

OBITUARY: JOHN LACHS (1934-2023)

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John Lachs, Centennial Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Vanderbilt University, passed away on November 14, 2023, in Nashville, TN. He will be remembered as an eminent teacher, mentor, thinker, author, and promoter of philosophy understood both as an academic profession and as a practical contribution to good and meaningful life. His books, scholarly articles, and video recordings show a wide range of his interests and areas of competence. Let me outline just a few themes that have been recurring in his philosophical writings and public activity throughout his professional life at McGill (BA 1956, MA 1957), Yale (PhD 1961), College of William and Marry (1959-1967), and, since 1967, at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN.

Throughout his intellectual life, ever since his graduate studies, including his master's thesis and doctoral dissertation, Lachs has been preoccupied with Santayana, his "first love in philosophy" (*Stoic Pragmatism*, Indiana University Press 2012, p. 2), to such a degree that he became one of the most accomplished experts of Santayana's thought. He has authored *George Santayana* (Twayne 1988), *On Santayana* (Wadsworth 2006); co-authored (with Michael Hodges) *Thinking in the Ruins: Wittgenstein and Santayana on Contingency* (Vanderbilt University Press 2000); edited *Animal Faith and Spiritual Life: Unpublished and Uncollected Works on George Santayana with Critical Essays on His Thought* (Appleton 1967); co-edited (with his wife Shirley) *Physical Order and Moral Liberty: Previously Unpublished Essays on George Santayana* (Vanderbilt University Press 1969), not to mention his numerous papers, presentations, and lectures on Santayana. He has openly admitted that Santayana's *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (1923) "became a part of my life" (*Stoic Pragmatism*, p.183), that John Dewey and Santayana were for him the "dominant influences" (*The Rele-*

vance of Philosophy to Life, Vanderbilt University Press, p. xv), and that the latter "taught me that the ultimate issue in philosophy and in everyday life is the health of one's soul" (*Stoic Pragmatism*, p. 185).

At the same time, Lachs has openly confessed that the idea of *stoic pragmatism* has been within him for a long time, and that "perhaps from the first, a defining feature of my thought" (*Stoic Pragmatism*, p. 23). 1964 was the year when he published his two first articles devoted entirely to Santayana, and it is the same year in which he published his first text written in the spirit of his stoic pragmatism ("To Have and To Be"). These two "strands" in his intellectual activity continued up and through "Santayana as Pragmatist" (2003), in which he interpreted Santayana from a pragmatist perspective, until finally his book *Stoic Pragmatism*, and his 2014 paper "Was Santayana a Stoic Pragmatist?" were published, and even further on. I have no hard scholarly evidence to claim that Lachs has been developing the idea in a parallel fashion to his scholarship on Santayana, or that he has intellectually kneaded Santayana into whatever form that could be used in order to support his arguments for *stoic pragmatism*, or that *stoic pragmatism* is a sort of continuation of Santayana's thought.

Lachs's output also testify to his expertise on American philosophy (*American Philosophy: An Encyclopedia*, co-edited with Robert Talisse, Routledge, 2008; *A William Ernest Hocking Reader*, co-edited with D. Micah Hester, Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), as well as to his efforts to promote it. Among others, he co-founded (1973) *Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy* (SAAP), co-founded *The Santayana Society* (1980), he was the President of *The Charles S. Peirce Society* (1987), *The Metaphysical Society of America* (1997), and *The William James Society* (2007). His numerous articles on American pragmatism as well as his interpretations of Peirce, James, and Dewey can be found in many academic journals and in some of the books that I enumerate in this text, *A Community of Individuals*, for example.

Lachs has even more to say by means of his ideas of *immediacy* (*Intermediate Man*, Hackett 1981; *The Cost of Comfort*, Indiana University Press 2019), *meddling* (*Meddling: On the Virtue of Leaving Others Alone*, Indiana University Press, 2014), the mind-body problem (*Mind and Philosophers*, Vanderbilt University Press 1987), ethical, socio-ethical, and bioethical issues (*A Community and Individuals*, Routledge 2003), and the problems of contemporary academia (*The University*, unpublished manuscript, completed in 2022). In his earlier years, Lachs was also interested in German philosophy. He translated and co-edited, with Peter Heath, J. G. Fichte's *The Science of Knowledge with the First and Second Introduction* (Appleton 1970) and published *Marxist Philosophy: A Bibliographical Guide* (University of North Carolina Press 1967).

Lachs expertise on many aspects of philosophy, ethics, and metaphysics in general can be seen in his co-edited, with Charles E. Schott, *The Human Search: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Oxford University Press 1982) and in a collection of his published and un-published articles *Freedom and Limits*, edited by Patrick Shade (Fordham 2014).

One can also find a booklet of poetry in his bibliography: *The Ties of Time* (Delta Canada 1970).

Most importantly, however, the practical dimension of philosophical activity has been his main message to his audiences, especially to his students (he received the Madison Sarratt Prize for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching as well as the Vanderbilt Alumni Education Award twice). I was blessed to edit *John Lachs's Practical Philosophy: Critical Essays on His Thought with Replies and Bibliography* (Brill/Rodopi 2018) having organized, before, an international conference on Lachs's thought in Berlin, Germany (2015), in which he participated and demanded on us, the conference Speakers, to give him solid criticism and stimulation for more activity. This book contains his full primary and secondary bibliography, prepared by one of John's former doctoral students, dr Charles Padrón, along with a long list of sixty nine "Directed Dissertations at Vanderbilt University."

Among his central ideas was that philosophy should be instrumental in helping people to establish a practical guide as to how to live well. This should be the predominant contribution of philosophy and philosophers to the humanities and the greater culture at large. In this sense, philosophy should revert back to its Hellenistic roots, which means securing a definite practical dimension, rather than exclusively a theoretical and speculative one. He openly demanded higher standards from philosophers themselves, and in "The Obligations of Philosophers," a chapter of the book that I edited (*Practicing Philosophy as Experiencing Life*, Brill/ Rodopi 2015), we can read that "Philosophers ought to know better, speak better, and act better" (p. 7). An important part of this philosophical stance and attitude towards life is the ability to find joy in everyday life and to celebrate the moments in which we can find beauty and splendor of the natural world around us. In this respect, his *In Love with Life: Reflections on the Joy of Living and Why We Hate to Die* (Vanderbilt University Press 1998) looks as the most important expression of his views in this respect.

I suspect, his appreciation of life despite the tragic situations around us comes from his early Central / European experience (he was born in Budapest, Hungary, on July 17, 1934) and later experience of American democracy, about which he wrote in a positive mode in "From Enemies to Peaceful Neighbors," in the book we co-edited with Matthew Flamm (*American and European Values*, Cambridge Scholars 2008). Namely, at an early age, he experienced "gratuitous violence and sudden death" during WWII and then in subsequent years under Communist rule. As a ten-year-old boy, he thought about "the evanescence of life and the uncontrollability of fortune" (*Stoic Pragmatism*, p. 182). After the move to Canada with his family (1951), studying philosophy seemed almost predetermined. Ultimate, preponderant themes preoccupied him, for example: "God, the meaning of life, and the right comportment toward death" (*Stoic Pragmatism*, p.182). "From Enemies to Peaceful Neighbors"

betrays Lachs's admiration for American culture with its pluralism, diversity, and toleration and, secondly, his appropriation of its universalist character with a conviction that America should set standards and give hope to other cultures, nations, and states.

Since I have personally experienced John's friendly, always helpful and encouraging approach for more than two decades, let me conclude by saying some words in a personal tone. I met John for the first time during my first scholarly visit to the US in 2001-2002. I got the *Kosciuszko Foundation Fellowship* to do research on George Santayana under Herman Saatkamp at Santayana Edition at IUPUI Indianapolis, IN and, later, under Lachs at Vanderbilt. By the way, Saatkamp was Lachs's former PhD student and, later, colleague and, till John's death, close friend (I witnessed a wonderful spirit of friendship and cooperation between them on numerous occasions). While in Nashville, it was Lachs who encouraged me to write my academic publications in English (I had pub-

lished only in my native Polish before), which I did, and to write my first book, *Santayana and America* (Cambridge Scholars, 2007). Later, he was an inspirational and helpful in organizing the *American and European Values* series of international conferences for thirteen years in Poland and Germany. Lachs was also instrumental in establishing *Berlin Practical Philosophy International Forum e.V.*; just after it started, I suggested Maja Niestrój, its Chair, that we should ask John for his permission that the association work under his patronship or *Schirmherrschaft*, as the German tradition has it.

I am very grateful to Harman Saatkamp for making it possible for John to keep in his hands, in his last moments, in a hospital bed, my authored book, freshly published, inspired by his practical philosophy: *Meaningful Life amidst a Pluralism of Cultures and Values: John Lachs's Stoic Pragmatism as a Philosophical and Cultural Project* (Brill 2023).