Chapter 6

Lachs, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness

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We learn to pursue our true good the way we learn to fish: by experience.

John Lachs, The Relevance of Philosophy to Life

John Lachs offers a profound philosophy of life, whose apparent simplicity grows out of a sustained critique of much of what is wrong with academic philosophy, abstract ethics, and disengaged political theory. His basic method is one of self-critical common sense, which is non-dogmatic and open to growth based upon experience. His ideas offer a recipe for peace and prosperity. If more of us took Lachs seriously, violence and war would diminish, happiness would increase, and personalities would flourish. His humane vision of the world celebrates life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The pragmatist tradition reminds us that no system of philosophy is complete or perfect. And no philosopher can cover all the bases. Critical readers of Lachs discover that for every inspiring passage, important questions are left unanswered. His work leaves us wanting more—more data, more reflection on systematic social problems such as structural racism and militarism, and more reflection on the role of ideology in social problems. In this paper, I flesh out some lessons to be learned from Lachs's work. I then consider a substantial objection—which is that he overly simplifies things and ignores a deeper level of social, political, and ideological critique. I respond by considering Lachs's philosophical methodology. Lachs is an empiricist, a pragmatist, and a relativist of sorts. He avoids dogmatism. Instead of pontificating, he wants us to develop insight grounded in the world of experience. Such insight is partial and fragmentary—and not revolutionary. By recognizing the diversity of human natures and pluralism in the realm of theory, Lachs leaves us without that singular Archimedean lever that could move the world. He is also aware that for every challenging social and ethical problem we confront, there are multiple answers, including the very real possibility that the status quo is an improvement over the past.
This conciliatory and piecemeal approach can be disappointing for those who want social theory that is more critical and more systematic—for those who dream of social philosophy as articulated by Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Marcuse, or Foucault. But throughout his work, Lachs reminds us of the dangers of all-encompassing systems and totalizing critique. He routinely warns us against “grand history,” “abstract moralizing,” and “grand dreams of perfect people” (to quote phrases found in the titles of some of key essays). Instead Lachs returns us, again and again, to ordinary life and everyday people. He engages in the real world, where means and ends are integrated and open to the broad range of human experience. This “eliminates the prerogatives of the eternal” as he says in his essay on “The Rat Race.” He continues in that essay, describing his pragmatic, Deweyan ideal of philosophy and social theory as aiming to find “concrete ways to enhance enjoyment in the present and to increase it in the future” (Lachs 1995, 90). Lachs affirms this idea, contrasting it with the revolutionary dreams of utopian thinkers. This anti-utopian idea is explained in another way in an essay that explains why “Good Enough” is often good enough. We should reject unreachable ideals and give up on the “eternal dissatisfaction” and “all encompassing guilt” of the philosophical perfectionists (Lachs 2012, 114–15).

Lachs’s philosophy of life is a clear representative of the American tradition. There are echoes in his work of the notable names in American philosophy—Santayana, Dewey, James, Emerson—in both the style and substance of his work. Throughout we find a prevailing spirit of energy and love of life that comes from enthusiasm for liberty and happiness. Lachs is an astute philosopher—and well-versed historian of philosophy. He is also a deft stylist, whose sentences ring in our ears.

Lachs advocates a practical unity of theory and life. He says that, “our books should be the author of our deeds”—and he encourages us to “present ourselves as living examples of what we teach” (Lachs 1995, 10). But given his conciliatory approach to ethics and to social and political theory, it is not clear that Lachs would approve of revolutionary social and political philosophy, such as we find in Marxism, Critical Theory, and radical philosophy. Lachs appears wary of revolution because he is first and foremost a teacher. We teach others by living well. Force and coercion teach the wrong lesson. To impose a vision of the good upon another violates the very spirit of teaching and learning. There is an old saying: “Give a person a fish and feed him for a day; teach a person to fish you feed for him a lifetime.” We might add, following Lachs: teach a person to philosophize properly and you empower them to learn to love life.