

“Stoic Pragmatism”



Transcription by Kevin Dotson, February 2017.

For those interested, here's **how to cite** this transcript or episode for academic or professional purposes:

Weber, Eric Thomas, Anthony Cashio, and John Lachs, "Stoic Pragmatism," *Philosophy Bakes Bread*, Transcribed by Kevin Dotson, WRFL Lexington 88.1 FM, Lexington, KY, February 9, 2017.

Announcer: This podcast is brought to you by WRFL, radio free Lexington. Find us online at <http://WRFL.FM>. Catch us on your FM radio while you're in Central Kentucky at 88.1 FM, all the way to the left. Thank you for listening, and please be sure to subscribe.

Dr. Eric Weber: As I said folks, this is WRFL Lexington, I am Dr. Eric Thomas Weber, and I am here to share with you episode five of Philosophy Bakes Bread. Without further ado.

[Intro Music].

Dr. Weber: Hello and welcome to philosophy bakes bread, food for thought about life and leadership, a production of the society of philosophers in America, aka: SOPHIA. I am Dr. Eric Thomas Weber.

Dr. Anthony Cashio: And I am Dr. Anthony Cashio. A famous phrase says that philosophy bakes no bread, that it's not practical. But we in Sophia and on this show aim to correct that misperception.

Dr. Weber: Philosophy Bakes Bread airs on WRFL Lexington 88.1 and is recorded and distributed as a podcast next, so if you can't catch us live on the air, subscribe, and be sure to reach out to us. You can find us online at <http://philosophersinamerica.com/philosophy-bakes-bread>. And soon our site will be updated at philosophybakesbread.com. We hope that you'll reach out to us on any of the topics we raise or on topics that you want us to bring up. Plus, we'll have a segment called, "You Tell Me!" Listen for it, and let us know what you think.

Dr. Cashio: You can reach us in a number of ways, or on Twitter @philosophybb, which stands for philosophy bakes bread. We're also on Facebook at philosophy bakes bread, and check out Sophia's Facebook page while you're there @PhilosophersInAmerica. You can of course email us at philosophybakesbread@gmail.com. And, you can also call us and leave a short recorded message with a question, or comment, or praise that we may be able to play on the show at 859-257-1849. That's 859-257-1849. And, if you're interested in learning more about Sophia, check us out online at philosophersinamerica.com.

Dr. Weber: So, this is Dr. Eric Weber live in the studio, because we were very fortunate to get some feedback this past week, and I want to share some of it with you. We got a call voicemail recorded, just in the way described, from Phil who is just going to give us some comments about an episode he heard recently on the show.

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

Phil: This is Phil, I really enjoyed hearing the radio show this afternoon. Umm, [inaudible] philosophy bakes bread. First time I heard it, and I only caught the end of it, but I really am looking forward to hearing more shows. At the end of the show you asked, you were discussing whether philosophy is a worthwhile study, and the purpose of education is not to get a job. The purpose of education is to be an educated person, and philosophy helps a person understand the world around them. To be able to read the newspaper and understand what's going on and why, and that helps in all kinds of areas, whether its education, law, politics, whatever a person is involved in. What they think and why they think is terribly important, and just wanted to pass that on. And, look forward to hearing more of the show.

Dr. Weber: Thanks so much, Phil. We really appreciate it. Actually, we got a double feature. We're very fortunate that Phil called back and left another message with a joke about philosophy, actually he suggests we put in the "Philosofunnies" show, but because of reasons you don't need to hear about. I'm going to play it for you now, and I again I appreciate it Phil. Here is Phil's joke for us for "Philosofunnies" played a little earlier on the show.

Phil: This is Phil, and I wanted to share with you a definition of philosophy given to me by one of my professors. He said, "Philosophy is the systematic abuse of language that was designed specifically for that purpose". Thought that might go in the humor section. Thank you, bye!

Dr. Weber: Nice one, Phil. Thanks so much. So, here we go with the show.

Dr. Cashio: We appreciate the comments and questions that we have received and look forward to more. Our next segment starting off the show is an important one too, and we will introduce our guest. It's called "Know Thyself". On today's show, fortune has smiled on us, and we are joined by Dr. John Lachs who is here to talk to us about stoic pragmatism.

Dr. Weber: This is from John's, well some of this is from John's Wikipedia page. Not every philosopher has a Wikipedia page dedicated to him or her. John Lachs is the Centennial Professor of Philosophy at Vanderbilt University where he has taught since 1967. Lachs received his Ph.D. from Yale University in 1961. His primary focus is on American philosophy and German idealism. Lachs was born in Hungary and immigrated to Canada as a child. He has been a member of the Vanderbilt faculty, as I said, since 1967 and has written a number of books and many articles over this period and before.

Dr. Cashio: Dr. Lachs served as president of the Metaphysical Society of America in 1997. He has written many books including *Intermediate Men*, as well as more recently *Stoic Pragmatism*, which we will be discussing today, and *On Meddling*. His style is highly accessible, as Lachs is committed to making philosophical questions and their discussion come within the grasp of all his audiences. Lachs is a pragmatist in the tradition of William James and Josiah Royce. He was president of the William James Society in 2007.

Dr. Weber: Now, this part is not on his website, but some don't know, it's not on Wikipedia anyway, some don't know John is an award winning poet, and even published a book of poetry as a young man in Canada. I think it was the *Tides of Time*, wasn't it? Uh, well.

Dr. Lachs: Yeah.

Dr. Weber: Yeah. What many do know and should know is that he's an outstanding teacher. He was recognized by, at the, by the Vanderbilt faculty and received The Graduate Teaching Award

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

in 2000, the Outstanding Commitment to Teaching Freshmen Award in 1999, and The Madison Sarratt Prize for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching in 1972. He's also been a mentor to a whole generation of philosophers out there and is one of the key players who helped turn the American Philosophical Association around for the better when it need a lot of, when it needed a lot of change.

Dr. Cashio: John, how are you doing today?

Dr. Lachs: After this introduction, I'm shaken.

[Laughter]

Dr. Cashio: Well, I understand it's all true. Uh, this first section is called "Know Thyself", and so Eric and I wanted to invite you to tell us about yourself, about who you are, about, we really want to know how you got into philosophy. Uh, about what philosophical questions interest you, what drives you, what issues you encounter, uh, in everyday life and work, and um. Tell us about yourself, John!

Dr. Weber: Do you know yourself?

Dr. Lachs: Well, uh sometimes I introduce myself to myself....

Dr. Weber: [Laughter].

Dr. Lachs: ...And, and then wonder, who the hell is this guy anyway?

Dr. Cashio: That's a good way to start the morning

[Laughter]

Dr. Lachs: I was born in Hungary, as you said, and grew up there. Grew right at the time that the world was getting ready for the Second World War. And there was a tremendous amount of mayhem that was being committed, bombing in Hungary, bombings. I don't mean the kind of bombings that we're facing now from "Isis", I mean the kind of bombing where airplanes fly above and drop a lot of bombs on you. And, I saw people die.

Dr. Weber: Wow.

Dr. Lachs: Which naturally raises the question of what is this all about? What is life all about, what is a worthy life? Particularly given the fact that it might be ended at any time right then and there. So, my interest in philosophy did rise from that.

Dr. Weber: Wow.

Dr. Lachs: There is, there is no question in my mind, but that there is meaning to life. But, it's very difficult to discern what that meaning is. There's no question in my mind that, that there's the possibility of happiness in life. But then there's also the reality of death. The nature of which we know, and the implications of which we don't really understand. So, when I went to college, I knew that I wanted to deal with the problems of life and death, mainly death. And, I went around, went to the chemists. Were they interested in these? They weren't interested at all. I went to the sociologists, no they weren't interested. Eventually, I found the philosophers and they say "yeah, you sound like a philosopher".

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

Dr. Cashio: [Laughter].

Dr. Lachs: So, I took that seriously and, started acting like a philosopher and thinking like a philosopher and being a philosopher. That's the brief version of how I got to where I am. It's been a wonderful journey, with full of frustration and full of significance. The frustration comes from the fact that after a while, as a philosopher, you realize that really we don't have clear answers. That we, the one thing we know, the one thing we know is we really don't know all that much. That leads us back of course to Socrates and Plato, and I'm a great admirer of those folks. Although the problem with many philosophers is that they begin by saying, "oh, we don't know", but if you don't watch out, in a matter of no time at all, they'll be telling you all the things they do know. So, you have to be pretty careful, and you have to be pretty skeptical. And, if you're careful and you're skeptical, you may actually get some answers that are not certain, but probable. How probable? Not very, but that's okay because so long as there's another day, we'll keep on thinking about it.

Dr. Cashio: Very good! John, I have a question. You said you started to act like a philosopher, how does a philosopher act?

Dr. Lachs: A philosopher, number one doesn't complain. No, no whining. You know, you try...

Dr. Cashio: Not even about the weather?

Dr. Lachs: Not even about the weather. I spent two hours and fifteen minutes with the eye doctor, and I don't know if I, what I would have done had I not been a philosopher. As a philosopher you say to yourself, let me understand what's behind this. Uh, if you're not a philosopher, you're not that interested in understanding and you explode, which I happily didn't do but was sorely tempted. So, a philosopher acts like somebody who understands himself or herself on the one hand, and on the other hand the circumstances under which we operate.

Dr. Cashio: I need to work on my complaining then, just a little bit.

[Laughter].

Dr. Weber: John, at what age did you move to Canada?

Dr. Lachs: I was fifteen at the time, uh which was back in 1949, 1950.

Dr. Weber: Wow.

Dr. Lachs: A long time ago, man. Uh, philosophers age...

Dr. Weber: Right.

Dr. Lachs: ...so long as they age well, it's alright.

Dr. Cashio: Yeah, age slowly, that the goal.

Dr. Lachs: Age like good wine.

[Laughter].

Dr. Weber: Now you mentioned that you found the philosophers interested in the subject of death, did you find that they had good answers for you?

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

Dr. Lachs: Uh, no...

[Laughter].

Dr. Lachs: Not really, they were struggling with it, and some of them have had experiences that made them believe that the issue of death and also of course a core relative issue of how to lead a good life was really worth spending time on. And, some of them felt that by turning to religion, they were, they would be in a position where, uh they could, they could walk away from it all with a feeling that they knew what they were doing and that it was the right thing. Uh, others were willing to do nothing but complain and complain and at the same time doubt. And, and that's very attractive particularly to a young person. But, there's a limit to how much you can doubt. And there's a limit to the satisfaction of being able to knock down everything that anybody presents to you. So, I had my stint with religion, and I had my stint of knocking things down. In the end, you really have to do it on your own. That doesn't mean that you forget about help from others or from other traditions, but when all is said and done, the important thing is for you to be at peace with yourself and have the sense that, this is as much as I can know now. Tomorrow, I may know a little more, but I'll never know it all.

Dr. Weber: Well, you know, John you know when I met you, my sense was that you were one of the happiest people I think I'd ever seen. And, I think a lot of people have the sense that you're an optimistic guy, that you think well about, you know the long, big picture history, and you have often talked about how there's a lot of progress. Is this something that philosophy taught you or is this something you think you found in thinking philosophically about the world? And, if I'm misinterpreting you, tell me, or do you think that you think differently from then or how would you think about happiness today for you?

Dr. Lachs: I continue to believe that life is such that it's worth living, and that good things will be made available or can be made available by one's self and one's loved ones. Day by day, I'm not optimistic about the ultimate outcome on a personal level, because having just recently lost my wife, I know that death is very real and not something that we can remedy easily or at all. So, one can be, I think it's really important to keep in mind that one can be optimistic and happy in a short-run and quite glum about the ultimate outcome in the long-run.

Dr. Cashio: Enjoy it while you have it.

Dr. Lachs: Not such a bad idea.

Dr. Weber: [Laughter]. Well what would say is the greatest insight from philosophy that you found for trying to be happy?

Dr. Lachs: The greatest insight didn't relate to my happiness, I am by nature somebody who is rather happy. The greatest insight is how immensely different people are, and how amazingly different the things that make them happy. I'll give you one example which is my favorite example. I am so happy teaching students. It's wonderful, they are full of energy, full of life. So many people can't wait to get out of the classroom and get into the administration. Now, if you ever wanted to find something that would make my life not worth living, it would be to make me dean.

[Laughter].

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

Dr. Lachs: At the same time, I readily admit that some people find it absolutely wonderful, and power to them! May they go ahead and pursue their happiness. But, that ain't mine.

Dr. Weber: [Laughter].

Dr. Lachs: So, you know there are people who take the weirdest things, the strangest things, the most incredibly different kinds of things and convert them into the patterns of a life. And, they're happy! And that's really all there is to be said about it, if you, have to step back, and that's what Meddling is all about, you have to step back and quite telling people how they're going to be happy because you don't really know.

Dr. Weber: So, John was talking about one of his latest books, *On Meddling* as a critique of people meddling in others affairs, right?

Dr. Lachs: Yeah, and they do that with so much pleasure.

[Laughter].

Dr. Cashio: Yeah, what do you do when it's meddling in other people's affairs is what gives you joy and happiness?

Dr. Weber: [Laughter]

Dr. Lachs: You know, it's important to a lot of people to tell others what they ought to do, and it's very wonderful that they can do that because they don't bear the consequences!

[Laughter].

Dr. Weber: Well, we have been talking with John Lachs, and we are concluding our segment called Know Thyself. In a few moments, we're going to come back and talk with John about one of his latest books called *Stoic Pragmatism*. We're going to make sure everybody knows what the heck that is, and then we're going to have all kinds of questions for him about, so what does this mean for our lives?

Dr. Weber: Hey, this is Dr. Eric Thomas Weber here live in the studio, and you've been listening to Philosophy Bakes Bread, food for thought about life and leadership, here on WRFL FM. And, I just, I'm taking one quick pause before we jump into the next segment of interviews with Dr. John Lachs, because I want to make sure everybody knows two words in the ways in which we're going to hear them in this upcoming segment with John Lachs. John uses two words, the word essential and the word accidental. And, we use these words in everyday language in certain ways, but in the scholarship that he's talking about, there's an important sense to these words. The word essential is something which means of necessity, like it's always, kind of in your control. For instance, the Stoics, whom he's going to tell us about, think that, you know, your will and your freedom to will this or that is something essentially in your control of necessity, it's in your control. And, contrast that for instance with the accident, the chance that you might happen to have some money, let's say today or tomorrow or something like that. And, it's by chance that this person, when he or she goes to, let's say buys something, it's circumstance, it's luck, it's good fortune that he or she can afford that, and someone else can't afford that. That's what he means by the word "accidental". It isn't that someone's car hit a wall or something, but the word "accident" in the way that you're going to hear it in this upcoming segment is about sort of by chance, not of necessity, you know, they happen to do this, but they

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

can't always do that, for instance. That's what "accidental" means versus "essential". So, without further ado, here's the next segment about what the stoic part of stoic pragmatism means with Dr. John Lachs and my co-host Dr. Anthony Cashio.

Dr. Cashio: Welcome back to Philosophy Bakes Bread, this is Dr. Anthony Cashio and Dr. Eric Weber. We're here talking with Dr. John Lachs. Our topic for today is stoic pragmatism.

Dr. Weber: Our listeners may have heard the word "stoic", many of them may know what that means and the word "pragmatism", and in everyday language they may know what that means, of course. They may hear these words from time to time but there's also sort of, there's both an everyday sense of the word and as well as, you know, a technical meaning to them among philosophers. Can you explain what the words both in everyday language and in any specific or technical senses that you mean them in this book that you've written, *Stoic Pragmatism*?

Dr. Lachs: Stoic, for a starter, stoic, the normal, natural, everyday meaning is very similar to what the traditional and historical meaning of it is. Typically, a person is stoical if he or she is ready to bear pain without complaint. That's really what it boils down to. Life is full of pain, somebody who doesn't, who doesn't allow himself to be swept under by the pains, by the miseries, by the disappointments, by the failures of life. So, the stoics were people in Greece, and mainly in Rome, way back in ancient days, who made a philosophy out of this, made a philosophy out of this because what as Marcus Aurelius, a great emperor, stoic philosopher, said; The important thing in life is to do your duty, to get things done right, to be at peace with yourself, not to expect anything that life cannot give you and will not give you. So, one of, endurance is the message, one of endurance. Make sure that you don't complain, as I indicated earlier that you don't complain. Make sure that life doesn't disappoint you, and the only way you can be sure that life will not disappoint you is to expect nothing!

Dr. Weber: John...

Dr. Lachs: So, yeah?

Dr. Weber: ...would you say that it's easier for an emperor to accept his place in life than for someone impoverished or a slave?

Dr. Lachs: The other great Stoic was a fellow by the name of Epictetus who was a slave

Dr. Weber: [Laughter].

Dr. Lachs: So an emperor and a slave can equally be stoics...

Dr. Weber: Right.

Dr. Lachs: ...and equally will. You know, Epictetus says, for instance, in one place he says: you expect your wife not to die, you expect your, a human being not to be a human being. You expect somebody who is finite not to be finite.

Dr. Weber: Right.

Dr. Lachs: So, when you come right down to it, the stoic says that people who are not stoics are essentially idiots!

Dr. Weber: [Laughter].

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

Dr. Lachs: They're idiots, because they expect something to happen that's never going to happen.

Dr. Cashio: I always enjoy reading Epictetus [Laughter].

Dr. Lachs: I think Epictetus is wonderful!

Dr. Cashio: [inaudible]

Dr. Weber: Well, then I gotta be the devil's advocate here, and...

Dr. Lachs: I hope so.

Dr. Weber: ...well, first of all, it's, I think pretty easy to say that, well it's easy to say that it's not easy to do what you're talking about.

Dr. Lachs: Yeah.

Dr. Weber: This is very far from easy, to sort of not be upset when a loved one passes.

Dr. Lachs: Well, as I said, my wife passed in October, and this is a test of my stoic pragmatism.

Dr. Weber: No kidding.

Dr. Lachs: It's, you are so right Eric in saying that it's one thing to say, oh you should be doing this, you should be feeling thus and so, or you should be not feeling at all!

Dr. Weber: Right.

Dr. Lachs: Which is one version of stoicism. It's one thing to do that, it's another thing to actually be able to accomplish that.

Dr. Weber: Right.

Dr. Lachs: And, not cry and not feel that the meaning of your life is, has fled. So, yeah, it's difficult. But if you do it, there's something you can be proud of. I think there is an absolutely unavoidable element of pride in stoicism. Look at what I can do. Look at how the world, no matter what it heaps on me, cannot defeat me. Stoics, when things went wrong for them, which was often because turbulent times in Rome, people would be executed. The stoic would, at a certain stage, simply kill himself.

Dr. Weber: Wow.

Dr. Lachs: Life is not worth living under these conditions.

Dr. Cashio: Ooh.

Dr. Lachs: Yeah.

Dr. Cashio: So, I mean does stoicism... one critique I hear of stoicism sometimes is that without complaining, without... Is there no reason to struggle, to make your life better or do you just accept whatever lot you have in life? And I mean that at the individual level or at the sort of larger social level. For someone to say, well this is the way politics has played out, I can't do anything about it?

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

Dr. Lachs: It's a question of control. What can I control? Not many things. But there is always one thing that I can control, and I will if I'm a stoic and that is, I'm going to control how I react to things. I'm going to control how I feel about things.

Dr. Cashio: Right.

Dr. Lachs: I'm going to control what I do about things.

Dr. Weber: Right.

Dr. Lachs: Right? And that's all that I'm ever going to be proud of. Am I in control of myself?

Dr. Weber: Right. Well John I want to come back to a point that you know, the notion that what we're talking about is hard is one issue. But there's something of a compassion that appears to be missing if we say, for instance, the person who wishes her child hadn't died is basically stupid for wanting someone to live forever for instance, or wanting someone to not die when they did. And at the same time, as we say it's very hard, you know, I don't know whether in some cases it would be impossible not to grieve, right? Maybe it would be possible to grieve less or to grieve for less time and so forth, but um I see the point that wanting the impossible is perhaps something we might say irrational, but there's more of a judgement in calling something stupid. When we say, for instance, that emotions can overpower us, you know what I mean, when we lose someone we love. You know, what do you think about compassion in relation to stoicism?

Dr. Lachs: Compassion is a way of feeling and a way of being which is useless. Essentially useless. Because, you feel so much pain with a person who is pained. You feel that pain, and what comes out of it? Nothing. Instead of one person being miserable now two people are miserable. Now, what's the value of stoking the fires of unhappiness...

Dr. Weber: Right.

Dr. Lachs: ...because that's what you're doing.

Dr. Weber: You know, well let's say you don't have certain safety precautions in a school playground, and someone had a child get in injury. You're compassion might motivate you to go ahead and sign that petition to put a little money into safety standards and so on. And to agree to limit your own liberty to do X, Y, and Z which is dangerous, so that, you know, your own child doesn't die too in that way. You know, arguably this is getting back to Anthony's question which is something related to, kind of, advocacy in a way. You know, complaining is how we make the world change.

Dr. Lachs: Well, that's one way to make the world change, but it's more likely to be something that makes you feel better. I'm a little suspicious about making myself feel better unless I achieve something thereby. What good am I doing by having empathy? There's a recent book by the way which I just started reading called *Against Empathy*, and I take it that it's a stoic line. Here is the possibility of doing something rationally. You don't need any empathy for that, just do the rational thing. So in the case of the child who gets hurt on the playground, it doesn't take empathy to sign the petition, it takes sensible reason. Because, reason will tell you that these obstacles on the playground, or these potential disasters on the playground should be eliminated. You can do that without dripping with empathy.

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

Dr. Cashio: So we should try to improve our lot instead of just saying, well we'll go about the playground example, we don't look at the playground and go well that's just the way it is, I can't do anything about it so move on, or do we recognize that I can try to improve a playground and do the best I can, hopefully it works. So, I mean, we do try to improve our lot in life and the lot of others.

Dr. Lachs: You have to be careful because for the stoic, what improvement means is different than what means to us.

Dr. Cashio: Ah! Okay.

Dr. Lachs: Improvement for the stoic is acting more and more rationally, less and less emotionally. So, what you've got in effect is the possibility of being in control of yourself and acting in accordance with natural laws. The stoics believe greatly in natural laws. So, how do you do that? Well, by not wanting, by not even ever desiring to violate the order of nature. There's some things that we can help, but those relate essentially to us. And, all the rest, the stoic draws, Epictetus in his book draws the first thing, the first distinction, which is, what is it that you're going want to do? Separate the things you want to do into two different categories. One category, the things that you're in charge of and can always do, the other one the things that you cannot do anything about. So, for instance, the kind of reputation that you have is absolutely not in your power, and nothing you can do will assure you that your reputation will be what you want it to be.

Dr. Cashio: Right.

Dr. Lachs: It's not up to you. So, Epictetus says always distinguish that which is up to you from that which is not up to you, and most of the things in the world are not up to us. A few are.

Dr. Weber: It's an interesting example, John, because if you think about it, big companies that have budgets for it spend an awful lot of money on their reputations. In fact, think about why British Petroleum's symbol is a green symbol, there's a reason why people spend a lot of money. And, in fact, when the oil spill happened in the gulf, they put billions of dollars very quickly, because it was in their control to try and help, and that would help, one of the reasons to do it is to help their reputation.

Dr. Lachs: Right.

Dr. Weber: I'm not saying they control fully how people are going to think about them, but do you not have an effect on people, on how people might think? It seems that you can have some effect on how people think of you. If you want them to think you are nice, well first of all, be nice to them. You know, those kinds of things.

Dr. Lachs: Sure, that's right. But you got to distinguish those things which are in our power essentially and those things that are in our powers accidentally. That accidentally or, BP, British Petroleum had all that money and that somebody decided that they would spend that money on, in the gulf.

Dr. Weber: Right, to clean up.

Dr. Lachs: That was all accidental. A whole lot of people do a lot of harm, and they are not in a position to make good.

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

Dr. Weber: I see.

Dr. Lachs: Because, that's not essentially in their power. There's one thing that's essentially in your power, namely, how you got to feel about it.

Dr. Weber: Mhm.

Dr. Lachs: That's in your power. Well what about how am I going to act about it? Well, even action, because it involves the body, is not for sure. Not sure that you can control that.

Dr. Weber: You know, at best maybe you can will to do the right act.

Dr. Lachs: You can will to do the right act, very, very nice point. We can will to do the right act, but don't expect results.

Dr. Cashio: [Laughter]

Dr. Weber: This is an important spot right here to stop. We're going to come back because we've only really focused on stoicism, and naturally we have two segments to talk about, you know John's book, so if it's about stoic pragmatism it seems like we may, maybe should talk a little bit about pragmatism. Right when we come back, thanks for listening to Philosophy Bakes Bread on WRFL Lexington 88.1. We'll be right back.

Dr. Weber: And, just as a little reminder, folks the word accidental as Dr. Lachs was using it there kind of means by chance, so BP might have some money to throw at its reputation to try and sort of address issues of the oil spill, but just Joe over here who happened to do some damage may not have the money that BP has, and so it's by chance that, you know, one person or group or company can do these things with respect to its reputation, not essentially something in its power to control in the case that Dr. Lachs was talking about one's reputation. So, we'll be back in just one moment with, after an announcement.

Announcement: Who listens to the radio anymore? We do! WFRL Lexington.

Dr. Weber: Now, before we jump back into our before last segment with Dr. Lachs, I want to mention one more thing, which is that, and Dr. Lachs is going to bring it up in this prerecorded segment to come, Dr. Lachs is an example of one of the many fantastic and amazing immigrants who have come to the United States and made our lives better. Dr. Lachs has been teaching people and helping people at Vanderbilt University for about fifty years, so he will bring that up in just a moment. Here is our last segment. Just a moment ago we heard about the stoic in stoic pragmatism, now we're going to hear about the pragmatism in stoic pragmatism.

Dr. Cashio: You're listening to Philosophy Bakes Bread, this is Dr. Anthony Cashio and Dr. Eric Weber speaking with our guest Dr. John Lachs! And we've been discussing stoic pragmatism, though John, in the last section we talked a lot more about stoicism than pragmatism, so I was wondering if you may say a few words on the pragmatic side of the stoic pragmatism.

Dr. Lachs: Well, the normal meaning, everyday meaning of pragmatism is somebody is pragmatic that means he is ready to compromise. And, that's not the sense of pragmatism as we have it in philosophy. Well, what is pragmatism? You know, I came to this country as the best thing I've ever done. I came to this country in order to improve my life. I indicated that I survived the Second World War bombings and misery, and I looked for a way in which I could

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

improve myself, improve my life, make something happen that is good. Coming to this country was that. And, pragmatism in that sense is the very essence, the very heart, of what I wanted to achieve. It's the very center of success, but not success necessarily as others measure it but success in the way in which you can pursue your dream and maybe even attain a good part of it. So, I would say that pragmatism is essentially, I watch that word essentially, really really what pragmatism is all about is the application of human intelligence to make life better.

Dr. Cashio: I like that definition.

Dr. Lachs: The application of human intelligence. Sometimes we get lucky, and things fall out our way even though we try to get in the way and not make it happen, but for the most part, there's nothing more delicious in the world than having some plans and having the wherewithal to attain those plans.

Dr. Weber: [Laughter].

Dr. Lachs: Absolutely wonderful thing. So, pragmatism is just that, in the philosophical sense. It's just the ability to say to yourself and to your friends and to your loved ones and everybody that cares for you, let's go and get this done, because it will make life better for all of us. That's pragmatism.

Dr. Weber: So, John let's contrast that with a different, what is a contrasting philosophical view? Would it be something like Romanticism or idealism?

Dr. Lachs: Well, of course some of it is a kind of wide eyed idealism, when you want to be sure that you get something done and you don't get around to doing it...

Dr. Weber: [Laughter].

Dr. Lachs: ...or you choose purposes that are completely beyond your ability to attain, that's one contrast. The other contrast is stoicism...

Dr. Weber: Okay.

Dr. Lachs: ...because the stoic is not interested in making life better in some significant small, worldly way, they're interested in proving their self-control, and the pragmatist is interested in not improving self-control nearly as much as improving control over the world.

Dr. Weber: Right

Dr. Cashio: So, how do you bring the two together?

Dr. Lachs: Ah, that's the key. Well here's the way I see them together. The daily activity in which I engage is pragmatic, because I think that if I'm smart and do the right thing and I'm an effective kind of person, I should be able to make my life a notch or two better every month, every week, maybe every day. Small ways. Larger ways occasionally when the occasion arises, that's wonderful...

Dr. Cashio: [Laughter].

Dr. Lachs: ...but that's the pragmatic side. However, it's not long before you'd reach the limits of your ability. You know? And, when you reach the limits of your ability, you better let go, because complaining and carrying on and being unhappy about things that are inevitable will not

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

do you or anybody else any good. I think the way cancer is treated is very much like that. When you first develop cancer, I'm going once again from my wife who died of cancer, and when you first develop cancer, you throw everything you've got at it. New medications. No matter how sick it makes you, it doesn't matter, because life, sustained life is on the horizon. That's pragmatic. Then at some point, the cancer returns and there's nothing that you can throw at it anymore, and that's when stoicism comes in.

Dr. Cashio: So are you maybe, almost a pragmatic use of stoicism?

Dr. Lachs: A pragmatic use of stoicism, and a stoic use of pragmatism.

Dr. Cashio: Yeah, I like it.

Dr. Weber: Well John, I remember one of the most fascinating things I learned from Aristotle was the fact that he would deny any sense that, sort of you know this every day, "Oh how you feeling, have you been, you know how's your"? Old friends meeting each other and asking each other how you're doing. "You know, yeah I've been happy with the new circumstances and so forth", you know this every day sense of happy. Like feeling good on the everyday is not what Aristotle meant when he referred to happiness, at least in the translation that we make of it, my understanding of it. What I thought was so fascinating was that he saw happiness as a matter that should really be understood in terms of a person's whole life.

Dr. Lachs: That's right. Go ahead.

Dr. Weber: Given that, my question is, does this ultimately suggest perhaps that, you know we shouldn't be too optimistic about being happy over our lives?

Dr. Lachs: It's very unusual to be happy throughout in one's entire life. In the case of my wife and myself, we had forty-nine years in which we were very happy with each other. But, there is an end to it.

Dr. Weber: Right.

Dr. Lachs: And then, what I face myself trying to understand is what use, of what use would it be for me to complain and bemoan the fact that the forty-nine years are gone, and it's not fifty years? It's completely useless, it's pointless. It makes your life miserable, because of what you yourself impose on yourself. So at some point, you've got to say pragmatism is the right attitude, but we suspend the pragmatic search for an answer or for improvement.

Dr. Weber: When we get to the limits of what's possible, is that what you mean?

Dr. Lachs: When we get to the limits of what's possible and what's sensible.

Dr. Weber: Well, one of the points that came up in the prior segment had to do a little bit with advocacy and activism. You know, there's the famous saying that you should be able to accept the things you cannot change? Well, activists out there say, you know I don't want to accept the things I can't change, I want to change the things I can't accept!

Dr. Lachs: [Laughter].

Dr. Weber: That if you're going to make change happen, you know we had a prior episode with Bill Myers, and he was talking about how if it weren't for philosophy questioning authority, you

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

know women wouldn't be able to get an education and to have jobs. You know, African Americans would still be enslaved, you know and so forth. And, it takes these, sort of you know, persons with fervor with, you know wanting to change things that they can't change in their lifetimes.

Dr. Cashio: Your gadflies.

Dr. Weber: Yeah, or you know those are the gadflies would do that, the philosophers, right? You know, and you know would we have had the progress we've had with a lot of stoic pragmatism? With a lot of stoic pragmatists?

Dr. Lachs: The pragmatism would have given you progress, the stoicism wouldn't have. But, you know, suppose some divine revelation said to you as an activist, you'll spend your entire life trying to do this, and it will not happen. How would you feel about it? Because, that's how most of us when we want to be not finite, but infinite in our power, this is how most of us feel. It's got to be alright, we're on the verge of a breakthrough, and then everything goes kerplunk. So, the question is do you, are activists more happy?

[Laughter].

Dr. Lachs: Are they more satisfied with life? Would they be happy and satisfied with life if they understood that their cause will not prevail?

Dr. Cashio: But, if they didn't believe their cause would prevail, I mean [laughter] they would give up on the activism and then nothing would improve.

Dr. Lachs: Well, improvement happens over a long period of time. It's not something that improves because, or primarily because people advocate.

Dr. Weber: Right.

Dr. Cashio: Hmm.

Dr. Lachs: It becomes a matter of economic circumstance or historical development. There are all kinds of reasons and all sorts of factors that contribute other than or in addition to the kind of activism that people engage in. I'm not against activism...

Dr. Weber: Right.

Dr. Lachs: ...I just think that activism is almost a certain way of being dissatisfied with your life.

Dr. Cashio: Right.

Dr. Weber: [Laughter]. Well, John here's the thing, you know all three of us are men, and we're white and we're very fortunate to do the things we get to do, and largely I feel pretty darn happy. At the same time, the society which enables my life is one in which, you know an African American man is six times more likely to go to prison in his lifetime than I am or than my son is. You know, my happiness, I need to remember is you know partly either made possible by or condoning or what have you, circumstances that trouble me. That it seems like other people should be able to have the kind of opportunities for happiness that I have, and you know, if I feel

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

happy about my circumstances, maybe it's just that I'm letting myself be blissfully ignorant, you know of the suffering of others. That's the kind of worry I have.

Dr. Lachs: Yeah, but the trouble is that leads you to all sorts of feelings that are very bad. You feel guilty. I've experienced this with a student who died young, and I said to myself, my god I would, readily would have given up my life because I've lived long enough and I didn't have a chance to because I didn't have that disease and my having it would not have relieved him of it. So, so what does it, what good does it do when you feel guilty about things?

Dr. Cashio: Hmm.

Dr. Lachs: I submit to you that it doesn't do any good at all. Now, does that mean that we should let things go? No of course we shouldn't let things go. We're supposed to do and we need to do, and I strongly urge us to do some protesting.

Dr. Weber: Okay.

Dr. Lachs: But, but not convert life into a life of protest.

Dr. Weber: I see. So in other words, you know one of the ways I'm interpreting what you've said, and tell me if you think I should be thinking differently, it isn't so much that we oughtn't be advocates, it's that we've got to be careful about you know emotion taking us away, and it should be our cool reason focused on what we can do ourselves and accepting the things that are beyond our control, but that doesn't mean you know avoidance of advocacy wholly, it just means its method, you know and motivation should be cool headed...

Dr. Lachs: And limits.

Dr. Weber: ...and within limits, okay.

Dr. Lachs: Yeah. No, that's very well said by you, Eric. Limits. Limits are crucial. And you know, at some point you've got to be able to say to yourself, one of my other lines, and that is what you have done is good enough. We have this sense that nothing we do is good enough, because there is always more to be done. Josiah Royce, a wonderful American philosopher took the attitude that every wrong must be righted, and everybody who can do anything about it ought to do it. And, that is almost certain to create more unhappiness and more misery in the world than you can imagine. At some point, we need to be able to say, I've done it, I have done what I can do, and that was good enough.

Dr. Weber: Well, you heard it folks, you're listening to Philosophy Bakes Bread on WRFL Lexington, we're going to come back for one more segment with the wonderful John Lachs of Vanderbilt University, thanks for listening!

Dr. Weber: You're listening, folks to WRFL Lexington 88. 1 FM all the way to left. This is now the last segment for Philosophy Bakes Bread here with Dr. Eric Thomas Weber and my cohost Dr. Anthony Cashio talking with Dr. John Lachs here on episode five.

Dr. Cashio: Welcome back to Philosophy Bakes Bread. We've been talking with Dr. John Lachs and now have some final big picture questions as well as some lighthearted thoughts. We'll end with a pressing philosophical question for our listeners as well as info about how to get ahold of us with your comments, questions, or criticisms.

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

Dr. Weber: Well, thank you so much for talking with us, John. We've been learning about stoic pragmatism and how to think about this, this more complex, perhaps version of stoicism and of pragmatism and how to think about, for instance you know advocacy for what's better as a day to day activity, but within the bounds of reason, you know and not letting our emotions get, you know, get away with us and take control of us too much. Well, in this last segment I want to ask you sort of big picture questions. The first one is, what do you think are big takeaways that you think we can tell people about this theory of stoic pragmatism to help them, you know make their lives better? And then I want to ask you, just sort of the big picture question about our show about how you think about philosophy baking bread?

Dr. Lachs: Okay, so first how to... Well, let me talk about how to make philosophy your friend.

Dr. Cashio: That's good.

Dr. Lachs: And then I'll come back to the other question. You know, some people have a natural sense of measure in their lives. They do things. They do them to a certain extent, and then they let go of them. This is, this used to be called rationality. It's reason. It's the way in which sensible people operate. That means we begin by accepting our finitude. What I mean by finitude is that there are limits to everything we do, there are limits to how we are, there are limits to how long we live. We are, we need to be comfortable within those limits. Without being comfortable, without those limits, we're going to be very unhappy in life. Philosophy helps in making us feel comfortable within our limits, because we understand what the limits are, and that's okay. It's alright that there are limits. So, I think that's that is how I use philosophy.

Dr. Weber: John so this show as you know is named Philosophy Bakes Bread after the old saying which jokes that, no philosophy doesn't bake bread, philosophy bakes no bread. And, you know as well as I do that a lot of people have that latter attitude and don't think that philosophy bakes bread. And, so my question is what do you say to such people when they don't think that philosophy is practical?

Dr. Lachs: It would be more convincing to me if they show that they had tried to see the work of philosophy, the usefulness of philosophy, the benefits of philosophy and they somehow found none. I think there might be people like that. There are also people who don't like to think, and there are people who don't like to control themselves.

Dr. Weber: [Laughter].

Dr. Cashio: Hmm.

Dr. Lachs: All sorts of people in the world and for them, philosophy bakes nothing. But then, a whole lot of other things like reason and good sense and common sense also don't bake anything. Philosophy bakes bread, it makes for lives that are so much better than the lives that so many people are willing to settle for.

Dr. Weber: Hmm. How would you suppose it does so?

Dr. Lachs: By making us understand the motivations of people. By making us understand the importance of context. By making us understand the vast importance of knowing when to say, enough.

Dr. Cashio: Hmm.

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

Dr. Lachs: Knowing when to accept what our fate is. I think, I think it's pretty clear that there's not, that we can't do everything, just cannot. But, how much we can do is a matter of trying against the limits, and you try against the limits, and that's your practical side, that's your philosophical Americanism. And then, after things don't work and there's no hope of making them work, maybe even cheerfully accepting the limits and saying, "I've done enough. Good enough".

Dr. Cashio: Yeah. Good enough.

Dr. Weber: Well, thank you John. Everybody, if you haven't seen it or read it yet, you should. It is something worth checking out, it's *Stoic Pragmatism*. It's something you can find in any number of book sellers online, for sure. And, hopefully at your local places as well, but look it up. And, thank you so much, John for telling us about some of the sort of deeper aspects of thinking about our limits as well as, you know how...

Dr. Cashio: Yes, thank you!

Dr. Weber: ...to keep the right attitude and so on when we are trying to make our lives better. We have a, as we said we have a lighter side of philosophy that we want to show and share also with people, so we include in each episode a segment called "Philosofunnies".

Dr. Cashio: You know we need to get a segment theme that starts there, music [laughter].

Dr. Weber: We need some music, or maybe some laughter or something, I don't know what.

Dr. Lachs: [Laughter].

Dr. Weber: Maybe we can get one of our children to say "philosofunnies" for us.

Dr. Cashio: That would be good.

[Laughter].

Dr. Weber: But, you know I invite you to tell us if you have anything, any funny story or anything about philosophy or any jokes that you want to tell us about philosophy or we can offer ours that we looked up and stole from others.

Dr. Lachs: [Laughter].

Dr. Weber: Do you have any funny jokes or anything like that John? Any funny stories about philosophy?

Dr. Lachs: No, not really. My problem with jokes is that I really enjoy them and then forget them!

[Laughter].

Dr. Weber: Well no problem, Anthony and I have a couple we'll offer you and if they're not good, we'll be blamed.

[Laughter].

Dr. Weber: Anthony, have you got one for us about stoicism?

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

Dr. Cashio: Hey Eric.

Dr. Weber: Yo!

Dr. Cashio: What did the stoic sage say about email security?

Dr. Weber: I don't know, what did the stoic sage say about email security?

Dr. Cashio: Beware of attachments.

[Laughter].

Dr. Cashio: So bad.

Dr. Weber: A couple of weeks after hearing a sermon on knowing my own hidden secrets and lies and deceit, a man wrote the following letter to the IRS. I've been unable to sleep knowing that I've cheated on my income taxes, I understated my taxable income, I've enclosed a check for a hundred and fifty dollars. If I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest.

[Laughter].

Dr. Weber: Some of these are, these last two are all...

Dr. Cashio: I'll be the interviewer.

Dr. Weber: ...Yeah, you go ahead.

Dr. Cashio: Alright, Eric what's your greatest weakness?

Dr. Weber: Hmm, answering the semantics of a question but ignoring the pragmatics.

Dr. Cashio: Interesting, could you give me an example?

Dr. Weber: Yes I could.

[Laughter].

Dr. Weber: Okay, that one's a pretty nerdy joke but I was looking for a pragmatics and semantics kind of joke. Maybe we need a rim shot.

Dr. Cashio: Yeah.

[Rimshot and laughter].

Dr. Weber: We never promised that these were good jokes, we just said that they are jokes.

Dr. Lachs: [Laughter].

Dr. Weber: And empirically, they are efforts anyways to be funny.

Dr. Cashio: I'll tell you Eric, one thing I've noticed about pragmatists is they always have a great sense of humor, I think that maybe is a...

Dr. Weber: I think that's true!

Dr. Cashio: ...I think that's interesting about a pragmatist.

Dr. Weber: I think that's true, that's been my experience as well.

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

Dr. Lachs: Yeah!

Dr. Weber: So, we have one more segment called, “You Tell Me”. You take it away, Anthony.

Dr. Cashio: Last but not least, we want to take advantage of the fact that today we have powerful social media that allow two-way communication, even for programs like radio shows. So, we want to invite our listeners to send us their thoughts about big questions that we may raise on the show. We raised a lot of them today.

Dr. Weber: Indeed! Well given that, we would love to hear your thoughts John about what question or questions we should ask everyone for our segment called, “You Tell Me”. Have you got a question that you’d propose for our listeners?

Dr. Lachs: I would say something like, what is the greatest obstacle you perceive to your happiness? It’s really difficult for people to identify the obstacle accurately, because what I have in mind is that, most people will say that, well if I had more money.

Dr. Weber: Right.

Dr. Lachs: But then, consider what happens to people who win the lottery.

Dr. Weber: Right.

Dr. Lachs: They lose all their money, they waste it. Then people will say, well maybe it wasn’t money after all. Well, what is it? I think reflecting on what it is that would make you happy if only you had it is a wonderful way to begin philosophizing.

Dr. Weber: You heard it folks, there’s a great question for us, we want you to send us your thoughts, comments, questions, and of course your compliments, and we’re going to tell you in just a second about how to get ahold of us.

Dr. Cashio: Thanks for listening to Philosophy Bakes Bread: food for thought about life and leadership! Your host Dr. Anthony Cashio and Dr. Eric Weber are so grateful to have been joined today by Dr. John Lachs, and we hope you listeners will join us again! Consider sending us your thoughts about anything you’ve heard on today, that you’d like to hear about in the future or about specific questions we raised for you. What objects get in the way of your happiness?

Dr. Weber: Indeed! Once again, you can reach us in a number of ways. We’re on Twitter @Philosophybb, which stands for Philosophy Bakes Bread. We’re also on Facebook @PhilosophyBakesBread. Check out Sophia’s Facebook page while you’re there, @PhilosophersInAmerica, and you can of course email us...

Dr. Cashio: At philosophybakesbread@gmail.com and you can also call us and leave a short recorded message with a question or comment we may be able to play on the show at 859-257-1849. That’s 859-257-1849. Join us again next time on Philosophy Bakes Bread: food for thought about life and leadership!

[Outro Music].

Announcer: Hey there! If you’re enjoying this podcast from WRFL Lexington, you may enjoy our live radio stream at wrfl.fm and of course via radio at 88.1 FM in the central Kentucky area! We have a wide variety of programs you are sure to enjoy, just go to wrfl.fm/schedule, and see

Philosophy Bakes Bread, Episode Five with Dr. John Lachs

what programs appeal most to you! Thanks again for listening to this podcast from WRFL Lexington!