis Menand viewed the Civil War as fundamental in shaping the philosophy of pragmatism, speculating that the extreme certainty evidenced by both sides in that conflict implanted in James a suspicion towards epistemological absolutism. Kaag speculates the Civil War played a different role in James’ thought, introducing him to the problem of determinism: “this was James’s first intimation that he, along with the rest of the universe, was not free but rather fated” (20). James’ despair culminates in 1867 where we read of his contemplating suicide in a letter to his father. Kaag sees determinism at the core of James’ despair: If everything is fated and we are actors in an effectively already written script, what is the point of carrying on the farce?

Chapter 2, “Freedom and Life,” describes James’ escape from the prison of determinism, an accomplishment which Kaag credits to his reading an essay by Renouvier “On Freedom of the Will” in 1870. James seems to have had a “eureka” moment, declaring that “my first act of free will shall be to believe in free will” (49). Of course, we can well imagine the determinist’s reply. Nonetheless James seems to have been undeterred by the response that must have occurred to him that this belief was itself fated. “With these words,” Kaag tells us, “James was reborn and his life gradually—in fits and starts—transformed” (49).

By placing the issue of freedom and determinism at the forefront, Kaag has performed a service for philosophical practitioners, forcing their hand on a fundamental issue. As a working therapist in conversation with other therapists, I can report freedom of the will is not a matter most therapists have thought very deeply or even consistently about. When pressed, however, most are willing to concede that the addict who relapses did so because of inevitable causal factors—their past, their parents, their genetics. Likewise, they are more than likely to believe a client’s depression is the

result of elements beyond her control, such as a chemical imbalance. As Kaag makes clear, such a deterministic worldview was anathema to James, and I would argue that therapists need to examine whether such an outlook is consistent with the dignity of their client. The philosophical practitioner, I would hope, is much more likely to side with James and Victor Frankl, Holocaust survivor and the founder of logotherapy, who famously put it, “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

Chapter 3 commences in 1879 with the mature James ensconced at Harvard. It is at this point that the promise of the book begins to pay off in terms of techniques and strategies that can be useful to a working philosophical practitioner or therapist. In my experience, most who seek the help of a therapist or philosophical practitioner do so for one of two reasons: they either want to act differently than they do (e.g., quit drinking, be more productive, or argue less) or they want to feel differently (less depressed, anxious, or angry). James provides guidance in both cases.

Insofar as behavior goes, most of the ways of acting that people wish to alter are the result of habit. This may seem to contradict the aforementioned emphasis on freedom of the will. As St. Augustine put it, “Habit, if not resisted, soon becomes necessity.” James, however, was much more hopeful on this point. For James, “the point of life was to recognize the power of habit, but then to guide and overcome it” (79). He provides the example of Norwegian women. Previously known for their domestic nature, they had recently, James learned, taken up snow shoeing, thus becoming as active and athletic as they once were passive and stationary. The message is that the work of behavior change is hard but possible through utilizing the same force that put the behavior there in the first place. This timeless message bears repeating today in light of the insurance industry’s (and our own client’s) desire for short-term therapy and quick fixes, reminding us that the work of meaningful change, like all things worthwhile, requires effort.

Feelings can seem even more intractable than behavior. While clients in therapy generally accept the possibility that they could change their behavior, many believe themselves to be at the mercy of their feelings—a reality they perceive as unalterable as their genes. Their depressed feeling is something they are simply stuck with, as Seattle is with rain and clouds. Modern therapy suggests two techniques for accomplishing this task: psychopharmacology and cognitive behavioral therapy: the first attempts to alter your biochemistry, the second your thoughts. James (and the James-Lange theory of emotions) offers a stunningly different method. It is the state of our body, not our chemistry or our thoughts, that gives rise to our emotions. Striking, as he often does in the book, an autobiographical tone, Kaag summarizes the situation thusly:

For most of my life, I thought that when I was hopelessly antisocial, or wallowing around my messy house, or failing to get out of bed, it was because I was depressed. Nope. James suggests it is the other way around: I feel sad because I constantly look at my shoes while in public, because my house is dimly lit and cramped, because I fail to stand upright. In his words, “We don’t laugh because we’re happy, we’re happy because we laugh.” The action itself is enough to bring about a particular affective state (87).

Although controversial, the theory still has adherents today, as I will discuss later.

The fourth chapter covers the tragedies that befell James in his forties, beginning with the death of his father in 1882 and his son a few years later. The suggestion is that these tragedies led James “deeper into the mysteriousness of existence” (97). Among these mysteries is the notion of consciousness. James is one of the first explorers in the West of the stream of consciousness. As Kaag points out, whereas much of James’s work exhorts us to take an active role in our existence, the stream of consciousness, by contrast, presents us with a passive path, which we achieve by simply witnessing the flow of existence, standing back and observing what is happening. Kaag observes, “Sometimes simply witnessing how the world lives and moves might be reason enough to stay alive” (124).

The focus of chapter five is James’ most famous contribution to the history of philosophy, pragmatism. The challenge for Kaag is not how to say something new about that which so much has been written; rather, the challenge is how to connect an abstract theory of truth to the business of saving, or even living, a life. As Kaag points out, besides being a theory of truth “pragmatism is also an existential and normative stance regarding the relationship between truth and human meaning” (128).

The existential implications of pragmatism are seen most clearly in James’s essay “The Will to Believe,” where the flexible nature of the pragmatic theory of truth is on full display. Here, James argues that we are justified in believing certain types of propositions based not on the evidence we have for the proposition but on other criteria. In particular, James argues that if a proposition is live (it is possible for us to believe the proposition), forced (we must believe either the proposition or its alternative) and momentous (there is a great deal at stake for us in believing or not believing the proposition)—and the proposition cannot be decided on intellectual grounds—then our willing nature must decide whether to believe it. Among the types of propositions James claims ought to be decided according to this standard (James calls these “genuine options”) are moral and religious claims—claims with a very practical connection to the business of living.

One concrete application of this line of reasoning to a therapeutic setting involves the question of the meaning of life—a question the philosophical practitioner more so than the therapist or psychologist ought to have a ready response to. Indeed, if we cannot offer a satisfying answer this fundamental question, it is not at all clear we should be continuing in the occupation. James’ essay provides the basis for what seems to me one of the better responses. The criteria James has laid out for a genuine option clearly apply in this situation. The very fact that the client poses the question, I submit, reveals it as a live proposition for the client. It is also forced: either life does or does not have a meaning. Just as obvious is the momentous nature of the proposition. And I take it there is no intellectual grounds on which it can be settled (at least I have not encountered any up to this point). The response of the philosophical practitioner using this strategy, then, is similar to the one Victor Frankl, the creator of logotherapy, offered: “only we can decide the answer to that question: it is not we who are permitted to ask about the meaning of life—it is life that asks the questions—we are the ones who are questioned! We are the ones who must answer, must give answers to the constant, hourly questions of life. Living itself means nothing other than being questioned”. (Frankl 2020)

Chapter Six takes us into the last decade of James’ life and the 1901 Gifford Lectures that ultimately became *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Although James was not religious in any traditional sense of the term, he was certainly open to worldviews that expanded the realm of the possible beyond that which is perceptible: “I firmly disbelieve ... that human experience is the highest form of ex-

perience extent in the universe” (176). James’s own adventures in this realm leaned in the direction of the supernatural. A founding member of The American Society for Psychical Research, James spent decades attempting to communicate with deceased loved ones. Here again the relevance of a belief in the extra-physical to the project of human meaning is obvious. One of the greatest sources of meaning in people’s lives is their religious faith and any practitioner who would exclude himself from working with people of faith (and you cannot work with them without sympathizing with their position) would find himself with a greatly reduced pool of clients.

There are some missed opportunities to lend support to James’ relevance to contemporary therapeutic practice. James’ assertion of the positive benefits of simply “witnessing” is seconded by Kaag but left unexplained and undefended. Clearly a review of modern mindfulness movement, which has done so much to connect this practice to a whole array of psychological benefits, would have been helpful here. As well James’ theory of emotions is gaining a new following with the work of Stephen Porges in polyvagal theory. The motto of polyvagal theory—story follows state—derives its force from the Jamesian view that the state of our nervous system is responsible for our emotional outlook. Despite these obvious whiffs, there is more than enough material to recommend this book to the practitioner interested in integrating philosophical wisdom into the business of everyday living.

References

Frankl, Victor (2020). *Yes to Life In Spite of Everything*. Boston: Beacon Press.

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Volume 18 Number 2 July 2023

Aims and Scope

Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

APPA Mission

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a non-profit educational corporation that encourages philosophical awareness and advocates leading the examined life. Philosophy can be practiced through client counseling, group facilitation, organizational consulting or educational programs. APPA members apply philosophical systems, insights and methods to the management of human problems and the amelioration of human estates. The APPA is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

APPA Membership

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a not-for-profit educational corporation. It admits Certified, Affiliate and Adjunct Members solely on the basis of their respective qualifications. It admits Auxiliary Members solely on the basis of their interest in and support of philosophical practice. The APPA does not discriminate with respect to members or clients on the basis of nationality, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, age, religious belief, political persuasion, or other professionally or philosophically irrelevant criteria.

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