




Book Review

The Healing Function of Philosophy in William James' Life

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“Sick Souls, Healthy minds: How William James Can Save Your Life”

By John Kaag, Princeton University Press, 2020, 209 pp., \$16.06

“Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact.” W James

William James asked “Is life worth living?” (James, 1895) His answer was short but profound: “It depends on the liver” (Kaag, 2020:129). In this book, John Kaag not only explores William James’s answer by using James’s life experiences and his reactions to life but also James’s philosophical insights. Philosophy is considered the predecessor of psychology, often described as having “a long past but a short history” (Ebbinghaus, 1908). This statement highlights the development of psychology as a science and underscores the importance of understanding its philosophical roots. Philosophy gives us a strong foundation for living a meaningful life and developing best the version of ourselves. The ancient description of philosophy as “the love of wisdom” or “philosophy as a way of life” suggests that philosophy offers an ethical and meaningful framework for living. This notion has been analyzed by the French philosopher Pierre Hadot, who draws a connection between philosophy and art. According to Hadot, philosophy is an art of living that can assist individuals in alleviating suffering and shaping their identities (Hadot & Davidson, 1995).

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eISSN: 2458-9675

Received: 15.10.2024

Revision: 28.12.2024

Accepted: 28.12.2024

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Citation: Korkmaz, N. E. (2025). The healing function of philosophy in William James' life [Review of the book *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Life* by John Kaag]. *Spiritual Psychology and Counseling*, 10(1), 127–129. <http://doi.org/10.37898/spiritualpc.1561638>

William James is considered one of the important pioneers of American pragmatic philosophy and the founder of American psychology in general, and the psychology of religion in particular. His life exemplifies how philosophy can create a meaningful existence, promoting health and happiness. John Kaag's book illustrates this through both James's life and Kaag's personal experiences with James's ideas. Kaag specializes in American philosophy at the University of Massachusetts Lowell School and he simplifies complex philosophical ideas in an accessible manner, integrating them with psychological insight.

Kaag begins the book with a biographical account of William James's unique life. He gives some details identification about James life. Born in 1842, James lived through the Civil War and received an extensive education in painting, zoology, medicine, philosophy, and psychology. He was a multi-talented "intellectual genius" of his time and remains relevant today. Coming from a wealthy family, James had many options but struggled with the direction of his life. His father, Henry James, advised him to "Be free." Despite his privileged background, James experienced severe depression, driving him to the brink of suicide. Luckily, James's perspective and philosophy saved his life. In addition to conveying the life and ideas of William James, the author also conveys his own personal life experiences to us. In this sense, it can be said that this work is a good example of biographical philosophy that supports Nietzsche's idea that "philosophy is always the autobiography of the philosopher".

For James, philosophy is crucial for overcoming life's burdens. As Kaag points out, "William James's philosophy saved my life or more accurately it encouraged me not to be afraid of life" (Kaag, 2020:5). He continues, "James's philosophy...is a life saver" (Kaag, 2020:5). In this book, Kaag shares his own life experiences that were aided by James's philosophy, showing how these ideas can help others as well. James famously said, "Be not afraid of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact." He added, "Is life worth living? Maybe, it depends on the liver" (Kaag, 2020:129). According to James, practicing philosophy is crucial for developing the ability to be less fearful of life. He believes philosophy serves as a smart self-help tool to overcome life difficulties. Readers can follow how James's philosophy can serve as a valuable self-help resource that can be taken from a philosophical perspective. Moreover, readers may choose to read this book out of curiosity about James's philosophical ideas, particularly his thoughts on overcoming depression or existential crises. Therefore, this book offers useful insights into William James's ideas and his life experiences, satisfying those interested in philosophical psychology in a biographical context. It follows not only James's ideas but also his personal life, providing a comprehensive view of his responses to life's challenges. While reading this book the reader can encounter William James' intellectual forbears who shaped his ideas such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Sanders Peirce, Carl Jung, and Freud.

The book comprises six chapters summarizing William James's life and his philosophical ideas such as determinism, freedom, psychology and a healthy mind, consciousness and transcendence, truth, wonder and hope which serve as real representations of his life. For example, regarding determinism, while James acknowledges the importance of free will, he argues that actions have the capacity to effect change. He states, "The stronghold of the deterministic sentiment is the antipathy to the idea of change" (Kaag, 2020:34). On the topic of action, James believes that action precedes feelings. For instance, he states, "Action may not always bring happiness, but there is no happiness without action," and further emphasizes, "We don't laugh because we're happy—we're happy because we laugh." James also reflects on rituals and habits, underscoring their significance for personal and societal stability. He advises individuals to incorporate two difficult or undesirable tasks into their daily routines as a way to build discipline. For James, habits function as an "enormous fly-wheel of society," and he succinctly asserts, "Thinking is for doing" (Kaag, 2020:68). The book's strengths lie in the portrayal of William James's character, the author's depiction of his life, and the connections made with readers' lives. However, the author frequently shifts focus to his own personal life while discussing James's, which occasionally blurs the distinction between the two narratives, making it challenging for readers to separate them.

Kaag conveys his purpose to readers by describing his work as "an attempt to pass James's wisdom on—his sense that life's possibilities are real and can be explored freely and meaningfully, but only at our own risk" (Kaag, 2020:10). He concludes the book by summarizing its central themes. The book is an inspiring, concise discussion filled with the author's insights. "Sick Souls, Healthy Minds" may be the best example of a self-help book that smartly connects how philosophy helps us find meaning in people's lives. It has been listed among the "best books to read" in 2022 and can inspire people to interpret their life experiences through a philosophical lens. Last but not least, this book's cover features William James's original hand drawing which reflects his thinking and experience while he is living his unique life.

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