

**Stoic Pragmatism: Open Seminars Online**  
**SEMINAR TWO: The Meaningful Life**  
**Wednesday, April 9, 2025, 19.00-20.30, Berlin Time (CET)**

Zoom link HERE:

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/86006935816?pwd=8gYGX6Rs557ZxBDDoneu84WoIPUawZ.1>

**Programme of Seminar Two:**

I Chris Skowronski's Talk

II Open discussion about the talk and about the questions and issues

III The Problem of the Meaningful Life from the perspective of the members of the GIFT's (Grupo de Investigación en Filosofía Terapéutica) specific projects on therapeutic philosophy (NOT obligatory)

IV The problem of the meaningful life from the perspective of other participants' projects and interests (not obligatory)

V Questions and Comments on any topic

**Questions and Issues to be discussed**

Do we construct meaning in life or discover it?

The meaningful life, the good life, happy life, successful life – what's the difference?

Risks of meaningless life

Meaningful life and mental health issues

Should not philosophy offer us visions of the meaningful life/s as one of its main tasks?

**A short presentation of some published claims or stances related to these questions and issues (see full bibliography below).**

**Pragmatism's Stance (Royce/ Wm James):**

"[W]hat makes life worth living is not what you find in it, but what you are ready to put into it by your ideal interpretation of the meaning that, as you insist, it shall possess for you" (Royce, 219-220).

**Stoic pragmatism's stance (Lachs):**

'[T]here are times at which the pragmatic attitude is inappropriate and good sense requires that pragmatists believe and act like stoics. If intelligent pragmatists have to be stoics from time to time, then pragmatism and stoicism are not incompatible after all" (Lachs, *Freedom and Limits*, 364).

**Stoic Pragmatism's Stance (Weber)**

'I have found John Lachs's "stoic pragmatism" to be the most helpful outlook for thinking both about stoic acceptance of what is beyond our control, combined with a modest yet hopeful optimistic pragmatism about what we might do to be happy despite challenges' (Weber 182-183). (...)

'The point Lachs makes is that stoics, like everyone else, do not know all of the reach of their powers. How can you know what you cannot change unless you try? And, trying is within one's power. So, trying is something that Stoicism can condone, if not endorse, in the effort to determine what is within one's power.' (Weber 190)

‘Opening rich and meaningful life opportunities for all is a value in itself and for democracy. Benefits are evident already in the empowerment of fellows who can then pursue different kinds of meaningful lives. (Weber 194)

#### **Stoic pragmatism’s stance (Lachs):**

‘...the good life has three basic conditions or ingredients. We must have desires and purposes, we must be fortunate enough to live in circumstances where they can be satisfied, and we must have the capacity and energy actually to achieve them. Without the convergence of will, luck, and power, the good life is impossible ... The lack of power yields envy and bitterness; the absence of will makes existence meaningless; without luck, life remains a frustrated quest. (FL 248)’

#### **Stoic pragmatism’s stance (Skowroński)**

‘Stoic pragmatism tends to contextualize the meaning of the successful life within societies and communities that appreciate commonly recognizable indicators of success. Success, as an important indicator of achievable goals, has a special importance in capitalist contexts and consumption-oriented communities. It indicates financial achievements or living in the upper social strata of any given society that, in fact, can and does easily turn into financial success. The term successful life nearly merges with the term successful career, bringing with it a higher income or access to big money for oneself and loved ones’ (Skowroński, 86).

It happens that ‘ individuals who, having had a successful life did not (or do not) have a good life, which means that they (and, perhaps, their loved ones) were not happy or satisfied with life, even to the point of thinking it empty and meaningless. This is the argument for which the successful life may not imply the same as the good or the meaningful life.’

#### **Stoic pragmatism’s stance (Skowroński) – The risk of having the meaningless life.**

‘Meaninglessness has different causes as it has different forms. If we characterize it, very broadly though, as lacking a sense of importance and/or of value in one’s life, we can see that it may deal with life as a whole or with life at one of its stages. If we assume this meaning of the term, we will see that the importance factor and the value factor are crucial.

Perhaps we have dissolved the vitally meaningful in favor of the consumption-oriented meaningful, taken the roles of clients and/or producers, and have exchanged the meaningful life into a successful life as a basic model for happiness? This is precisely the point that SP wants to address by forcing us to pay attention to the unused opportunities available to us in contemporary Western culture.

Why a sense of meaninglessness is dangerous and may become destructive for us should not be that difficult to answer. It seems to be because, sooner or later, a meaningless life might become a painful, lived experience by leaving us burnt out, bored, inactive, complaining, frustrated, and unhappy. But it may become also toxic for our surroundings’ (Skowroński, 61)’

#### **Stoic pragmatism’s stance (Lachs) – philosophy, vision, and meaningful life:**

‘What does it take for a philosopher to be great? We can sum it up in one word: vision—an integrated, accessible and attractive view of the whole of things. Such visions offer accounts of the human world and of the nature and role of values in it, making personal orientation possible. Plato portrayed such a vision, as did Spinoza and Kant. (...)

Then there were philosophers who had no vision at all, even though they were masters of technique. Last of all come the professors of philosophy who took no interest in the value of

philosophy for the guidance of life. Measured by these standards, Santayana was a great philosopher (Lachs, 'Santayana's Vision,' 82).'

#### **Related Stances: Logotherapy (Frankl):**

"in logotherapy the patient is actually confronted with and reoriented toward the meaning of his life. And to make him aware of this meaning can contribute much to his ability to overcome his neurosis" (Frankl, 104)"

#### **Related Stances: Positive Psychology (Steger)**

'[M]eaning in life is an important variable for human well-being.' Definitions of meaning comprise 'two pillars: comprehension and purpose. Comprehension encompasses people's ability to find patterns, consistency, and significance in the many events and experiences in their lives, and their synthesis and distillation of the most salient, important, and motivating factors. (..) Purpose refers to highly motivating, long-term goals about which people are passionate and highly committed' (Steger in Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology, 679)

#### **Bibliography**

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- Royce, Josiah (2005 [1911]). "William James and the Philosophy of Life." In: *The Basic Writings of Josiah Royce*. Edited by John J. McDermott. Vol. 1, New York: Fordham University Press, 205-124.
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- Steger, Michael (2012). "Meaning in Life." In: *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*. Oxford University Press, 679–688.
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