

## BOOK REVIEW

JOHN LACHS, *FREEDOM AND LIMITS*. EDITED BY PATRICK SHADE.  
AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY SERIES.  
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John Lachs (born in 1934 in Budapest, Hungary) is a well-known American philosopher, educator, professor at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, and his recent book *Freedom and Limits* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014) sums up and confirms his position in the philosophical arena. This is a collection of his most representative papers, already published in different places during the scope of almost sixty years of his intellectual, educational, and academic activity. The volume is edited and introduced by Patrick Shade for Fordham's *American Philosophy* series.

Five hundred pages of over thirty chapters grouped into five parts cover Lachs's all fields of philosophical interest. Shade's introduction presents a general outlook of Lachs's achievements, both within academia and outside of it, and explains the use of the volume's title: "*Freedom and Limits* underscores the complex tension that arises in Lachs's thinking, for while he celebrates human individuality, intelligence, and creativity, he is nevertheless mindful of the real conditions that curb our endeavours. Meaningful and enriching living are not thereby sacrificed but rather contextualized" (p. 2). Lachs's prologue gets us closer to his biography and shows us the extensive role of philosophy in shaping his mind and his practical approach; the prologue's title, "The Personal Value and Social Usefulness of Philosophy," can be seen as a terse suggestion for all those interested in answering the question: what is the sense of doing philosophy nowadays? Later in the book he develops his idea of philosophy in public life in this way: "we may also think of our work as educating young

people, as making available to them the skills necessary to have a good life" (p. 390).

The first part of the book, entitled "Mind and Reality," presents six chapters on the philosophy of mind, epistemology, and ontology. Some of these chapters extensively consider George Santayana's naturalism, Johann Gottlieb Fichte's idealism, Charles S. Peirce's pragmatism, and the specificity of American philosophy as regards the relationship between materialism and idealism. One of the factors, Lachs says in "The Transcendence of Materialism and Idealism of American Thought," that makes American philosophy unique is its attempt to undercut the materialist-idealist dichotomy, as it was in the case of John Dewey for whom "metaphysics of activity" was such an attempt (p. 103). From what he writes we can conclude that American pragmatists characteristically did not want to get involved into the merely theoretical discussion about the dichotomy and, instead, promoted a practical employment of some aspects of both making philosophy both theoretical deliberation and practical activity in many aspects of life.

The second part of the book, "The Self and Society," consisting of seven chapters, deals with the role of the individual in the community from the point of view of ethical socio-ethical problems: happiness, death, selling organs, leaving others alone, and others. Here we see Lachs's sensitivity to the lot of the non-egoistic individual creatively existing within a communal framework, something that his readers know from his other books: *Intermediate Man* (1981, 1983, 1985), *In Love with Life* (1998), *A Community of Individuals* (2003), and *Meddling* (2014). In "Leaving Others Alone," he presents practical aspects of the theoretical notions of individuality and liberty, and explains: "Curbing our desire to rule over people and abandoning the error of supposing that ours is the only natural or worthy way to live would go a long distance toward making this a more decent world" (p. 210).

The part three, including six chapters and entitled "Pluralism and Choice-Inclusive Facts," seems the most technical, though still the clarity of the author's language is definitely one of his strongest sides. Especially in "Relativism and its Benefits," "Persons and Different Kinds of Persons," and "Philosophical Pluralism," we get a sense of Lachs's attitude towards the everlasting discussion as to how to cope with incompatible values and norms in morality, philosophy, and in other areas of the public life. We can feel a definite reference to Lachs's intellectual background, which is American pragmatism and George Santayana, in a strong pronouncement of pluralism, freedom, and individuality yet, all this, within a social order. I will come back to this below.

In part four (seven chapters), "Meaningful Living," Lachs stresses the importance of the practical feeling of the quality of life, and here we have the emphasis that is put upon the relevance of philosophy to life, which, by the way, is his long term interest: one of his books (*The Relevance of Philosophy to Life*, 1995) was dedicated to this problem as well. Lachs's sources for this are both old and recent; for example, he links Aristotle and Dewey in his criticism of the rat race, and the Stoics and the pragmatists in promoting vitality and progressivism yet within the limits of what is possible and desirable for making life better for all of us. This latter plot is abundantly pronounced in his book *Stoic Pragmatism* (2012).

In the book's final part, which is "Human Advance and Finite Obligation" (six chapters) plus the epilogue "Physician Assisted Suicide," Lachs explains his vision of progress both in individual life and the communal as regards making life more bearable. Lachs is known for his definite views on both of these aspects. He strongly promotes philosophy, among other things, as a tool that may help people realize that satisfaction with life and a sense of self-development do not have to require much funding and any extravagant achievements: loving and

being loved, commitment to the realization of our dearest aims, and rationalization of one's possibilities can give a solid basis for many of us to enjoy life. At the same time, suffering, if not bearable, can be a factor that can turn life into hell, and Lachs, once again, shows us the practical dimension of philosophizing. Namely, he urges us to think about assisted suicide as a humane way of getting out of a terrible plight.

Is there any internal logic in such an arrangement of the chapters and topics? Is it an accidental collation of papers or rather a well considered endeavour? Patrick Shades explains in his Introduction that each part highlights the dominant theme, and within the given part and theme, the consecutive chapters are arranged chronologically. The order of the dominant themes, however, reflects Lachs's focus on philosophical issues throughout his career: from his engagement in the problems of epiphenomenalism and mind (the title of his very first published paper being "Consciousness and Weiss' Mind," 1959, not included in the volume) through the reflection on individual in the communal life, ending with bioethics in recent years.

One of additional values of the volume is showing us Lachs as an independent thinker, I mean independent from George Santayana in the first instance. This is important for those readers who know that Lachs is an author of two books on Santayana (*George Santayana*, 1988, and *On Santayana*, 2006), and the co-editor (with Shirley Lachs) of two volumes of Santayana's unpublished texts (*Animal Faith and Spiritual Life*, 1967; *Physical Order and Moral Liberty*, 1969). Shade indicates Lachs's ties with Santayana as well as Lachs's criticisms of Santayana; on the one hand, his recognition of Santayana's idea of 'animal faith' as offering "vital insights for a philosophy of life" (p. 6), and, on the other hand, his criticism of Santayana on mind, on the materialism-idealism divide, and on essences. At the same time, Shades highlights Lachs's original contribution to the contemporary scene by proposing

the idea of 'stoic pragmatism' and paying special attention to particular socio-ethical issues, and this includes the benefits to be had from ethical relativism. Lachs's idea of 'stoic pragmatism' -- already abundantly discussed by many commentators in many places -- also testifies to Lachs's philosophical independence, this time from American pragmatism (though, generally, Lachs can be included into the camp of pragmatists). For example, he does not follow William James's reservations about stoicism (in *Psychology, Briefer Course*, 1892), and, just the opposite, he proposes to include it as a complementary ingredient of pragmatism. As regards relativism, I would like to comment on it a little longer, since I think Lachs's voice on it should be taken into consideration.

Lachs starts with the thesis that relativism is something natural and profitable for the flourishing of the individual, and even suggests, "Relativism and its Benefits," that dogmatists or the anti-relativists fear relativism for psychological reasons, which is losing a sense of the solid groundwork for their social engagements and their moral stance: "Perhaps it is our animal urge for security that turns us into dogmatists in manners and morals" (p. 219). It seems to me that Lachs assumes without any proof (at least at this place) that relativism is not itself a form of dogmatism (e.g. 'it is absolutely true that there are no universal principles in ethics'), and, hence, that relativism can psychologically be maintained for similar reasons as dogmatists hold it. Later on, Lachs develops his argumentation in a philosophical way by showing us a perplexed moral objectivist (whom he calls a dogmatist) in a situation where he or she faces the problem of the justification of a different or another moral stance executed by his/her close relatives and friends. There are some options according to which the condemnation of, for example, somebody's lying should be examined. Lachs mentions (cf. p. 220): hedonistic reasons (causing more pain), utilitarian reasons (failing to maximizing the social good), and theocentric reasons (God may not approve of it),

none of which can be clearly and indisputably vindicated by the objectivist/dogmatist.

Lachs's scepticism on the possibility to reach any groundwork here, paves the way to the idea of values as "relational terms" (p. 222), and the conclusive part of the argumentation being the recognition of liberty as the main benefit: "The greatest beneficiary of the universal acceptance of moral relativism would, without doubt, be human liberty" (p. 228). Liberty, then, can be used by us to thrive and contribute to our communities; it can, although it does not do so when misused, and much space in the volume is devoted to tell us how the proper usage of freedom should look like. Not only freedom. From his "Philosophical Pluralism" we learn the conclusion he makes from the numerous disagreements among philosophers in the course of history, even the greatest thinkers who do not lack the highest argumentative skills. It is hardly possible to equally take seriously Plato with Nietzsche, Hegel with Kant, and the reason is that they view things from different perspectives, using sundry methods, and coming out of incompatible assumptions. For Lachs, as perhaps for some others, this is not a painful dilemma; just the opposite: "I do not think the world would be a better place if philosophers agreed in their views. Agreement is of value when its absence leads to armed conflict, bitter resentments, or divorce, but it avails little when critical dialogue is the only vehicle on the road to truth" (p. 289). Here, Lachs intentions dovetail with the democratic dimension of the philosophy of American pragmatists, and with the pluralism of Santayana.

What is, then, a particular of philosophy, understood as a set of sundry philosophies. Lachs presents clearly his view on the value of philosophy, and it is consonant with his view on the benefits we can have out of relativism: "Its value lies in expanding our minds by developing imaginative new ways of looking at things and in sharpening our critical skills by offering rigorous objections to every theory" (p. 289). In different

contexts, different people, having specific minds and sensitivities of their bodies, can hardly enjoy unanimous views on many aspect of living. However, this does not degrade the results of philosophers' views and philosophical efforts. Each of them can make effort to develop their own visions, their own criticisms, and their own ways of making life happy within limits necessary for co-operative activities, inter-human relations, and communal well-being.

Some words about Lachs's style of writing must be uttered at the end of this review, since it is unusual if we take academic criteria to be observed especially in a Continental university. First, it is deprived of footnotes and citations; Lachs does not want to explain more than he writes in the body of the text, and he does not shower his reader with innumerable names, titles, philosophical -isms, and quotations from other authors. Second, he writes to more open audiences than those at academia; his texts are understood even by those who have no training in philosophy and read philosophy simply to learn more, for example about moral choices. I consider the attractiveness of his philosophical language as the major advantage of his book; this is not, however, an impotent ornament, but an encouraging calling to philosophers to perform and enjoy their mission:

Philosophy is an ancient instrument whose use is all but forgotten. It sits as mere decoration in the house of learning while the kitchen and the garage hum with activity. We need to learn to play the instrument again, to remind ourselves of the power of its music. We must go beyond scales and finger exercises until its melody becomes the soul of the house. Our music is the outcome and completion of the promising sounds of the kitchen, but also the tool that makes all that busy activity meaningful and joyous (p. 390).