



Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński

University of Opole, Poland

Berlin Practical Philosophy International Forum, e.V., Germany

ORCID: 0000-0003-3814-1346

e-mail: skris65@gmail.com

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/RF.2022.030>

The Individual and the Community in Stoic Pragmatism

The problem of *agency* is central to stoic pragmatism in its anthropological assumption that “each private, conscious person is a unique center of activity and feeling.”¹ Yet, the strength of the agency does not rely solely on agency as an isolated entity or on anyone’s features or *virtue* as the ancient Stoics understood it. What we know from the pragmatists’ writings (George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, Sidney Hook, Richard Rorty) about social behavior is that no one can be a socially isolated entity, and that everyone is somewhat interwoven into the cultural, sociopolitical, and economic ambience. Even the individuality of a person is social: “Only in social groups does a person have a chance to develop individuality.”² There is a sort of unavoidable circularity here. Namely, the individual, during the process of upbringing and maturation undergoes a series of cultural influences before becoming a conscious agent willing and able to think of cultural matters or other issues.

¹ John Lachs, *The Cost of Comfort* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 7.

² John Dewey, “Individuality in Education,” in: *Middle Works, 1899–1924*, ed. J. A. Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1922), 176.

John Lachs's *stoic pragmatism* represents a hope that if we pragmatically interpret some Stoic ideas (which are also Hellenistic on some points) and practically weave them into our own contemporary contexts, it may appear that they can help us recognize our sense of agency in a more effective way to increase our sense of the quality of our lives. For example, "the most notable feature of pragmatists is their commitment to bring life under intelligent and effective human control."³

This does not differ that much from the Stoics, at least in employing a rational selection of things and actions that allowed them self-control and self-sufficiency. This corresponds to the idea of Lawrence Becker, one of the principal figures of the *modern stoicism* movement, who indicates that, for modern stoicism, rational agency "is a defining feature of mature human consciousness."⁴ The problem of agency has also a social and communal dimension, since one of the basic presuppositions of stoic pragmatism (and of modern stoicism) is the betterment of individual circumstances. The quality of individual lives are ways to ameliorate social and communal life.

The aim of the present article is to show, in accord with the stoic pragmatist view, that elevating the role of agency can be one of the main points in the relation between the individual and the community, including our individual efforts to deal with some social, political, and cultural issues – contingency, for example. Stoic pragmatism vindicates the claim that making right choices amidst available resources in the circumstances we find ourselves in, can and should help agents with being able to navigate responsibly amidst the meanders of sociopolitical life, not only in private life.

Stoic Pragmatism and its Affinity to Modern Stoicism

The term *stoic pragmatism* was coined by the Hungarian-American philosopher John Lachs (b. 1934), as a theory for the practice of the good life in individual, social, and cultural contexts.⁵ It has two main philo-

³ John Lachs, *Stoic Pragmatism* (Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012), 44.

⁴ Lawrence Becker, *A New Stoicism* (Princeton–Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), 13.

⁵ Cf. Lachs, *Stoic Pragmatism*; John Lachs, "Stoic Pragmatism," in: *Freedom and Limits*, ed. Patrick Shade (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 363–376; "Was Santayana a Stoic Pragmatist?," in: *George Santayana at 150: International Interpretations*, ed. Matthew Caleb Flamm, Giuseppe Patella, Jenni-

sophical sources of inspiration. The first is American pragmatism, especially William James, John Dewey, Josiah Royce, and also George Santayana – whose links with pragmatism are detectable on some points. The second is the philosophy of Stoicism, especially the ethics of the Roman Stoics: Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, who, in some places, “is indistinguishable from a pragmatist,”⁶ and Cicero who, fundamentally, was more of a sympathizer with Stoicism and an elaborate articulator of its ideas rather than an authentic Stoic *philosopher*. In his own writings, Lachs reduces the whole tradition of Stoic philosophy to its later, Roman version in which, as in the pragmatism of James and Dewey, metaphysics was less pronounced than ethics: “The heart of stoicism is its ethics, not its metaphysics or epistemology.”⁷ Despite many unquestionable discrepancies between these two important, yet historically distant, philosophical traditions, an effort to “enrich and complete each other” finds its justification in providing “a better attitude to life than either of the two views alone.”⁸ As a result, “Stoic pragmatists believe that intelligent effort can make life longer and better. At the same time, they acknowledge human limits and show themselves ready to surrender gracefully when all efforts at amelioration fail.”⁹

Stoic pragmatism is an open project in the sense that it pursues factual improvement in the quality of life for living individuals, rather than a new theory about such improvement. It hopes to do so by showing, explaining, and encouraging more exemplary attitudes towards life among various audiences, despite divergent cultural norms and clashing values. SP abandons “the research/discovery paradigm of philosophy” as “wrongheaded and unproductive,”¹⁰ and focuses on the expansion of philosophy beyond the practices of academic circles out into the open public. Lachs has reservations about the power of philosophy that an-

fer A. Rea (Lanham–Boulder–New York–Toronto–Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2014), 203–207; Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński (ed.), *John Lachs's Practical Philosophy* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2018), 153–212. Steven Miller, Yasuko Taoka, “Toward a Practice of Stoic Pragmatism,” *The Pluralist* 10(2) (2015): 150–171; Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński, “Santayana as a Stoic Pragmatist in John Lachs’s Interpretation,” in: *Overheard in Seville: Bulletin of the Santayana Society* 38 (2020): 109–123; Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński, “Stoic Pragmatist Ethics in a Time of Pandemic,” *Ethics and Bioethics (in Central Europe)* 11(1–2) (2021): 82–91.

⁶ Lachs, *Stoic Pragmatism*, 47.

⁷ Lachs, “Was Santayana a Stoic Pragmatist?,” 203.

⁸ Lachs, *Stoic Pragmatism*, 42.

⁹ Lachs, “Was Santayana a Stoic Pragmatist?,” 206.

¹⁰ Lachs, *Stoic Pragmatism*, 21.

alytical and scientific method-oriented pragmatists, such as Charles S. Peirce, recommended in the past, and that Nicolas Rescher (the so-called *cognitive pragmatism*) does presently. Instead, stoic pragmatism should promote philosophy understood as a guide to life for those of many different persuasions, rather than as a methodologically coherent set of theories for a limited circle of experts, as analytical philosophy tends to do, or as a form of ideology, as neo-Marxist schools tend to practice these days. There are even places in which Lachs employs, as did the Stoics, the analogy between medicine (treatment of the body) and philosophy (treatment of the soul). On the other hand, the present hyper-professionalization of science-oriented pragmatism that makes philosophy look abstract and superfluous for the general public is Lachs's target of criticism, and appears to be the principal reason why he pitches his ideas to wider audiences. In this way, stoic pragmatism can be seen, at least partially, as a result of Lachs's critical assessment of American pragmatism. Especially, since it was pragmatism that represented a transformative model of doing philosophy that is a practical amelioration for a society and its culture. However, it has failed to achieve its realization by becoming entangled in meticulous analyses of abstract puzzles. Having been unable to offer an adequate attitude to life, it needs "a stoic correction"¹¹ that would make pragmatism more practical action-oriented and more widely audience-oriented.

Stoic pragmatism has appeared in the time of a more general appreciation of Stoic themes. The work of such eminent scholars as Pierre Hadot¹² and Martha Nussbaum¹³ (and, in Poland, of Henryk Elzenberg¹⁴) has elevated many Stoic themes onto a new level and, in all probability, given way to even more recent developments. Also, there have been other scholarly studies that have taken the name of *new stoicism* or *modern*

¹¹ Ibidem, 56.

¹² Cf. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, transl. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995 [1988]).

¹³ Cf. Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire. Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994); Martha Nussbaum, "The Worth of Human Dignity: Two Tensions in Stoic Cosmopolitanism," in: *Philosophy and Power in the Graeco-Roman World. Essays in Honour of Miriam Griffin*, ed. Gillian Clark, Tessa Rajak (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 31–51.

¹⁴ Cf. Henryk Elzenberg, *Marek Aureliusz. Z historii i psychologii etyki* (Lwów–Warszawa, 1922); Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński, "Axiocentrism in Santayana and Elzenberg," in: *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 39(2) (2003): 259–274.

stoicism.¹⁵ One of the principal figures of this movement, Lawrence Becker, interprets Stoic themes from a contemporary perspective as if Stoicism has had a continuous history up to the very present, and that some of its themes have developed according to ongoing developments in physics, logic, and ethics.¹⁶ The question arises as to how one can adapt Stoic teaching into contexts of our present situation, scantily metaphysical and with so much of it secularized and commercialized. Becker answers that a part of Stoic ethics, in opposition to Stoic cosmology and theology, can easily be accommodated to lives nowadays, if “appropriately restated.” He even claims that “Stoic virtue ethics could have remained largely the same” as would the idea of “living in accord with nature” and other central doctrines of historical Stoicism.¹⁷

A Contemporary Challenge for Agency: Contingency of Ideas of Who We Are

We deal with contingency when we recognize that the values we cherish and the social practices that we have understood as important “lack the certainty, rightness, or absolute justification prior generations insisted they could attain.”¹⁸ If we agree that stability and the absolute justification of values have traditionally been the factors that gave foundations to the sense of the good and meaningful life, contingency becomes a challenge. To be sure, contingency, discussed in various contexts, is not a new characteristic of the human condition. After all, the Biblical book of *Kohelet* (*Ecclesiastes*) discussed it thousands of years ago, as did many texts from later periods. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the writings of Nietzsche (and his idea of *God is Dead*), the aesthet-

¹⁵ Cf. William Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); René Brouwer, *The Stoic Sage: The Early Stoics on Wisdom, Sagehood and Socrates* (Cambridge University Press, 2018 [2014]); Lawrence C. Becker, *A New Stoicism. Revised Edition* (Princeton–Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017 [1998]); Massimo Pigliucci, *How to Be a Stoic. Ancient Wisdom for Modern Living* (London: Rider, 2017); James W. Williams, *Stoicism: The Timeless Wisdom to Living a Good Life – Develop Grit, Build Confidence, and Find Inner Peace* (SD Publishing LLC, 2019); Piotr Stankiewicz, *Manual of Reformed Stoicism* (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2020); Tomasz Mazur, *O stawaniu się stoikiem. Czy jesteście gotowi na sukces?* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2014).

¹⁶ Cf. Becker, xii–xiii.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, xiii.

¹⁸ Michael Hodges, John Lachs, *Thinking in the Ruins: Wittgenstein and Santayana on Contingency* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 2.

ics of the avant-garde, Thomas Kuhn's idea of changing paradigms in science,¹⁹ the philosophy of postmodernism, and American neopragmatism, among many others, have manifested the phenomenon in newer versions. Contingency has become a serious challenge nowadays, not for novel theoretical versions but for its widespread impact on practically all aspects of Western culture and life. The most accomplished and significant forms of institutionalized life in the West – science, education, mass media, political systems, legal systems, religions, morality – are less and less reliable to be referred to as absolute points of reference or, to use postmodern vocabulary, *metanarratives* or *grand narratives*.²⁰

One of the most spectacular examples of contingency concerning who we are comes from London's Employment Tribunal's verdict against Maya Forstater in 2019, who lost her job for simply claiming publicly that there are only two sexes: males and females. According to the Tribunal's verdict, the claim that there are two sexes has an "absolutist nature," which is "incompatible with human dignity and fundamental rights of others," and "the human rights balancing exercise goes against" such an "absolutist approach."²¹ The question of the sexes is one thing, and the question of human dignity is quite another. We cannot avoid discussing both in the context of what is absolute and what is relative and contingent. The Tribunal's verdict is unclear as to whether we should treat *human dignity* in absolutist terms or not, and it is unclear if the "fundamental rights of others" is an absolutist claim itself. However, if the question about the sexes were viewed to be suspicious, would not this mean that contingency is unavoidable even in most basic questions about happiness, meaningfulness, the good life, and self-fulfillment? Should these be viewed as relative or relativized to some norms and cultural standards of the day? Could perhaps cultural (and axiological) relativism save us from contingency? If so, we would have to understand dignity or happiness, as relative to the understanding of a given group or a given tradition, and we could do it, but only at the price of losing its universal importance. We cannot demand the dignity of, say, women all across the

¹⁹ Cf. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

²⁰ Cf. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1979]).

²¹ *The Employment Tribunals*. Case Number: 2200909/2019. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e15e7f8e5274a06b555b8b0/Maya_Forstater_vs_CGD_Europe_Centre_for_Global_Development_and_Masood_Ahmed_-_Judgment.pdf (London: The Employment Tribunals 2019), 24, 26.

world, while at the same time claim that dignity needs to be contextualized and relativized.

On the other hand, even those who would claim that *human dignity* should be understood in absolutist terms may have problems with what that means exactly. After all, it is basically impossible to ignore economic conditions in discussing what human dignity practically means and, whether or not social security is a part of the issue in question. One of the best illustrations of this uncertainty has occurred in Spain, where, since 2014, there have been Marches of Dignity (*Marchas de la Dignidad*) in which salaries and pensions are at stake. These factors were non-existent to include in the considerations of human cultures and earlier ethical systems of thought that tried to cultivate the idea of human dignity long before the capitalist era emerged, as in Christianity and in Kant. The idea that human rights may seem dependent, i.e., contingent and/or relative, on social and even technological contexts (there are contemporary voices coming from such traditional circles as the United Nations claiming that access to the Internet should become a new human right²²) has been proposed. The Internet itself, along with the digital revolution of recent decades, accelerates this sense of contingency, despite the immense progress we have thanks to digital tools in many areas of life, culture, and education.

The sense of contingency is strengthened by social media that promote tribalism, polarization, and communication echo chambers, rather than the common values shared by human beings, independent of their backgrounds. Cultural changes together with the narratives about these changes evolve amazingly fast in social media, and younger audiences are most vulnerable to absorb uncritically whatever they see and hear. Social media's rapid-fire communication, the dynamism of their discourses, and the malleability of their vocabularies make it difficult for us to identify a fixed set of characteristics of any one culture, or specific segments of any given culture. For example, identifiable attempts to define a given culture (e.g., is a given culture discriminatory or not?), a given moral category (e.g., happiness or moral corruption) and its niche in life, depends a lot on whom defines it: scientists, politicians, social activists (progressives, conservatives), religiously motivated moralists, social media influencers, digital celebrities, or a variety of others. It also depends on the selection through which categories (scientific, political,

²² Cf. Anne-Marie Grey, "The Case for Connectivity, the New Human Right," *United Nations* website, 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/un-chronicle/case-connectivity-new-human-rightGray>.

popular, economic) we care to describe something, and what the target audience is.

Although there have always been important differences in the descriptions of cultures, values, and their interpretations, today we are witnessing something that has never taken place before. Most of us, including teenagers, have free access to powerful tools of mass communication (FB, YT, the Instagram, Tweeter, TikTok, WhatsApp, etc.) by means of which it is possible to present and represent matters in a novel, usually sensationalistic manner. Many people have the technological capacity to express their views, whatever the quality or veracity, in a written or audio-video form. This was something impossible previously. In this way, some influencers and celebrities have an immediate impact, usually short-lasting, on the views of millions of their subscribers and followers, and the scale of their popularity can hardly be matched by any experienced professor or regular expert, even when highly competent in a given field of knowledge.

Such instantaneous influence of so many different people coming from the social media world may be positive, inspirational, or creative for many aspects of life. In some instances, it even undermines something that has characterized Western culture for centuries, and that is a sense of certainty concerning basic truths and values pronounced by recognized authority figures. Here, the evolution of Western culture seems both systemic and radical. Truth and values, cultivated by established institutions (church, educational, the legal system, the established media, authority figures) and institutionalized forms of life (established social roles, morality, customs, public opinion) seem to be undermined currently in the West. The present technological, digital revolution, has much to do with it. This is revolutionary in comparison to what the Western world experienced during and after the Enlightenment.

Stoic Pragmatist Response

If we agree to understand that the individual “organism is a free-standing sensor and agent,”²³ and *agency* is a “balance of control and stability,”²⁴ we could claim that individuals, as conscious agents, “are in the best position to determine their own interests and to devote ener-

²³ John Lachs, *In Love with Life: Reflections on the Joy of Living and Why We Hate to Die* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), 31.

²⁴ Becker, *A New Stoicism*, 160.

gy to their own pursuits."²⁵ More specifically, SP is an outlook that promotes the idea of agency, or thoughtful individualism with an elevated role for the inner life, with attention being paid to the validation of individual experiences and to the development of possibly all individuals within a community in a variety of ways. Before proceeding, the question, *What does "individuals" mean when used in this project?* should be answered. These are regular people "with a finite and peculiar angle of approach to the world. They may be unintelligible from the outside; but from their own perspectives, everything they feel and do seems luminous and for the most part astonishingly right [...]. They do what they can to lead as rich a life as they can, focusing on ordinary pursuits executed with personal flair and flavor."²⁶ Stoic pragmatism's assumption at this point is that agency makes the individual more conscious of opportunities, skills, actions, activities, consequences, and all this makes us stronger or better oriented in the context of enjoying a good and meaningful life. The individuals we are talking about here are not social reformers who want to rearrange public institutions, but those who want to rearrange the ways we interpret our individual lives. After all, it is the individual life that serves as the ultimate test for the unmeaningful life, which is pain, disorientation, and suffering. On the other hand, it is the individual agent's life that serves one as the ultimate test for a meaningful life, which is happiness (*eudaimonia*) or any other goal definable by an agent who is able to dedicate one's interests and energy to set initially and then fulfill the goal worthy of pursuit. The ultimate test of life centers around the universally valid wisdom that is "we all suffer our own pains and die our own deaths."²⁷ Neither institutions nor societies as such can suffer or be happy about the unmeaningful or the meaningful life, only individuals can do that: "For the community cannot act on my behalf and never suffers my pain when I am wrong."²⁸

In stoic pragmatism, society, basically, is a collection of individuals, and the shape or the spirit of any given culture depends on the characters of its individual members. One of the consequences of such an anthropological approach is that the efficacy of an action is based on

²⁵ John Lachs, *Freedom and Limits*, ed. Patrick Shade (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 9.

²⁶ John Lachs, *A Community of Individuals* (New York–London: Routledge, 2003), 142.

²⁷ Lachs, *In Love with Life*, 31.

²⁸ John Lachs, *George Santayana* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 99.

agency and “only derivatively in the regularity of the world.”²⁹ In other words, “it is only by a conspiracy of individuals that society can act, and only by the voice of individuals that it can be judged.”³⁰ This does not mean, however, that we are isolated entities having an objective knowledge about the world surrounding us. Stoic pragmatism does not promote any type of simplistic reductionism according to which social and cultural problems can be reduced to individual characteristics of particular members of the public. We are not able to understand and interpret a host of social, political, and cultural problems by using this unjustified assumption. There are so many public issues that cannot be reduced to the behaviors of the individual members of a society.

To be sure, it is hopelessly difficult, if not arbitrary, to try to set a strictly delineated boundary between the individual and the communal in such cases as family, our native cultures, our country or state, our own generation, our language along with its rhetoric, narratives, and discourses that we use in communication, and also the authorship of our projects in which many other individuals are involved. From the very moment we are born, each of us, apart from our predispositions and talents, is submerged in numerous conditions and situations and becomes influenced by powerful mechanisms of communal life in all their aspects: historical, linguistic, social, economic, moral, educational, political, technological, and cultural. Even individuals who seek isolation or intend to sequester themselves away as monks or nuns in a monastery or nunnery, are culturally submerged in their religious cultures and traditions and assume a specific, aged and well-worn type of public mission, which is to pray for the sake of humankind.

Stoic pragmatism recommends such an individualistic approach while thinking about the meaningful life and responsibility, for instance, because it wants to stress the role of agency that needs to skillfully navigate challenges and the traps of all kinds circumscribing the individual. These external contexts cannot be ignored; yet they cannot, on the other hand, obscure individual agency and the importance of individual choices. There is one more reason why stoic pragmatism focuses much more on the individual than on the social. Namely, it does not pretend to possess any special methodology to analyze social, economic, and political problems. Although stoic pragmatism relies on and accepts

²⁹ Lachs, *Stoic Pragmatism*, 76.

³⁰ John Lachs, Shirley Lachs (eds.), *Physical Order and Moral Liberty: Previously Unpublished Essays of George Santayana* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969), 196.

the scientific explanation of the world, it absolves itself from the methodology of the social sciences and the empirical analysis of the social world because its compelling message concerns a humanistic reflection about the efficiency of the agent's coping with the meanders of life. Even when stoic pragmatism discusses its possible contribution to cultural and public domains, it only indirectly refers to the history and the present role of given institutions, political movements, and the social power structure. It does not possess socially influential tools to ameliorate cultural institutions or to redirect the course of social movements. Such redirections and ameliorations can be attempted, though, such as when a given stoic pragmatist, like Marcus Aurelius in the past, or on much smaller scale, John Dewey more recently, gets involved in socially and politically powerful institutions of the day (government, academia) with enough adequate tools to affect developments on a major sociopolitical scale. On a still smaller scale, a stoic pragmatist might get involved with the educational system or with a digital platform by means of which one's voice could be amplified. For example, a possible scenario of a stoic pragmatist as a public intellectual who will want to (ably) use cyberspace and some digital platforms to (effectively) promote a message on ethical and philosophical issues.³¹ Obviously, the amelioration of social and cultural life is not an aim for stoic pragmatists since they encroach on spheres of life that are external to one's control, independent and unpredictable. However, doing our best and striving to ameliorate the quality of our lives and of those who want to listen to us, definitely is within our control and definitely is dependent on our intentions and skills. We can say, then, that SP is an active, meliorative, and transformative frame of mind accessing spheres where change is most difficult to achieve, and most satisfactory, which is in oneself. However, not only this.

SP does not avoid engagement in social, cultural, and even political activity, understood as a caring about public life. After all, it has its own social amelioration agenda, one that can be encapsulated by one of the modern stoic's formulations, according to which "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."³² This should be followed by the

³¹ Cf. Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński, "Philosophy in Digital Culture: Images and the Aestheticization of the Public Intellectual's Narratives," *Eidos: A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 4(1) (2020): 23–37.

³² William Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 221.

second step, which 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.”³³

It is in such contexts that stoic pragmatism stresses the role of agency. Individuals need to recognize their power to influence and inspire meaningful lives according to the claim that the “grounding assumption of freedom is that human beings are self-moving agents who are capable of recognizing, seeking, and attaining their own good. If we deny human intelligence, drive, and competence, we will naturally wish to take over the lives of others to help them along.”³⁴ “Taking over” or interpreting lives according to external standards, which are functioning prior to an agent’s thought about those standards, could imply that given individuals have not worked through their own tendencies about a meaningful life. This may mean that somebody else does it for them or instead of them. I mean, if we do not take care of our worldview as *ours*, we inevitably will have to, willy-nilly, incorporate one of the already functioning worldviews as our lenses through which we see the world. To be sure, nothing is wrong with such an approach. But we do become less of an agent in this way, since we give away important prerogatives of agency to others. In this sense, the problem of agency is also a part of the problem in the relation of sociopolitical and cultural influences, and an agent’s autonomy and scope of individual freedom. The relations of power within the social and cultural power structure can be characterized in this way:

[...] a balance between our dispositional ability to maneuver effectively toward our goals, responding with practical intelligence to salient events along the way, and our dispositional resistance to being deflected by the shifting winds of impulse and circumstance. When we have perfect control over our conduct, we no longer have anything worth calling character; we are simply untethered actors in an atmosphere of possibilities. When we have perfectly stable dispositions, we no longer have anything worth calling control; we simply follow the trajectory determined by our fixed traits, unable to maneuver at all in response to new information about our endeavors or circumstances.³⁵

I leave aside here the circular problem of internalizing such ideas of individual autonomy; we learn from our culture and its numerous insti-

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ John Lachs, *Meddling: On the Virtue of Leaving Others Alone* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 8–9.

³⁵ Becker, *A New Stoicism*, 160.

tutions that individual freedom, within legal boundaries, is a basic right, and we internalize this message throughout our upbringing. We then live out our lives in step with our deepest convictions that individual freedom, within legal boundaries is our basic right and then transmit it to future generations. If such is the case, the subjective sense of individual autonomy has a communal, societal, and cultural background, and that is why I mention an agent's limited autonomy. Even if the individual has the opportunity to select one given lifestyle and a system of thought that could interpret the good and meaningful life according to some well-established traditions, the question of autonomy would still persist. That is to say, if there are numerous traditions that have developed models for the good life, why not take on these already existing models and why should we care at all about a meaningful life on our own? Or, perhaps, even more importantly, a meaningful life could perhaps mean adopting one of the already existing models for a meaningful life, and a conformist approach would be most propitious.

It is agency that allows us to have this or that attitude toward life and being able to choose, rightly or wrongly, how to live, how to alleviate our pains, and how best to use our time before we terminate our earthly journey. I stress the individual's agency here not only to remind us that there are individuals whose agency is reduced due to natural causes, to the natural stages of development (children), and their own ignorance (irresponsible and thoughtless individuals). Stoic pragmatism pays attention to the risks for individuals who are thoughtless or without reflection concerning their lots in life or simply egocentric, ignorant, and apathetic to what happens around them. Pragmatically speaking, the price they risk for their irresponsibility is their own vital interests, and the qualities of their lives in the short or long run. Ignorance is never a healthy option when we refer to the idea of "know yourself," or when we care about the fate of those we love. Relying on a subjective set of opinions about oneself is risky; if not supported by at least some portion of objective knowledge as to how the world works, and at least by some portion of experience about successful relationships with other individuals, we are in danger of slipping into illusion and self-deception. A more adequate perspective of the reality gives us a wider picture of the conditions of the good and meaningful life. Subjective opinions may turn out to be irresponsible ignorance that endangers the one who entertains these opinions. This frequently occurs in the case of children and, somewhat less frequently, with infantile and irresponsible adults. When we talk about agency, we stress the role of the causality of our attitude, the importance of our adequate responses to what takes place around one.

A Final Reflection

The stoic pragmatism project does not serve a stoic pragmatist (and his or her sympathizer) in attempting to heal the world. Rather, it serves to impart the inexpensive and rather easily available ways in which it is possible to navigate the world in a twofold manner. First, to navigate amidst the traps, challenges, and opportunities that make life meaningful. Second, to try to ameliorate a slice of the public sphere where our knowledge and skills allow us to intervene. Stoic pragmatism does not claim that the characteristics of contemporary culture, such as contingency, are either good or bad as such. They simply occur, and we need to face them. The best we can do is to convert them, from something potentially dangerous into something profitable for us and our loved ones. Or, if this is not possible, at least, to reduce their negative spread. This is the therapeutic component that stoic pragmatism can offer. It is non-pragmatic and non-stoic to view contemporary Western cultural elements negatively, to throw in the towel, and to become frustrated as to their meaningful prospects for our lives.

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Summary

The present paper outlines John Lachs's idea of stoic pragmatism and develops its important part which is the relation between the individual and the community. In his project, Lachs reduces the whole tradition of Stoic philosophy to its later, Roman version and tries to link it with the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism (especially William James, John Dewey, and George Santayana, who is close to pragmatism at some points) hoping that it is possible for these two to "enrich and complete each other" so as to provide "a better attitude to life than either of the two views alone." Stoic pragmatism pursues factual improvement in the quality of life for individuals living in given social circumstances, rather than a new theory about such improvement. Interestingly, stoic pragmatism overlaps at many points with the so-called modern stoicism, a movement that uses Stoic ethics in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: stoic pragmatism, modern stoicism, individual, community, Lachs, Santayana