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- 1 Few if any contemporary philosophers have done more to promote American philosophy and philosophy in America than John Lachs. The creativity and sheer industriousness that characterize his sixty-year career as a producer and advocate of both professional and public philosophy are extraordinary, while his reputation as a teacher of philosophy, especially his work with undergraduate students, is described as "legendary" (p. 21). In the appreciative, probing introductory essay to *John Lachs's Practical Philosophy*, Herman Saatkamp Jr. – one of Lachs's many former students that contribute to this volume – recounts the story of how the student newspaper at Vanderbilt University in its coverage of Lachs a receiving university teaching award attempted to capture his dynamic teaching style. Saatkamp recalls that the "student newspaper published not one photograph but a sequence of photographs of him teaching an introductory class. Each photo captures him almost dancing across the class, raising arms, dramatically pointing out student questions, chalk clacking against the blackboard, all with a positive intensity that invited engagement. The student newspaper got it!" (xxi). Lachs has brought the same energetic intelligence to bear on his seminal work in American philosophy, especially the philosophy of Santayana, and

to his articles and books on social philosophy, medical ethics, the philosophy of education, moral philosophy, and much else besides. Significantly, his philosophical energy and acumen are not confined to the lecture room or study. He maintains the conviction that philosophy's rich history and endless diversity has something to offer to just about everyone. One of his books is titled *The Relevance of Philosophy to Life*. To some ears this might sound like a rhetorical title in need of a question mark. Not so for the man who once "received a grant to take philosophical discourse to the annual Tennessee Fair [...] rented a booth and [...] gladly held forth on moral issues" (74). Lachs not only wrote a book on the relevance of philosophy to life, throughout his life he has embodied his philosophical ideals.

- 2 It is fitting, then, that *John Lachs's Practical Philosophy* is indicative of Lachs's productive life and his philosophically edifying influence on others. The book is the outgrowth of a four-day international conference dedicated to his work that was held in 2015 and organized by the Berlin Practical Philosophy International Forum. (Like William James's work before him, Lachs's pragmatist philosophy has found an appreciative audience beyond American shores.) The book is divided into six chapters with eighteen essays on his philosophy by scholars from North America and Europe – a veritable chorus of interlocutors that at turns celebrate and criticize his philosophical positions and theories. The first four chapters address major themes in his philosophy: The Practice of Philosophizing; Philosophical Relationships; Stoic Pragmatism; and Anthropology, Social Ethics, and Bioethics. The fifth chapter contains an essay on "Immediacy and the Future," by Phil Oliver, as well as a reply to it by Lachs and his coda to the book, "Death and Self-Importance," a meditation on the cosmic unimportance of our personal endeavours and the comic importance we sometimes assign to them. The final chapter presents a "Comprehensive Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources" of Lachs's work. (Lachs reports that he has been "lazy" at different points in his life (28). One wonders when. I counted sixty-nine Ph.D. dissertations that he directed at Vanderbilt University and suspect there are more on the way.) For those familiar with Lachs's philosophy, this collection is essential for understanding the development of his thought and for providing fresh perspectives on his work; for those who have not encountered his writings before, it will serve as a broad, accessible introduction to his ideas.
- 3 With the book's subject being all of Lachs's philosophy and with such a large assembly of able critics discoursing on a variety of topics, there can be no tidy summary of all that the book contains. The editor's helpful organization of the book, however, allows the reader, whether he or she is familiar with Lachs's philosophy or not, easy entry into conversations about the central philosophical ideas that animate his writings. Lachs might not be "thrilled by any isms [sic]," as he retorts to McReynolds who characterizes his philosophy rather clumsily as "proto-posthumanism"; yet he adheres to many of the "isms" associated with classical American philosophy, in particular, pragmatism, fallibilism, and ameliorism (58). It is perhaps "ameliorism" that is the main driver of his philosophical thinking. For he is concerned above all with the individual finding ways to construct a meaningful existence in a life-granting but impersonal cosmos and a vast world of complex social connections.
- 4 In the Prologue, Lachs states that he agreed to participate in this examination of his ideas on one condition: that his work be vigorously criticized. "I asked that you call attention to my errors," he writes, "and suggest ways in which they may be corrected."

He adds that he is (mercifully) not asking for “the old APA system of scorching the ground from which ideas sprout,” but the other kind of criticism which is “the fair assessment of the value of ideas with suggestions of where they fall short.” He further adds that he has abandoned his views before (e.g. epiphenomenalism) and is willing to do so again. Indeed, he claims that “I have read your critiques and started using them,” although it is not always apparent where and how he has begun using the constructive criticisms levelled against him (xxvi).

- 5 Given the immense task of responding to so many critics on a wide range of topics, it is perhaps not surprising that Lachs's replies often seem a little clipped when compared to the meticulous expositions of his work. In responding to critics, he tends to reiterate and not amend or further develop his views. For example, Michael Hodges in his essay, “Lachs on Transcendence: Art's Relation to the Life of Reason,” argues against Lachs that there is an unbridgeable conceptual and moral divide between what Santayana calls “the life of reason” and “the spiritual life.” For Hodges, the former is engaged in pressure-filled self-care while the latter is categorically “disinterested.” “This is a conflict and an unresolvable one,” he states (10). In response to this unresolvable conflict, Lachs simply restates his view that as a matter of fact “battling for good and effortless immediacy [...] capture the attention of people at different times and especially different stages of life” (15). Similarly, Krzysztof Piotr Skowronski in his essay, “John Lachs's Relativism in Philosophical Education as Seen from a Practical Perspective,” argues that some of Lachs's prescriptions for teachers of philosophy must “transcend particular views or relative statements, and judge them in the name of a common or universal good.” As Skowronski sees it, Lachs “assumes more or less openly” a “universal platform” of values that is the true ground of his prescriptions (65). Lachs's reply to this charge is a straightforward reaffirmation of his moral relativism. “We have,” he writes, “a precise answer to the question whether there are universally valid values. There are, to the extent that there are universally shared natures” (74). And in reply to Michael Brodrick's essay, “Mediation and Its Discontents,” in which Brodrick argues that Lachs's “lofty ideals” regarding education reform – in particular, having students spend more time actively learning in the community and less time in the classroom – would be detrimental to education of “the traditional liberal kind,” Lachs flatly asserts that “I don't think that liberal education on the college level must be or should remain intellectual” (258-67). To be sure, at times Lachs does embrace the concerns of his critics, such as with Patrick Shade and his sensitive essay “Facing Death: Preparing for Dying as a Social Process,” but this appears to be mainly because he regards Shade's critique “as enriching developments of my ideas rather than outright critiques” (283).
- 6 In a couple of instances, Lachs's replies appear more defensive than resolute. Andrew Fiala, in his generally laudatory essay “Lachs, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness,” takes Lachs to task for advocating specific social programs without supporting empirical data. While Fiala praises Lachs as a “deft stylist” – Lachs's lucid prose style is by design non-technical and he prides himself on writing without footnotes – he objects that when Lachs makes normative claims about social programs such as “public health care, unemployment insurance, the social security system, and the food stamp program [in America] [...] the footnotes are lacking.” In Fiala's view, “[d]ebates about such topics require empirical support that must be grounded in empirical data” (103). This claim does not seem particularly controversial, so Lachs's reply to it is puzzling. He writes that “the test of such theories is not the number of supportive footnotes but

their tendency to yield insight,” adding that “no science is objective and salient examples convey more immediately accessible information than scientific charts” (114). Setting aside the claim that “no science is objective,” it is unclear why Lachs would be resistant to empirical data indicating whether or not, say, welfare programs promote dependence. After all, empirical data provides “insight” too and the reference to “scientific charts” seems like a straw-man. A similar note of defensiveness also arises in Lachs’s reply to Richard Rubin’s essay “Lachs vs. Santayana.” Lachs has long defended an interpretation of Santayana’s system of philosophy where “matter” is identified with “existence.” Lachs’s interpretation runs contrary to a thesis defended by other Santayana scholars which holds that while “matter” certainly exists it always has some form or “essence.” In Rubin’s estimation, Lachs’s insistence that Santayana must have in mind a “purely ontological idea of matter is [...] an imposition of a foreign ontology into Santayana’s using Santayana’s own vocabulary” (120). In his reply to Rubin, Lachs restates his view that matter is “the inarticulate counterpart to essence,” but he also prefaces his restatement with the “wry” comment that “I could not avoid asking myself what difference it would make if I got Santayana’s ideas wrong.” Although he grants that it might “make sense to correct misreadings of Santayana, partly because his ideas are interesting and fruitful and partly because his texts are difficult and his commentators few,” his initial reply seems incongruous with the invitation to criticize his work and the seminal Santayana scholarship he has produced.

- 7 Santayana once described his own philosophy as “eclectic.” For him, this term wasn’t pejorative, but rather signalled the diverse influences on his thought and his firmness grounding his philosophy in common sense and everyday experience. Lachs’s philosophy is similarly “eclectic.” It is influenced by the entire history of philosophy, albeit with an emphasis on American pragmatism, and more recently Stoicism, and it is grounded in common sense and everyday experience. This allows him to avoid doctrinaire and idiosyncratic assumptions that might lead to intellectual dogmatism and moralism or otherwise distort the clear-minded ideas and practical proposals he presents. Also like Santayana, Lachs in his writing soars to the higher reaches of speculation about the nature of existence and the divine without losing sight of the mundane and the practical interests of human life. Lachs writes that “I have been scribbling for about sixty years, but it will take less than a tenth of that my time for my ideas to be forgotten.” But he adds that “[n]either my authorship nor my specific theories matter so long as my work contributes to the great turn of philosophy away from irrelevant abstraction toward its historical mission of serving as a guide to life” (26). If the essays in the present volume are any indication, he is happily wrong on the first point and certainly correct on the second. Those who wish to see philosophy that is relevant to life flourish both inside and outside the university can take heart knowing that Lachs’s amelioristic ideas have been set in motion.

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