

John Kaag. *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020. Pp. 1–210. ISBN 978-0691192161. Hardcover \$22.95.

John Kaag is the author of one rather traditional book in philosophy, *Thinking Through the Imagination: Aesthetics in Human Cognition*, and three books in which he integrates aspects of his personal life with relatively focused philosophical reflections. These reflections typically are evoked by the thought of a single philosopher. In his *American Philosophy: A Love Story*, Kaag directs his narrative to the philosophical experience of William Ernest Hocking with particular focus on what Hocking's library revealed. But he peppers his exposition liberally with the thoughts of William James, Hocking's esteemed mentor; C. S. Peirce, the subject of Kaag's doctoral dissertation; Josiah Royce; and many others who make cameo appearances. *Hiking with Nietzsche: On Becoming Who You Are* centers on responding to the challenging ideas Nietzsche thrusts upon his readers. In *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds*, Kaag attends to how William James used his philosophical writing to save his own soul. This is a project Kaag quite evidently mimics. The book's problematic might best be summarized as a quest to answer this question: How can one authentically acknowledge both the despair life thrusts upon one and respond openly to the promises life holds out?

The philosophies of John Kaag and Michael Polanyi each emphasize the person and personal responsibility in their writings. But there is a marked difference in the way each expresses personhood. Polanyi's personal dilemmas and traumas are largely hidden in his writings. Kaag's crises are front and center. He identifies himself as a sick soul even as he discusses the psychological challenges confronting James in his early life. Kaag's existential angst comes out in such passages as these: "I was, and still am, socially awkward. Today, my full-time job is to 'profess' philosophy to large groups, but for

most of my life the one thing that made me more uncomfortable than public speaking was, well, large groups" (62–63). "But even after I willed myself through a divorce, a remarriage, and a series of existential U-turns, I still found myself, with growing frequency, dazed by the monotony and pained by a sense of disconnection" (107).

Thus, *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds* offers the reader two versions of *from-via-to* structure. First, there is the structure of William James's own philosophy. He attended *from* his everyday life experiences, with its psychosomatic challenges, *via* philosophical reflections *to* a conception of a viable philosophy of life. Second, Kaag takes account of James's insights in offering his version of healthy mindedness. Kaag's own psychological issues function as the primal emotional, embodied subsidiary elements from which he thinks. They are articulated and integrated with James's intellectual legacy to form the meaning-laden focus of the book. The two American philosophers' resultant integrations of vulnerable personal self-revelation with relevant philosophical insights gift the book with a raw authenticity unusual in philosophical writing. The result may be seen as Kaag's unique brand of post-critical expression. Alternatively, the book can be interpreted as disclosive therapeutic philosophy.

In tracing James's career, Kaag offers vignettes that recall aspects of Polanyi's life experiences and their impact. Kaag approvingly cites Louis Menand's suggestion that "the Civil War set the context for James's philosophical studies: the devastation of a conflict, motivated by grand ideological visions..." (20). Such an experience of war also motivated Polanyi's long-delayed journey into philosophy, although World War I rather than the Civil War was his trigger. James and Polanyi each studied for a career as a physician, but neither found that career to fulfill their deepest desires. Each gained a reputation as a fine teacher who genuinely enjoyed close relationships with students. But each also relished opportunities to escape from nagging obligations.

James sought refuge in the White Mountains, whereas Polanyi left Magda behind to write in Wales or travel to Switzerland.

The thought of James and Polanyi also overlaps in many ways. In a 1901 letter to James Sully, James remarks that “I seriously believe that the general problem of the subliminal...promises to be one of the great problems, possibly even the greatest problem, of psychology” (180). This statement suggests that James is thinking of the sort of processes Polanyi identifies as tacit knowing, although James does not seem to recognize the functional status of subsidiaries that Polanyi emphasizes (see *TD*, 95). James is referring, Kaag suggests, “to mental processes just below the threshold of consciousness that can often be felt without fully emerging.... [These experiences often] qualify as something we know, at least for a moment” (180). Based on such tacit understanding, Polanyi developed his emphasis on the philosophical importance of faith and imagination as aids to discovery, with scientific discovery serving as his primary model. James connects his experience of the significance of faith and discovery to developing interpersonal relations of trust. Kaag paraphrases James’s self-referential pleas for boldness in addressing his future wife as follows: “I have to give my assent before sufficient logical justification is supplied, and when I do, the evidence, it is hoped, begins to trickle in” (61). The parallel with Polanyi’s autobiographical statement that “surely one first draws one’s conclusions and then puts their derivation right” is striking.

James was also comfortable, as was Polanyi, to tie degrees of reality to intensity and productivity of experience. James stated, “As Emerson says, there is a depth in those moments [of vision] that constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences” (111). James’s immediate reference was to “falling in love” and to the taking of psychedelics, experiences that seem outside Polanyi’s frame of reference. But both James and Polanyi adopt Peirce’s assertion that the truth about reality requires a

long-range view. However, James’s pragmatic theory makes it clearer than Polanyi does that he regards truth to be ultimately not about the outside world and its facts. He sees truth to be an attribute of our ideas. “Truth,” James writes, “happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events” (134). That view comports with Polanyi’s understanding of meaningful truth and the communal approach to scientific truth, but not with Polanyi’s belief in the transcendent reality of what science refers to.

Concern about existential meaning is a subterranean feature of much of James’s thought. “Philosophy lives in words,” James states, “but truth and fact well up into our lives in ways that exceed verbal formulation” (129). It can be seen, again, that both men appreciate language as a kind of “via” that is a translation of tacit understanding. James does not cotton to a theory-based view of ethics but rather ties it to what provides zest for an agent. Kaag writes, “James argues that we are ultimately accountable to ourselves, to the inner sense of significance that arises (or doesn’t) in a particular activity” (152). However, James realizes that such personal passion can conceal from one the actual inner state of others, a state he terms “a certain blindness in human beings” (154). To compensate, Kaag muses that “we don’t suffer exactly the same miseries, ever, but this difference should be enough to engender a bit of compassion for those around us” (157). Nevertheless, it seems fair to state that in his individualistic emphasis on reaching healthy mindedness, James is less attuned than Polanyi to seeing humans as social beings reliant on communal traditions, empathy, and conviviality for experiencing full existential meaning.

Kaag is quite evidently reliant on James’s thought as a guide for his personal search for healthy mindedness. I applaud Kaag’s success in portraying his and James’s thought within the limits suggested by the book’s title. This work is not a comprehensive account of James’s life and accomplishments, but it is a deft and evocative exploration of the role

that searching for meaning can play in sensitive lives. I recommend it highly for those interested in such a topic.

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Zachary D. Carter. *The Price of Peace: Money, Democracy, and the Life of John Maynard Keynes*. New York: Random House, 2020. Pp. 628 + xxii. ISBN 9780525509035. \$35.00.

Zachary Carter knows how to hook a reader who is not sure whether to commit to reading a book of over 600 pages dealing with economics. In his introduction, he relates how John Maynard Keynes, “Maynard” to his friends, had at age thirty-nine fallen in love with a Russian ballerina—after preferring male lovers all his life. Keynes’s friends among the Bloomsbury set were either startled or appalled. Quickly within the first fifty pages of this broad-ranging, thought-producing book, we find Keynes entangled not only with Lloyd George, J. P. Morgan, and Woodrow Wilson, persons we might have expected to encounter given the book’s subject matter, but also with Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, E. M. Forster, and art critics Roger Fry and Clive Bell of the Bloomsbury group, as well as such intellectual luminaries as George Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The book chronicles events throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. Keynes is at the center of attention until his death in 1946. Thereafter, Carter shifts attention to the fortunes of Keynesian theory as supported or opposed by such persons as Galbraith, Samuelson, Hayek, and Friedman.

Keynes’s 1905 undergraduate degree at Cambridge University was in mathematics, and in 1921 he finally published a book on probability that expanded his graduate study. Polanyi critiques Keynes’s probability theory in chapter 2 of *PK*. Keynes was a brilliant thinker capable of bracing

insights in many fields, an assessment emphasized by Russell, who wrote, “When I argued with him, I felt that I took my life in my hands, and I seldom emerged without feeling something of a fool” (12). Yet Keynes the intellectual also cherished the arts and was a passionate lover. Carter summarizes his complex life as embracing tendencies that were often in tension:

Keynes was a tangle of paradoxes: a bureaucrat who married a dancer; a gay man whose greatest love was a woman; a loyal servant of the British Empire who railed against imperialism; a pacifist who helped finance two world wars; an internationalist who assembled the intellectual architecture for the modern nation-state; an economist who challenged the foundations of economics. (xx)

In his first book, *Indian Currency and Finance* (1913), Keynes foreshadowed his critique of the gold standard by describing its irrelevance to daily commerce in India. His first great triumph, though, was when he was called to London to advise on how to deal with the economic catastrophe sparked by the chaotic uncertainty created with the advent of World War I. London, the center of the economic world, was under siege as banks and investors withdrew their funds from investments and the stock markets plunged. The declarations of war made it impossible for debtors to pay their obligations, trade faltered, and a flood of people demanded gold in exchange for paper money. The Bank of England lost two-thirds of its gold reserves in just three days, a dire situation when money’s value was based on the amount of gold reserves a country had. In the panic, British bankers decided to hoard gold within the country, cutting off gold payments to foreign customers. Keynes advised the Treasury to do just the opposite: cut off internal payments of gold and