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Introduction

PHILOSOPHY IS USUALLY REGARDED as the most inessential and superfluous of human pursuits—right up until the point when a person suddenly realizes that it's not. Philosophy might begin in wonder, as the ancients suggested, but it is also born of struggles, both personal and political, that shake average men and women to the bone. In these moments of crisis—in the face of suffering, injustice, and death—one may begin to ask a question that has always been and will always be at the heart of philosophy: “Is life, this life, *my* life, the life that frightens me to the core, worth living?” No thoughtless answer will suffice. Only a wise one will do. And with the asking of this question, all of a sudden the love of wisdom takes on a life-and-death significance. We would like to make sense of things, to understand what they mean, to be less afraid.

On a steamy evening in 1895, William James, founder of pragmatism and empirical psychology in the United States, addressed an audience of young men and women at Holden Chapel, tucked away in a corner of Harvard Yard. At the end of his lecture on the meaning of life, he raised his voice: “Be not afraid

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of life. Believe that life is worth living, and your belief will help create the fact.” This is not the command of a fearless God that echoes throughout the Bible—“Be not afraid!”—but rather the words of a man who was often debilitated by fear. For some of us, fear is a frequent state—not the fear of any particular object, like monsters or venomous spiders, but of life generally. The universe simply does not sit well with us. It is what the Germans would call *Unheimlichkeit*, literally, “unhomelike-ness,” which is somewhere between uncanny and terrifying. As a young man, James experienced his reality in precisely this way. In later life, as a philosopher and psychologist, James described his condition as being “sick-souled” and crafted an astonishingly detailed course of treatment.

William James wrote as though his life depended on it, because in a significant respect he believed it did. The entirety of his productive life can be understood as a complex response to the question of meaning, as expressed by a man who was not always convinced of life’s value or desirability. Countless readers—from Jane Addams, who founded Hull House, to Jean-Paul Sartre, who founded atheistic existentialism, to Bill Wilson, who founded Alcoholics Anonymous—have turned to James for insight and perspective when they could see no way forward.

Readers are drawn to James's sense that a significant aspect of living out philosophy is to cultivate the resources to be just a little less afraid of life.



Over the years, the editors of the anthology in your hands have read and reread particular passages from James's corpus. In moments of difficulty, both small and momentous, James has helped us understand the perplexities and tragedies of life with greater clarity; but more importantly, his words have provided a wise companion, a Virgil-like guide to help us walk through our own little rings of hell. James is perfectly clear: life is often scary. There's nothing to be ashamed of in this admission. It is a shame only if we never try to chip away at that fear.

This anthology is meant to serve as a companion to Kaag's *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds: How William James Can Save Your Life* and consists in the main of James's published writings that underpinned the book. When John Williams reviewed *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds* in *The New York Times*, he wrote, "I'd advise you to read Kaag's primer. . . . But if you haven't read James himself, do that first. It's wonderful that he inspires intermediaries to bring his thought to modern-day readers, but his cogent and humane

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work doesn't strictly need intermediaries. He remains ready to help you directly." Williams's advice is well placed, and this collection is an attempt to provide points of entry into what we take to be the *sanctum sanctorum*, the holy of holies, of James's philosophy; this is an intellectual dwelling built around a single question that James sought to answer in a variety of ways (since it does not admit of a single response): "Is life worth living?" At the doorway of each entry, each selection from James, we have written a short gloss or welcome mat to greet you.

We do not purport to give you all of, or even the best of, James—just the James we know and love. As Richard M. Gale writes, in his introduction to the philosophy of James, "Any interpretation of James that purports to be the correct one thereby shows itself not to be. For James sought a maximally rich and suggestive philosophy, one in which everyone could see themselves reflected." The refraction of James in this anthology is the passional and existential philosopher, one willing to live on a chance, and dare us do likewise.

What do we hope for this collection? When John Banville reviewed *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds*, he reflected that it was too much to expect philosophy to make your life worth living, writing:

To start, let us be clear on one thing: William James cannot save your life. His books, his thought, his dicta are capable of enriching and amplifying the workings of your mind and even of your emotions, if you are suitably receptive. It may even be that the example of how he dealt with his own difficulties may shed a light on how you might deal with your own. But don't count on it and, above all, don't expect too much.

We respectfully disagree with Banville. For those on the edge of total self-destruction, “enriching and amplifying the workings of your mind . . . and your emotions” can and often does have a salvific effect. This is the sense in which philosophy can save you, and it is as real and dramatic as any physical cure.

This anthology has been gathered as an offering for the sick-souled, as an invitation to receive a bit of philosophical therapy from a man who we take to be one of wisest and most generous thinkers of the nineteenth century. James believed that it is possible for the sick soul to be “twice-born”—to face the world meaningfully and courageously. It isn't easy; it is always the difficult matter of exercising the will, adjusting one's angle of vision, being open to transcendence, and making way for wonder and hope. But it

is possible. To the question, “Is Life Worth Living?” James assures us, “Maybe. It is up to the liver.”

This anthology has also been gathered for the “healthy-minded,” those who experience the universe as a satisfying and accommodating whole, as a means to understand and aid those—friends, family, neighbors—who teeter on the edge of fatal soul-sickness. The United States is currently in the midst of a collective existential crisis, a point in which an unprecedented number of young adults question the meaning of life. Cases of depression, suicide, and para-suicidal behaviors (the slow burn of someone intent on self-destruction) are on the rise. High unemployment, inflation, polarization, and foreign wars have taxed us. The COVID plague passes, but always threatens to return. As Albert Camus, the French existentialist, wrote at the end of *The Plague*:

[T]he plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; . . . it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen chests; . . . it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and . . . perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.

Camus means something beyond mere bacillus; he means, more deeply, plagues dormant in our minds—

despair sending up malevolence, insecurity sending up violence, hatred sending up cruelty. James, a physiologist turned psychologist-philosopher, similarly used a physiological term, “sickness,” to spotlight all the pathologies below our surfaces, always threatening to overwhelm us.

Banville wrote that *Sick Souls, Healthy Minds* was “timely . . . given the state of the world as it plunges towards hell in a handcart. Help, even if not of the life-saving kind, is available.” This collection is an attempt to provide just a little more help.



As James crested middle age, the emotional malaise that defined his twenties and thirties returned. He sought relief high in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, in a house on the outskirts of the small hamlet of Chocorua, at the edge of the lake, at the base of the mountain that shares its name. In the winter of 1889, James’s sister commented on the importance and meaning of James’s home away from home, writing, “William expressed himself and his environment to perfection when he replied to my question about his house at Chocorua, ‘Oh, it’s the most delightful house you ever saw; has 14 doors all opening outside.’ His brain isn’t limited to 14, perhaps unfortunately.”

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It is quite like James, perhaps the most humane and welcoming philosopher, to celebrate a wealth of doors, so many standing invitations for guests to come and go as they like, for light and fresh air to flow freely.

Modeled after James's dwelling in the wilderness, this anthology too has fourteen doors—fourteen selections—to welcome you in, whenever you please. These selections are ordered into six sections of pair-wise topics: Determinism and Despair; Freedom and Life; Psychology and the Healthy Mind; Consciousness and Transcendence; Truth and Consequences; and, finally, Wonder and Hope. This structure complements *Sick Souls*, *Healthy Minds*, though both books, mutually enriching, may stand on their own.

Both books follow a roughly chronological path that tracks James's thinking over the course of more than forty years, and both books open at a moment when James experienced the possibilities of life as entirely closed off. In 1869, James was on the verge of adulthood and, he admitted to his friend Henry Bowditch, on the verge of total collapse: "I am a low-lived wretch," he wrote. "I've been prey to such disgust for life during the past three months as to make letter writing almost an impossibility." At the center of James's troubles was the sense that his life was beyond his ken and beyond his control. He felt, alterna-

tively, that existence was either chaotic and senseless or lockstep and stultifying. In either case, he was not free to chart his own way.

The fact that he was born into a household of affluence and intellectual opportunity was of little help and ultimately only served to deepen James's frustration. In a family of geniuses—his siblings, Henry and Alice, certainly qualified—young William was raised to have great expectations that were routinely unmet. Through his early years James concluded that this existential disappointment stemmed not from a lack of will or understanding, but from the mute indifference of the universe itself. For a time, James felt himself out of sync with the unstoppable workings of the cosmos, and quite literally beside himself. While he eventually quelled this sense of fear and *dis-ease*, James never fully expunged it from his thinking, reflecting on it often, most pointedly in “The Dilemma of Determinism,” his clearest articulation of the experience of being existentially stuck.

To experience the grip of suicidal depression for any length of time is to come into close quarters with what theologians have termed “the religious paradox.” In the late 1880s, Josiah Royce, James's next-door neighbor and colleague at Harvard, took up the problem directly and undoubtedly affected James's thinking. The paradox can be summarized in the following

way: Many human beings experience life as completely botched, as a lost cause, as completely unredeemable; these individuals want to be, need to be, saved; yet any form of salvation would turn either on the efforts or the insight of these self-same individuals; and these individuals are devoid of the resources that might make salvation possible because they are completely botched. In short, we must be involved in our own salvation, but we are, by definition, ill-equipped to do so. James was not a religious man in any traditional sense, but he was pointedly aware of this tension because he had experienced it in the depths of despair.

When the black dog of depression darkens our doors, it is not uncommon for us to find the most remote bed or cave or makeshift grave and bury ourselves for weeks. We give ourselves over to the German poet Heinrich Heine's *Matratzengruft*, or "mattress-grave," on which, for eight bed-ridden years, he suffered with crippling paralysis. What would be best for our sanity strikes us as the worst: to get up, when we can, and venture into the light of day. We might be able to rouse ourselves, but only if we had a different body, a different relationship, a different mood, and a different situation—that is to say, only if we were not ourselves. The depressive is usually the person least equipped to diagnose or treat their most serious

ailment. Some sort of astonishing, almost divine, bootstrapping has to occur to save an individual from utter lostness. It is going to be nearly impossible. As it says in Philippians 2:12–13, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to act for His good pleasure.” James understood this fear and trembling with the clarity of first-hand experience, and fashioned a philosophy of free will that was meant to perform something like a miracle.

Perhaps it was because Charles Bernard Renouvier considered himself a “Swedenborg of history” that James was first drawn to that French philosopher’s writings in the spring of 1870; that “Swedenborg” name was dear to James’s father Henry, thus significant to the son. Whatever the circumstances of this chance encounter, Renouvier likely saved James’s life.

“I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life,” James wrote in his diary on April 30, 1870. “I finished Renouvier’s second *Essais* and see no reason why his definition of free will—‘the sustaining of a thought because I choose to when I might have other thoughts’—need be the definition of an illusion.” Against the prevailing winds of nineteenth-century deterministic philosophers, Renouvier reasserted

metaphysical liberty, declaring that each of us “could break the logical continuity of a mechanical series and be the initial cause of another series of phenomena.” James, taking up Renouvier’s declaration, declared his own new independence: “My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.”

James’s will, newly freed, could begin the world again, and his life again. His sick soul was now twice-born, though as with most births, nothing’s easy. “This cannot possibly be real. . . . Surely this freedom and joy are at best a fluke. At worst, it is a sure sign that things have gotten worse—that I’m completely delusional.” The fear and trembling, the working out of salvation, grip us again and again; we interpret even our joy as, somehow, its opposite. But Renouvier’s declaration kept James aloft. In the section on “Freedom and Life,” we include the essay “Is Life Worth Living?” We include it because in it you find Renouvier’s liberty distilled into the Jamesian “maybe.” *Maybe* life is worth living; there is a choice about it, every time the question is asked.

Likewise, when it comes to believing a claim on little to no evidence (not, mind you, a claim *counter* to the evidence), yet a claim vital to one’s flourishing, James argues in “The Will to Believe” that there is a chasm requiring a choice: leap across (believe) or

freeze (suspend judgment). Both are choices. In James's oxymoron, this is a "forced option," a forced choice. The belief in free will is just such a forced choice. Philosophically, the case is inconclusive, though the stakes are profound. It is an open question. Over this abyss, Renouvier forced James to choose, asking, "Are you free?" James, frozen for so long, leapt out, sprung forward, and asserted "I am."

After his Renouvier moment in the 1870s, James turned in earnest to his studies, first to human physiology, then to psychology, finally to philosophy and religion. He had discovered his will, and now he was determined to put it to good use. He spent the next decade of his life exploring the relationship between free will, activity, cognition, and emotions. The result of this extensive study was the *Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890, which is widely regarded as the greatest achievement in empirical psychology in the United States in the nineteenth century, and arguably ever. The *Principles* is highly technical, but there are seed grains of humane advice scattered across its pages, signs that James never forgot his dedication to the sick soul or his admiration of the healthy mind.

"Keep the faculty of effort alive in you by a little gratuitous exercise every day," James advised in the *Principles*, "That is, be systematically heroic in little

unnecessary points, do every day or two something for no other reason than its difficulty, so that, when the hour of dire need draws nigh, it may find you not unnerved and untrained to stand the test.” In other words, exercise your will, just as a matter of practice, and note that its effects are real and lasting both on the world and on the bodies we call our own, if only for a short time. To keep the fear of life at bay, James counseled being “systematically heroic,” as a means of fashioning ourselves into a person more equipped to face the chances of life. James continued, “We are spinning our own fates, good or evil, and never to be undone. Every smallest stroke of virtue or of vice leaves its never-so-little scar.” This is about as far as a thinker can get from “The Dilemma of Determinism.”

This being said, James neither overstated what the will could accomplish nor claimed that individuals were the sole authors of their lives. The meaning of life might be “up to the liver,” but this liver is also always constrained and enabled by one’s circumstances. The world frequently intervenes on the will and impresses itself on a human life. The primary selection from the *Principles* on the “Consciousness of the Self” is very clear on this: the self is a complex process that is reflected in the expression of individual will, is embodied with a particular comportment,

is engaged and molded by a given social reality, and is felt subjectively and personally.



When we teach James, it is often the case that our students immediately “get” the importance of the Will to Believe. The power of free will, a force that can change the world and change a life, is something that most young people desperately crave. James’s early exploration into philosophy makes a great deal of sense to most Americans for no other reason than the way that it resonates with what they have been taught about liberty and the possibility and value of acting on one’s own behalf. Bootstrapping of any kind strikes them as not only distinctly possible but completely necessary. One need only put one’s back into it.

What are less intuitive for our students, but no less important for James, are more subtle human capacities that can save us even, and most especially, when our wills falter or fail us. In these cases, our healthy-mindedness turns on an ability to see things otherwise, to adjust our eyes to the darkness, to make a conscious choice about how we interpret the world and where we find meaning. This is not about meaning-making per se, but rather about becoming aware of,

or literally “coming to,” life in a new way. To see things otherwise is possible, and adjusting one’s angle of vision can be as life-altering as transforming one’s life in a heroic act of will—and just as difficult. We see this most clearly in James’s review of Benjamin Blood’s *Anesthetic Revelation* and his essay entitled “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings.”

A key to being less afraid of life is simply to see it a bit more clearly and completely. Shielding one’s eyes when confronted with sudden danger is a protective reflex, yet shutting one’s eyes to the fullness of reality—its novelty, its foreignness, its brutality—can make one feel particularly vulnerable, afraid, and small. At least that is James’s suspicion. “The art of being wise,” James held, “is knowing what to overlook” but also knowing when to pay absolute attention. Following the American transcendentalists who defined his early education at Harvard, especially Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, James entreated his readers to open their eyes to the cosmos—to realize that the world is vastly more complex and nuanced, rich and enriching, than we typically acknowledge. And it is forever accessible, at least for the precious time being. This, for James, is the truth of the matter.

In the second to last section, “Truth and Consequences,” we find James wrestling with this complex-

ity and nuance, both in the rarified air of metaphysics (“What Pragmatism Means”) and on the ground with pressing social problems (“The Moral Equivalent of War”). Not unlike his perspectivist German contemporary Friedrich Nietzsche, James looked through many lenses: that of the epistemologist, social thinker, ethicist, activist, and a metaphysician not afraid to take up a dispute involving a squirrel (we suggest jumping right into “What Pragmatism Means” if you need closure on this squirrel dispute).

One unpopular perspective we might consider is that of the jesting Pontius Pilate, when he inquired of Jesus, *Quid est veritas?* *What is truth?* Pilate’s question was not a real one, but rather a snide cut at the idea of truth itself, the concept of capital-T Truth. But let’s take this question seriously, as James most certainly did. Is Truth some intuited static relation between the noises and scratches we call words and some corresponding reality out there in the world? Or, as James argues, is the quest for Truth messier, riskier, and more experimental? For humans like us, the truths that we arrive at are always interpretations of the facts, provisional and fallible. This does not mean giving up the ghost on finding Truth in the long-term, but rather realizing that our finite efforts will continue to fall short of a final interpretation of reality. This gloss of James’s theory of truth should hold

certain critics at bay: James is not a crass instrumentalist, and he is not a relativist who says that there is no such thing as Truth. He is just humble about what our human abilities in the short term can accomplish. Pragmatism, James states in italics, is “*the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities; and of looking forward towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.*” The consequences that we encounter in inquiry guide our future investigations, priming us to make more encompassing and experientially rich interpretations in the future. We look and move forward toward effects, ever rippling out, from our guessing games and daily experiments. The truth is not apprehended completely and once and for all. For humans like us, the best one can do is carefully work toward it and around it by degrees.

Yet truth-talk is not idle talk. Ideas have consequences; war is one of them. Nietzsche made this point, quite audaciously, when writing about religious wars, which are, at bottom, wars of ideas—our most fear-soothing, future-proofing ideas. As Nietzsche writes,

The greatest advance of the masses hitherto has been religious war, for it proves that the masses have begun to deal reverently with conceptions of things. Reli-

gious wars only result, when human reason generally has been refined by the subtle disputes of sects; so that even the populace becomes punctilious and regards trifles as important, actually thinking it possible that the “eternal salvation of the soul” may depend upon minute distinctions of concepts.

This may be an ugly truth, but James understood it. The Civil War was a war to end slavery and, in the hopes of abolitionists, tear out the intellectual roots of that brutal institution. William’s two younger brothers, Robertson James and Garth “Wilkie” James, both fought for the Union; Wilkie almost died in 1863, at the Battle of Fort Wagner. William, who sketched the sleeping face of his convalescing young brother, understood that Wilkie nearly died defending an idea.

Not all wars, of course, arise from deep existential clashes; James points to America’s “squalid war with Spain.” In any case, for the clear-eyed historian, peace likely brings no hope, since peacetime seems always and only a prelude to more war, and more, cyclically, endlessly. “Every up-to-date dictionary should say that ‘peace’ and ‘war’ mean the same thing, now *in posse*, now *in actu*” writes James. For “military feelings” and “military instincts” stir many of us, even in democracies. “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time

to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants,” writes Jefferson, gruesomely. “It is its natural manure.” James puts it more starkly: “History is a bath of blood.”

Consider the title of journalist Chris Hedges’s 2002 book, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. James grimly agrees. We hold as a “spiritual possession worth more than all the blood poured out” all “those ancestors, those efforts, those memories and legends” from our martial histories. The more sacred the war hero, the more sacred war may seem to us, paradoxically. And here fear rises again: a fear that, war abolished, we would degenerate into a “sheep’s utopia” or “a cattleyard of a planet,” as James writes in “The Moral Equivalent of War.” This fear of decline is “now taking the place of the ancient fear of the enemy.”

But James thought that we can water the tree of liberty sufficiently, not with blood, but with the sweat of our brow. We can retain “the supreme theatre of human strenuousness” and tap meaning in struggle, but not vicious struggle. A “war against war” means feeding our need for the hero’s journey, for *Sturm und Drang* (“Storm and Stress”), for valor, for “army-discipline,” but sublimating that hunger into a constructive force. Here is the birth of AmeriCorps and the Peace Corps.

“Be not afraid of life” means be not afraid of risk, failure, even death, in your pursuits. Life is hard, so

it calls for “hardihoods,” even virtues of a martial intensity, but exercised against stronger enemies: poverty, disease, exploitation, degradation, and on, and on. In this fight, James envisions the gain of “toughness without callousness.”

“Great indeed is Fear,” James concludes in “The Moral Equivalent of War,” “but it is not, as our military enthusiasts believe and try to make us believe, the only stimulus known for awakening the higher ranges of men’s spiritual energy.” Nor, we must add, does fear lift us to the *highest* ranges of our spiritual life.



Today, when you step out on the back porch of James’s one-time summer house in Chocorua, your eyes look down a grassy hill into a stand of pines a hundred yards away. Over the last century and a half the trees have crept toward the house itself, a testament to the fact that wilderness can be kept at bay only so long. The woods are dark and deep, and obscure the mountains above the cottage and the lake below. Nature will have its way with us soon enough, much sooner than we tend to appreciate. Perhaps this strikes you as overly dark, a cause for fear and trembling, but William James liked to suggest that apprehension is

not the only, much less the appropriate, response to encroaching shadows. It is a miracle and a blessing that one can see so much, experience so much, do so much, before everything goes black.

James's summer house remains airy and light, although six of the fourteen doors have been boarded up and now serve as walls. But no matter. In James's day, he could poke his head out the front door and see to the top of Chocorua's granite cone, which he often climbed and always loved. He could ply his way across the waters below his house and, in the middle of the lake, dive as deep as he liked without touching the bottom. Dive as deep as you like, you will never reach the bottom. If you do, rest assured that you haven't found the true depth of the water. People from every walk of life, from New York City to northern Maine, still come to take the plunge in Chocorua. James had to come here, at least once a year, to experience "wild American country," but also to reacquaint himself with life beneath and beyond its mere surface. On a very clear night in Chocorua, at the very center of its waters, one can look up or one can look down at a selfsame sight—a scene of utter obscurity speckled with perfect light. This is the site of wonder, sheer bafflement, but also hope. Perhaps, in the end, there is no better reason to be not afraid of life.

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