

Book Review: Philosophy for Life And Other Dangerous Situations by Jules Evans

by Blog Admin

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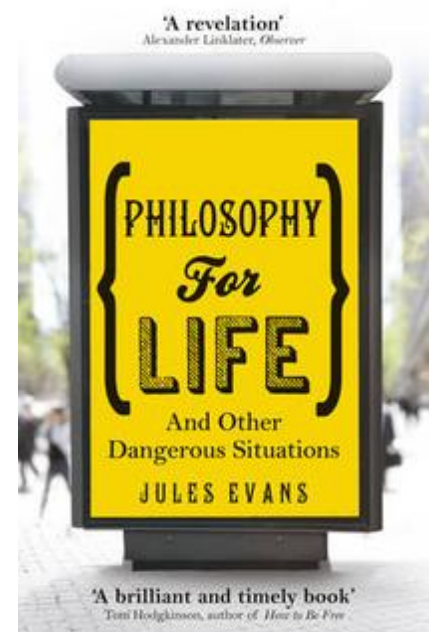
*In **Philosophy for Life And Other Dangerous Situations**, Jules Evans explains how ancient philosophy saved his life, and how we might all use it to become happier, wiser, and more resilient. Jules explores how ancient philosophy can inspire modern communities – Socratic cafes, Stoic armies, Platonic sects, Sceptic summer camps – and even whole nations in their quest for the good life. **Jonathan Simmons** finds that Evans successfully delivers in his attempt to bring a therapeutic model of philosophy to general readers, but has reservations about the author’s approach.*

Philosophy for Life And Other Dangerous Situations. Jules Evans. Rider. May 2012

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Imagine a trusted colleague has just told you that literature could help immunise people against suffering and help them build better lives. Your interest piqued, you lean forward in anticipation as she places the works of Tolstoy, Nabokov, Joyce, and Proust on the table in front of you. On each cover, you find a well-worn card with a list of relevant concepts, methods, and assumptions tied to each author’s view of the good life. Not only are these lists the keys to self-help, your guide whispers, but the authors should be viewed as literary counsellors. Their work, contrary to what contemporary writers and academics might tell you, is not meant to pleasure, inform, or challenge readers, but to offer them practical solutions to everyday problems.

If your imaginary colleague’s view of the purpose of literature seems perverse, then you might appreciate my ambivalence towards Jules Evans’ *Philosophy for Life and Other Dangerous Situations*. Evans, Policy Director at the Centre for the History of the Emotions at [Queen Mary, University of London](http://www.queens.ac.uk), sets out to provide a credible impression of unpopular public intellectual Alain de Botton – he’s affable, primarily descriptive, and he thinks philosophy works best when it consoles.



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After bemoaning higher education’s indifference to the well-being of undergraduates and academic philosophy’s failure to engage with ordinary people, Evans confidently draws the reader in, presenting his ideal philosophy curriculum as short ruminations on the value of what he refers to as the Socratic tradition. The first five chapters survey the often aphoristic contributions of the Stoics and Epicureans, stopping periodically to weigh-in on positive psychology, Spartan physical fitness, and whether the late Christopher Hitchens was an authentic Epicurean.

Chapters six through twelve – the afternoon sessions – have fewer platitudes, providing pleasing commentaries on both ancient scepticism and the modern sceptical movement, though Evans does raise the spectre of scientism, a tedious species of criticism in keeping with other attempts to rewrite important conflicts as infantile aesthetic debates. He portrays science as a sterile interloper on street philosophy’s territory and suggests that contemporary sceptics are members of a libertarian cult. On the conflict between science and religion, he echoes de Botton’s *Religion for Atheists: Why can’t we all just get along?*

Evans’ journalistic approach to philosophy is not value-neutral and nor should it be; he tends to reduce his

collection of philosophies to Socratic values like self-control and self-sufficiency. As far as individualistic approaches to well-being are concerned, this is a harmless misstep, but Evans does mislead when he talks about community and the democratisation of philosophy: he never quite accomplishes his goal of linking the individual to society, invariably returning to the subjective, almost as if he wants to avoid being accused of being partial. When he does take a stance on, say, postmodernism and relativism, the reader is just left with a vague negative feeling.

Evans is at his best when he moves away from his Gladwellian interest in the obvious (consciousness is mysterious!), exploring the relationship between philosophy and psychology. For a middle-grounder, he provides a surprisingly scathing critique of positive psychology, though he does in the end offer its founder, Martin Seligman, a fig leaf, arguing that his work hasn't been a complete waste of time in so far as positive psychologists have paid lip service to Greek philosophy.

Empowering people to approach philosophy as a form of self-help weakens the enterprise as a whole because doing philosophy, much like doing science, is a skill, and a difficult one at that. The prize is not to be found in a summary of arguments or even in the solutions to problems, but in the difficult work of raising novel questions and having your beliefs challenged by a community of inquirers. Rather than a calming salve, philosophy is only better than the illness that it attempts to treat, i.e., it can be painful, and even destructive—just as it is necessary to endure Ulysses to be rewarded for your efforts.

While *Philosophy for Life* is peppered with references to reason and practical wisdom, it is still altogether too pleasing, favouring what philosopher A.C. Grayling refers to as “cream-puff stuff,” over a more nutritious intellectual diet. Evans' Socratic method lacks heat, and is probing and critical only insofar as it satisfies hidden desires. The fate of the philosopher in this egalitarian street philosophy is uncertain, and I can't think of anything less helpful for truth-seekers. Despite my reservations, Evans does deliver one of the more tolerable attempts to bring a therapeutic model of philosophy to lay audiences, though I recommend reading it with a red pen in hand.

Jonathan Simmons is a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Alberta. His main research interests include irreligion and secular studies, but he is currently exploring citizen-science movements and how science advocacy operates outside of formal structures. [Read more reviews by Jonathan.](#)