

### **Lachs' *The Cost of Comfort*<sup>1</sup> in Light of Stoic Pragmatism**

A major portion of John Lachs' philosophical output has been dedicated to the ethical aspects of social practice, to the good life, first and foremost. As a representative of the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism, he criticizes much of its past for assuming a too abstract mode of operation. One result of the costs of a too-much-science-oriented way of philosophizing is a set of unsatisfactory solutions and another type, even worse, which is a charge of failing to serve the public at large. If the members of the public need anything from the pragmatists, it is not new theories rendered in technical language about problems that hardly anybody outside of academia would see as important. Thus, in his *Stoic Pragmatism* (2012) he evoked the need to work out "a pragmatism with a stoic correction" (p. 56) to stress the importance of dealing with daily life challenges in a convincing language, as, for example, the Stoics and other ancient Greeks did in their time. Stoic pragmatism would still be pragmatism, yet one that would discuss life issues rather than theoretical problems and would open itself to a wider audience than merely other professors. The limitations of human endeavor, the quality and the meaning of life, and how to live well would be some such issues.

Lachs' recent book reveals this practical attitude (and this comprehensive language) very well. The main question at stake here is: What are the costs of living a comfortable life in the West? As a scholar of Santayana's philosophy, he puts this question in an individualistic context rather than in socio-economical or strictly political one. This means that he asks about a sense of the meaningful life from the perspective of a particular person living in particular circumstances. Among the answers to this question, one discussed most extensively in the book is the following: More and more institutionalized forms of life, although enormously effective economically and socio-politically, make us more and more entangled in a net of indirect dependencies and anonymous interrelations. As a result, our own sense of meaningful performance in various aspects of our lives is substantially reduced. Hence, on the one hand, we are free to enjoy the most comfortable form of life ever in the history of the West: war-free and hunger-free coexistence of sundry groups and minorities, even those repressed in the past; social security for a considerable segment of population; medical, informative and technological progress on an unprecedented scale. On the other hand, however, there is a cost for most of us to pay and the level of frustration, stress, and loneliness in many segments of Western societies must be somehow related to this cost. Lachs focuses on the term *mediation* (a theme discussed previously in his *Intermediate Man*, 1981) or "interposition of others between oneself and the complete act" (17). He claims that we, as individuals, sink into an indirect experience and pay for it dearly by being unable to perform our most important activities in their complete form, something he calls "the complete human act" (43). What is the complete human act? It is an action that gives us a sense of our agency, that makes us involved in performing an activity from inception, through realization and, finally reaching the result of our projects with a full sense of responsibility for this action as ours. The most important dimension of a complete human act is that it makes for our sense of the meaningfulness of our life and its worth in a most extensive way. This aspect of the social life is more and more vulnerable given the enormous complexity of human cooperation nowadays, and this complexity is growing.

The level of human cooperativeness in nearly all areas of life is so sophisticated that most of us serve only a tiny part in the whole process and hardly ever see the result as our

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<sup>1</sup> John Lachs, *The Cost of Comfort*. Indiana University Press, 2019, 99.

own acts and efforts. Nor do we have a sense that a given project is a result of our own invention. Whatever institution we serve - a corporation, a government, an administration, the bureaucratic regulations, an IT industry—most of us are unable to see or to have an influence on the consequences, even when these seem to be scandalous. Most of us lose the responsibility for the outcome that is beyond our own specific segment of doing our job since our institution is too big, too complex, and too mediated that we could even sometimes even be aware of its impact on the lives of others. This "mediational distance" can be "measured by the number of people necessary to create a social act of some complexity. In making our minuscule contribution to the act, we do not see how it combines with what others do to make a larger whole and we remain in the dark about the consequences" (95). Lachs provides the examples of the Nazi concentrations camps and of the Madoff investment scandal where those numerous coworkers responsible for doing only a tiny fraction of the whole process did not feel at all responsible for the outcome and often did not have the slightest idea of the consequences of the whole process their institutions performed.

If I should provide more recent extreme examples to what I understand Lachs is writing about, I would think of the Facebook programmers who were not able to predict that Russian hackers would use those very tools to illegally influence democratic elections in the US, or that an Australian terrorist would livestream his massacre in New Zealand; even if those programmers were democrats, believing that their product would contribute to building a transparent society and giving voice to many unrepresented groups, the outcome may have appeared to be very frustrating for them, not to mention the resultant victims. These examples illustrate the tendency towards complexity of our aims and, almost necessarily the mediation within the process of completion of these aims, that render the outcomes out of our control for most of the contributors to the process. The mediation Lachs writes about is even more developed given additional mediators: texts, images, ideologies, and similar factors. An ocean of texts around one makes it difficult for us to see the difference between the information we need and fake news which, again, renders us distant from thinking of and realizing our complete acts since we are not able to recognize the future contexts of our activities. And this mediation causes problems with a more profound satisfaction with what we do and with a sense of the meaningfulness of what we want to achieve. In other words, the immediacy we deal with is more and more problematic and detecting the reality directly, without much mediation, is a challenge.

If we wanted to diagnose the problem from the point of view of stoic pragmatism that Lachs outlined in other places, especially in *Stoic Pragmatism*, we could say that the sense of a good and meaningful life in many for us has been limited by making us too dependent upon external factors: social institutions, public communication, images, news, etc., the functioning of which we have hardly any influence on. Institutions of various sorts have a tremendous impact upon our lives, but we do not have almost any impact upon the shape and character of these institutions. It is exactly this sense of the limitedness of our agency that makes us less tranquil, despite the opulent conditions of life all around us.

Since the term *mediation* has a variety of meanings (also positive), we have to be careful in order to understand it in Lachs' context. The term signifies a more and more indirect way in which our activities get realization in the contemporary world. Due to a longer chain of intervening factors and unpredictable circumstances, many of us feel our activities as if fragmented, accidental, and fungible. Sometimes, we ourselves feel like that too. What are the specific negative consequences of extended mediation? What is the bad side in the context of the individual sense of well-being and the good life? In *The Cost of Comfort* we can read about six of them: passivity, impotence, ignorance, manipulation, psychic distance, and irresponsibility. All of them, if true, create a paradoxical sensation that despite the affluent society we live in, the sense of the quality of living diminishes for many members of this

wealthy society, and this is because all these enumerated phenomena contribute to a sense of frustration and discomfort rather than the opposite—contentedness, fulfillment, and sanity.

The first of these, *passivity*, does not mean that people are generally less active. A first-look-view at Western societies should suggest just the opposite: we seem to be more and more active in various areas of life, both private and public. However, this sort of activity makes us more *busy* with all sorts of obligations (mainly at work) and must-do-actions (mainly consumption) that are imposed upon us from the external world rather than make us active with activities of our own agency. And it is the latter that more substantially elevate the quality of lives. To use Lachs' words: "We do what is expected of us, but the source of our activities does not reside in us. Though we do things, we feel that we sing someone else's tune: countless others claim possession of our souls. As a result, we feel passive in our activities and active only when we are left alone to do what we really want" (p. 31).

*Impotence* is also a paradoxical phenomenon in the world of enormous transformations that make our communal and individual life more dynamic. We see thriving businesses around and the growth of the cyberspace is unmatched. Yet all these developments need a gigantic net of human cooperation, one side effect of which is the individual sense of being a small and unimportant part of the whole process. Even worse, many jobs are fungible which means that workers are aware that the particular job they perform can be easily performed by anybody else or by artificial intelligence, which is a more probable scenario these days. There is hardly any place, Lachs reiterates, for a deeper sense of satisfaction that is taken from a complete project performance, one that is exercised from its inception, through its realizations, until its finale along with its consequences.

The scale of *ignorance* should not be a surprising phenomenon even if we realize that we live in the most educated society ever. Access to education in Western countries has never been easier. At the same time, the development of technology, medicine, finance, and politics makes their mechanisms of operation even more complicated. Very few experts can fully understand these mechanisms, not to mention ordinary members of the public. Yet, we are all involved in them which makes us feel that we have less and less of control of the phenomena that govern our social life. Corporations, be it global-scale or national, make most of their workers unaware of the complexity of their own business; these workers are responsible only for a tiny segment of the procedures. The Internet, I suppose, is a more complex example: we have access to all kinds of knowledge in cyberspace but there are very few of us that know its logic and very soon there will be hardly anybody that will claim to know how it actually functions. Yet, it is the algorithms that regulate more and more aspects of our daily life, from GPS to FB and our dependence on the algorithmic recommendation will be more embracing in the years to come. Our ignorance of these mechanisms will be growing despite a tremendous increase in the level of education and its access by the Internet.

Most frequently we feel *manipulated* when we realize that a service or a tool that we had expected to work for our benefit has appeared to work for a massive audience or a specific target audience. Why did we expect it? Because the narrative of the service provider appeals to each of us as if to say that 'you are our special client' or 'your vote will make a difference,' yet its practice is generalized and standardized rather than individualized.

*Psychic distance*, or "ignorance of the interconnectedness of social acts" (43), is probably an unavoidable effect of mediation (in the present meaning of the term). An individual can hardly emotionally engage in something she does not have an influence upon and/or does not realize the ways that other parts of the process she participates in, work. As it happens very often in other kinds of proceedings, most of the coworkers and partners engaged are alien to each other, aliens among whom there is hardly any emotional bond or any stronger intellectual proclivity. And the parts of the whole process extend a given agent's

competences; as a result, "Pride in work, understanding the vital importance of one's own contribution, and seeing coworkers as partners all suffer or are eliminated" (44).

Finally, *responsibility* becomes so restrictive to a given segment of one's job, that irresponsibility for the results of what we are engaged in, appears to become a next major problem. If an agent performs a limited task within a greater process, as usually is the case, she is unable to perform the complete human act, as already defined. Lachs concludes: "Since the cause of the action, the purpose, and the motive all come from the outside, it is not altogether surprising that people refuse to feel responsible for failures" (46).

To give an ampler perspective, it should be noted that mediation does not only involve more people in the chain of action nor does it always negative. Images and words are also among the mediators and, in some contexts can serve us well. An example of this we can find in what Lachs calls *advertising* and what is something very different from what we know from commercial ads. Despite its extensive use of words and images, the "vital function of advertising by professionals is not to increase profit or to enhance consumer choice, but to educate people of the mediated world" and as such it becomes "a positive obligation to be discharged in the public interest" (79).

So, what to do given these bad sides of mediation? Eliminating mediation is hardly possible and hardly needed. Nobody wants to risk losing access to basic goods as they are seen today, like electricity, oil, the Internet, easy travelling, social security, etc. Therefore, no elimination, but reducing the ill effects is at stake here. Henceforward, Lachs refers to the *spirit* of American pragmatism or to the pragmatist part of his stoic pragmatism, that is experience, values, democracy, openness, toleration, and education. However, rather than theorizing, as most pragmatists do, he wants to include in his stoic pragmatism descriptions of "sound practices," an account of "largely unintellectualized attitudes," and "normative recommendations for actions" (Lachs, *Stoic Pragmatism* 2012, 71) so as to show the human condition in a variety of common forms. In *The Cost of Comfort* he suggests that exactly these kinds of descriptions should be a part, just a part though, of reducing the ill effects of mediation. Descriptions of "the actual experiences and considered opinions of the people affected by mediation," of individuals suffering "when they feel impotent in dealing with government agencies," of customers having "little influence over the lamentable behavior of large organizations," and of a painful reality "that the irresponsibility of others causes untold frustration" (75). It is in these descriptions that values emerge. As to values—indicating which is another part of dealing with the ill effects of mediation—he does not define what exactly values are, nor does he construct any theory of values. Instead, he proposes such an attitude that would focus on "the valuations people place on their experiences," then trying to "understand their causes," and, finally, "proposes some strategies for reducing the unwelcome events of life" (76).

Reference to education is another way out. Both parts of stoic pragmatism, that is to say, the stoic and the pragmatist evoke the role of awareness of the individual as regards his or her actions. The former stresses the individual consciousness of the agent and latter stresses the consciousness on the social plane. Yet, school education cannot play the crucial role; instead, "education that features direct encounters with the physical and the social worlds promises results, as do changes in the cultures of government and institutions. The growth of openness, transparency, along with the imaginative identification of oneself with suffering others, can accomplish a good deal" (87).

All in all, it is the immediacy or direct experience that seems to be at the top of the ways out. Reaching immediacy can not only reduce stereotypes, racial prejudice, religious aggression, nationalistic ardor, and ideological boundaries. Most of all, it can humanize human relations on a variety of levels and be a serious source of our sensing a higher level of

the quality of life. The humanization of public relations is a sort of reduction of the extensive mediation we face in the contemporary world.