

John Lachs

Stoic Pragmatism.

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John Lachs has long been one of pragmatism's best defenders. His work is inspired by the writings of John Dewey, William James, Josiah Royce, and especially George Santayana. *Stoic Pragmatism* is distinguished from his previous books in its attempt to unite several long-held views into a general philosophy of life. In the introduction, he tells us that "[a]ge clarifies" and that many years of reflection have but recently brought the author to "take delight in thinking that I have now discovered my beliefs about some of the deepest problems, beliefs I think I have acted upon all my life" (1).

The leading principle in Lachs's philosophy is the normative stance of pragmatism. "Whatever specific beliefs pragmatists share concerning experience, knowledge, value, and meaning," he writes, "they generally agree that a central part of the business of life is to make life better" (40). Stoicism, by contrast, emphasizes the rational limits of human striving. At first glance, it appears "these two great philosophical traditions" promote "incompatible values." However, Lachs believes that the "radical distinction between the stoic and the pragmatist is misleading and inaccurate" (41). Over the course of four chapters and an autobiographical epilogue, he provides reasons for thinking that, as he puts it, "'stoic pragmatism' is not only possible but also desirable, and that it provides a better attitude to life than either of the two views alone" (42).

The first chapter, "What Can Philosophy Do To Make Life Better?", begins with a primer on the history of philosophy. Lachs holds that it is obvious "philosophers do not agree on any idea and cannot present a single truth as authenticated by their methods." In this respect, philosophy is more like music and literature than science. Nevertheless, it "is not something we outgrow" since it "deals with the most difficult problems of human existence" (8). It is important since it "opens the mind to the values of other people and enriches our sympathies for what may seem alien forms of life. It also presents different sorts of belief, placing what we have been taught from childhood in a context of rival conceptions and thereby liberating us from the rule of unexamined faith" (9). He states that it is unlikely to disappear anytime soon, since it asks "questions that matter and will continue to haunt us so long as humans remain finite, baffled animals" (13).

In order to make philosophy relevant to life, philosophers must be socially engaged. Lachs notes with approval the rise of disciplines such as business ethics and bioethics; he proposes that the "United States would be a better nation if, in addition to a Council of Economic Advisors, it also had a Council of Ethics staffed by philosophers" (16). He then offers several reasons why philosophers tend to stay on the sidelines: they are doubtful that academic philosophy leaves them with anything to say to an uncomprehending general public; the incentive structures of graduate programs are "perverse" since they reward obscurity and

complexity rather than community engagement; many academics labor under the “wrongheaded” notion that philosophy “will contribute to the sum of human knowledge the way the sciences do” and expect similar results; and “[a]cademics are an inherently fearful lot, easily intimidated by deans and presidents, and rarely ready to put themselves on the line” (19–20). In his view, the only way to remedy this unhappy state of affairs is for department chairs and administrators to abandon the “research/discovery paradigm” that rules the day (21). More merit must be given to teaching and partnership with other disciplines. Despite a purportedly large demand for what philosophy has to offer – more on this point below – he is not optimistic that it will get out of its academic rut (22).

Chapter two shares the book’s title and begins with some thoughts on “The Past, the Future, and the Immediate”. Lachs objects that Hegel’s teleology mistakenly “wrenches purposiveness out of any relation to the future and restricts it to past events and their culmination in the present moment” (29). He makes the case that pragmatism, which looks to consequences in order to find meaning and purpose, is the more compelling view. He refers approvingly to Peirce, who held that “the present is a seed whose conversion into plant and flower is a teleological task left to the future” (31). Although he defends pragmatism, he also rightly objects that a “celebration of the present does not come easily to [most pragmatists].” He argues that pragmatism must find a meaningful place for “the immediate”: moments of consciousness not concerned with the past or future. After all, such moments may well “be the only spirituality open to nonreligious people” (37).

After these reflections, Lachs turns to his most direct attempt at reconciling stoicism and pragmatism. He first tries “to show that there are times when the pragmatic attitude is inappropriate and good sense requires that pragmatists believe and act like stoics” (41). Next, he argues that it would be a mistake to see stoicism as a philosophy of passivity since the great stoics attempted reform and believed in progress, at least of a localized and temporal sort. Last, he contends that pragmatists, although they tend to say little about our “circumambient impotence,” cannot sanely deny our physical limitations. Pragmatists are known for stressing the fact that we begin life *in medias res*, and Lachs holds this fact implies most things are out of our control (47). Given these reasons, Lachs concludes that stoicism and pragmatism are not only compatible, but “enrich and complete each other” (51).

The third chapter explores the ethics of stoic pragmatism. Lachs endorses a “generous pluralism” that admits the relativity of values and respects the autonomy of individuals (124). Borrowing a theme from James, he identifies the various sorts of “human blindness” that stand in the way of fostering pluralism. Granting that James identified one sort of blindness, namely, “the failure to see how others view the world,” he objects that this sort of blindness “actually consists of two disabilities, the first that of not being able to see the world the way others see it, and the second that of closing our eyes to the divergent devotions of other people” (88). He eventually distinguishes ten forms of blindness, arguing that while these can hamper the quest for a good life and should therefore be overcome as much as is possible, we also need to accept our natural cognitive and emotional limitations lest we become overwhelmed by feelings of endless ethical obligations.

Continuing with this theme, Lachs then rejects Royce's thesis that our obligations "are infinite in number." Again drawing inspiration from James, he develops the view that reprieves from obligation or "moral holidays are meant to shield us and preserve our integrity if we choose to do less than everything we could" to make the world a better place (105). This rejection of limitless obligation carries over into the next two sections: "Good Enough" and "Leaving Others Alone." Here he criticizes our tendency to strive for ever "*more perfect versions* of the goods we have and the experiences we enjoy" (107) and argues that "moral wisdom consists largely of knowing when to leave people alone and when to help them and, when helping them, how not to subvert their aim" (121).

Pragmatism is sometimes criticized for its alleged inability to say anything meaningful about death. The event would seem closed to amelioration, at least for naturalists such as Lachs. To ease our concerns, he proposes a kind of cognitive therapy. We are to interrogate our tendency to think that we are somehow beyond extinction and integrate "the fact of death into meaningful and satisfying lives" by forming a clear conceptual picture of life as a cycle with death its natural limit (57). We must learn to accept with peaceful resignation that all life ends, and that most times it is not a tragedy when it does.

Lachs surely knows this will seem like cold comfort to some readers. Existential anxiety can last a lifetime, even if one forms a clear picture of the cycle of life. However he also suggests a second, more plausible proposal: the stoic pragmatist will ideally "put off the moment [of death] until our ebbing energy gets us ready" (61). Having reached such a point, he states, "peace takes the place of striving" (57). This proposal is distinct from the first since, if it is how one faces death, it would seem more the fortuitous result of a long life well lived and less the effect of cognitive therapy.

In chapter four, "An Ontology for Stoic Pragmatism," Lachs outlines Santayana's system of philosophy. His reasons for doing so are that although Santayana "never quite articulated the view [of stoic pragmatism]... it captures his attitudes, practices, and portions of his theoretical positions," so that a fully developed philosophy of stoic pragmatism "will resemble Santayana's ideas in a surprising number of ways." (143) Using Royce's idealist philosophy as a foil, he examines Santayana's views on immediate experience or "the specious present" (145); eternity and truth (148); and the "ontological isolation of the individual" (155). After a (somewhat awkwardly placed) section on "Understanding America" in which he discusses Santayana's views on social and political liberty, he takes up the perennial metaphysical debate between materialists and idealists. As he sees it, whether one is an idealist or materialist ultimately comes down to "the question of honesty in philosophy, a question which no one has raised more vividly, more urgently, and more eloquently than [the materialist] George Santayana" (174). The chapter concludes with some criticisms of the finer points of Santayana's ontology.

Lachs presents all of these ideas, and several more besides, in prose that is lively and unadorned. He explicitly eschews the "swirl of footnotes" (1) and references that can bog down academic writing (though it must be said the book is sorely lacking an index). His philosophy of stoic pragmatism is well grounded in naturalistic assumptions that are eminently plausible, and in some cases unavoidable. He also addresses a remarkably broad range of issues. For those interested in pragmatism and American philosophy, Lachs's work is not to be missed.

Taken as a whole, however, *Stoic Pragmatism* feels somewhat loosely stitched together. Several sections are drawn from essays previously published in various journals and anthologies, none of which are referenced. This results in some unevenness of tone as well as some repetition. For instance, Lachs points to applied ethics as an example of how philosophers can make a practical difference in their community (16). Four pages later, we are told that his discussion of how philosophers can positively impact their community “would be incomplete” if he “left out an important positive development that occurred in the past thirty years,” namely, applied ethics (29). His rhetorical style also occasionally edges toward caricature, such as when he criticizes present-day philosophers, who he says have all but abandoned their “traditional task” of “providing moral guidance to individuals and assuming a critical stance toward questionable social practices” (13). One might also reasonably doubt his insistence that there is “a large public waiting anxiously for what philosophy can offer” (193), especially since those responsible for providing the goods have so resolutely turned away from discharging their duty.

Taken as a first statement of a philosophy of life that is not only a theory but something that can actually “guide practices and express attitudes that shape life and that can meet the pragmatic test of making it better” (2), *Stoic Pragmatism* offers plenty of appeal and promise. It fulfills its pragmatic mission of aiming at amelioration and encouraging our hopes – hopes partly inspired by Lachs’s promise of further statements and refinements of his views.

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