

Stoic Pragmatism: Open Seminars Online
SEMINAR FIVE: Does Self-transformation (always) Mean Development and Improvement?

Wednesday, July 9, 2025, 19.00-20.30, Berlin Time (CEST)

Zoom link HERE:

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/89185174767?pwd=sFuUNy5hHeiaj6Gae4oNa1gtZvALv5.1>

Programme of Seminar Two:

I Chris Skowronski's talk

II Open discussion about the talk

III Questions and Comments about other topics, if there are any

Questions and Issues to be discussed

- 1 Why is self-knowledge NOT enough, and we need more (as continuation of the previous seminar)?
- 2 Self-knowledge as self-examination aiming at transformative betterment (melioration).
- 3 What is the connection between self-transformative effort and practical philosophy?
- 4 Should self-transformation reduce frustration, anger, and anxiety (hence, show therapeutic effects)?
- 5 Does (individual) self-transformation translate into social improvement?

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

Stoic pragmatist stance (Lachs/Skowroński)

„Lachs's basic idea is this: by bringing together the pragmatist and Stoic traditions at a common point, namely, the melioration of public life by the betterment of individual lives, stoic pragmatism aspires to transcend the methodological limitations imposed by current, theory-oriented academic philosophy. As a consequence of this, SP discusses practical philosophy, hoping to inspire ideas and suggestions that will also appeal to more general audiences about what a good and meaningful life is, and, in this way, accomplishing philosophy's wider, public, and cultural mission” (Skowroński, 2023, p.1).

Stoic pragmatist stance (Lachs)

“It is not that stoic pragmatists lack ideals; they could not be pragmatists devoted to improving the human lot without them. But motivating ideals must be limited and achievable or else the moral life becomes a vale of frustration and resentment” (Lachs/Skowroński 2018, 149).

“In a dynamic society critique is a compliment and the greatest engine of progress. To criticize people is to take them seriously, that is, to respect them as intelligent friends traveling with us on the road to a less error-prone and more humane universe” (Lachs 2012, 140).

Stoic pragmatist stance (Skowroński)

“Stoic pragmatism is definitely an active, meliorative, and transformative frame of mind accessing spheres where change is most difficult to achieve, and most satisfactory, which is in oneself” (Skowroński, 2023, 190).

“A life deprived of profound reflection loses its quality. Profound reflection refers to a universal human experience rather than temporary, local, restricted experience in a limited cultural context. The indispensable energy in SP goes to individual transformation in ways in which we are able to detect, identify, and utilize” (Skowroński, 2023, 191).

Modern Stoicism's stance (Irvine) on transformation of society:

“the first step of transforming a society into one in which people live a good life is to teach people how to make their happiness depend as little as possible on their external circumstances. The second step in transforming a society is to change people’s external circumstances. The Stoics would add that if we fail to transform ourselves, then no matter how much we transform the society in which we live, we are unlikely to have a good life” (Irvine 2009, 221)

Pragmatist stance on optimism and transformation, or pragmatist meliorism (Peirce, Dewey):

Meliorism is "doctrine that the world is neither the worst nor the best possible, but that it is capable of improvement: a mean between theoretical pessimism and optimism" (Peirce, 3697).

Meliorism says that "the specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event may be bettered" (Dewey, 181-82).

A related stance: The Ancient philosophers’ message on self-transformation (Hadot):

“Such is the lesson of ancient philosophy: an invitation to each human being to transform himself. Philosophy is a conversion, a transformation of one’s way of being and living, and a quest for wisdom” (Hadot, 275)

A related stance on self-examination/ self-interpretation (Seiple)

“self-examination is self-interpretation. And here I mean not just that self-examination requires self-interpretation. I mean that serious self-examination is a kind of self-interpretation—serious reflection upon how we have lived our lives, who we have become, and what we may realistically hope or—and that without such a narrative there can be no caring for the soul. And that’s because who we are as persons is, quite precisely, the result of our self-interpretation” (Seiple, 735).

“self-examination is inwardly dialogical. At the simplest level, there is a relationship between my life as narrated (its past, present, and possible future) and my own attitudes toward that story. Both of these are mental representations, but in self-reflection the first is the “object” of the second: I may be pleased or disappointed, engaged or indifferent toward something I remember doing or undergoing. And I shall almost certainly have conflicting attitudes that take on the character of reciprocal inner conversation” (Seiple, 736).

A related stance on transformative / practical character of philosophy (Amir)

“I argue that Western philosophy is deeply transformative and I formulate that which performs in it the required transformation of the self” (Amir, 43)

“The contemporary relevance of unraveling the transformative power of philosophy lies in helping to secure its place in the academe and in enabling personal change for the benefit of the individual and the society in which we live” (Amir, 44).

“it is the province of philosophical practice to make philosophy active in the world, and only insofar as it can be transformative can it be practical” (Amir, 54)

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See also: stoic pragmatism bibliography <http://berlinphilosophyforum.org/stoic-pragmatism-bibliography-updated-may-2024/>

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