

Notes for *Freedom and Limits*. By John Lachs. Edited by Patrick Shade. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014. 520pp. Cloth, \$125.00; paper, \$30

F *Freedom and Limits* is a well-organized collection of thirty-two selections, offering a comprehensive insight into the work of 20th century American philosopher John Lachs. Lachs's writing spans more than fifty years; hence this volume reflects a variety of philosophical streams, notably pragmatism, pluralism, and epiphenomenalism. The essays are divided into five parts, each reflecting a major theme in Lachs's understanding of American philosophy: mind and reality; self and society; pluralism and choice-inclusive facts; meaningful living; and human advance and finite obligation. In sum, these deliberations contemplate the nature of society, revealing Lachs's enduring concern about the relationship of the community with regard to the individual. Selections are featured in chronological order by publication date, enabling readers — even those unfamiliar with Lachs — to follow the development of his philosophical thinking alongside dominant ideas of interest to him, namely finitude, immediacy, liberty, optimism, the individual as a unit of action and decision-making, choice-inclusive facts, reimmersion, and stoic pragmatism.

In this volume, Lachs seems to favor social utility over philosophical rigor. Accordingly, he tackles pragmatic concerns as a vehicle to demonstrate his disdain for uniformity and perfectionism, both of which he perceives as undermining the pursuit of a satisfactory human life. Navigating discussions in philosophical works by Dewey, Fichte, Hegel, James, Peirce, Royce, and, most extensively, Santayana, Lachs concludes that the variability and adaptability of human nature makes striving for a single ultimate or supreme good futile. Instead, Lachs offers a contrasting version of the good life whereby “good enough” ought

to be good. In this way, Lachs's philosophy attempts to radically transform philosophical thought away from idealism and perfectionism, which lead us to believe "everything needs to be improved," (449) into being concerned primarily with practical reforms as the only hope for the improvement of the human condition. Pragmatist philosophers should take special notice of the prologue and epilogue, as they provide pertinent insights into Lachs's personal stakes, as well as further elucidation the social usefulness which he values in and demands from philosophy. In these contributions, Lachs describes himself primarily as a public philosopher: "My passion is to deploy philosophy to deal with the important issues that face us as individuals, as a nation, and as members of the human race" (31). Many of the essays accordingly navigate various moral quandaries experienced in everyday life, such as helping refugees, assisted suicide, and education.

Lachs is keenly interested in how quests for perfection or infinite obligations impede human happiness. For him, happiness requires consideration of the social context, and thus social organization, in which people's actions and pursuits occurs. Yet, as his fervent discussion in the essay "The Transcendence of Materialism and Idealism in American Thought" (97-111) reveals, he is beleaguered by how materialism and idealism have long enthralled the Western tradition, leaving people gridlocked and diminished into functioning as mere living organisms in complex social contexts. Both materialism and idealism represent purely cognitive approaches to making sense of the world which, to Lachs, fall short. While they guide our understanding, they do not guide our practice. Instead, Lachs advocates for centering human activity, thereby turning the American philosophical tradition into a "more intelligent, more fulfilling, and more humane" activity (111). Later in the volume, during his most explicit and sustained discussion of William James, it seems Lachs fears such gridlock may evoke a kind of apathy, testing the limitations of moral philosophy in pragmatism. This could explain his interest in analyzing James's concept of the "moral holiday" in the essay by the same name (435-448). As Lachs summarizes, moral holidays adhere to this rationale: "if our

obligations are infinite but God picks up the slack and completes what we leave undone, then we might as well break from our labors and let the Deity take over” (435). Here, Lachs narrates James playfully targeting Royce in what becomes a three-person exploration of the moral impulses behind religion, or “the Absolute”, as a motivation for moral action in daily life, or conversely, whether there are any conditions in which “time away from moral efforts” is “justifiable” (447). Ultimately, Lachs laments the futility of many arguments for exemplary notions of human possibility since “we have no idea of what a perfect version of any of these properties [justice, power, mercy, and knowledge] might be like” (452). Lachs’s provocative volume invites readers to accept human finitude and (re)engage philosophy as a guide to life’s enduring societal challenges.

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