



*Human Goodness: Pragmatic Variations on
Platonic Themes* by Paul Schollmeier

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This is a book about spirits—human, godly, ghostly, and alcoholic. Paul Schollmeier's *Human Goodness: Pragmatic Variations on Platonic Themes* explores how humble humans act morally in an absurd world. Schollmeier contends that the Socratic spirit, or *daimon*, of self-knowledge and hypothesis testing provides the foundation for a deeply human moral philosophy. It is, in Schollmeier's elegant phrasing, *daimonic* rather than *eudaimonic*, joining Aristotle and Plato with William James, as well as contributions from the ghosts of David Hume and Immanuel Kant and a few rounds of whiskey. Spirits abound! Mixing Socratic skepticism with Jamesian empiricism, Schollmeier argues that we act best when we apply general principles held as opinion (not as certain knowledge), and tested through experience, to our particular situation. When these opinions yield fruit, we find ourselves less at the whim of our capricious surroundings; when they do not, we are obliged to recognize the provisional nature of our opinions and change them. The ends of these day-to-day activities reflect a far grander cosmological order, one we ignore to our mortal (and moral) peril. It is by engaging in this intellectual activity that we are made happy, and it is in measured pursuit of this happiness that we are virtuous. Our actions are neither absolutely true nor perfect. They are instead *the best that we can do*. And for a reviewer attempting to encapsulate a finely nuanced book in a small space, this is comforting advice indeed.

The book begins with a puzzle: the curious twin claims in Plato's *Apology* that, true to the Delphic oracle's proclamation, Socrates is both wise and knows nothing. The key to this apparent paradox, Schollmeier contends, is the difference between divine knowledge, "ultimate, nonhypothetical knowledge of final causes" (6), and human knowledge, which is hypothetical only. Schollmeier marshals William James to argue that as humans, we encounter objects of knowledge perceptually; even our concepts are fashioned from this meager material. Without access to divine knowledge, humans must test hypotheses and assume that they are true only provisionally.

James's (and Hume's) emphasis on the passions as the foundation for action, however, gives Schollmeier pause. In order to construct a moral philosophy that avoids absolutism but remains objective, Schollmeier argues for a harmony between the intellectual and the passionate that is ultimately rational, our Socratic *daimon*. We are neither gods nor animals. Should we surrender rationality to desire, Schollmeier warns in concert with Socrates, our already fragile perceptual knowledge will be further distorted by fickle emotion. It is precisely because our grasp on the world is so tenuous that we must pay heed to cool intellect rather than hot passion.

Such skepticism of our claim to know might make one hesitant to engage in the enigmatic world—but we have no choice! In order to find our hybrid *daimon*, both Socratic and pragmatic, Schollmeier suggests rhetoric as the methodology best suited to serving practical knowledge because it eschews certainty in favor of probability and acknowledges that the hypotheses on which we act are tentative and revisable. To this end, Schollmeier highlights the enthymeme and argument by example as the two techniques that best suit the nature of our hypothetical knowledge, and he urges a return to *philodoxo*, the love of opinion.

Giving up our claim to certainty need not be a dismal proposition. Having established his methodology, Schollmeier begins building a moral philosophy that embraces an ontology of change and contends that our happiness provides us with stability in the form of a rational teleology. The objects of our human happiness are fleeting and changeable, so happiness cannot be static but is, rather, an activity that is its own end, "an activity that is an intellectual inquiry" (78). Our happiness is contingent on our ability to hypothetically determine, in our particular setting, our function and then fulfill this role to the best of our abilities. Depending on the setting, it may be dancing, parenting, or simply a lively conversation.

This concept of happiness as rational teleology is essential to our moral freedoms and imperatives. Schollmeier contends that our freedom is simply the ability to pursue our happiness, “the power to engage in a rational activity for its own sake, undertaking said activity with full knowledge of ourselves and our circumstances without hindrance from any internal or external constraints” (133). Of course, absolute freedom is for humans as impossible as absolute knowledge. Thus, “we can be more or less free as our hypothesis is more or less true” (136).

Our equally approximate imperative is to act in pursuit of this happiness. Schollmeier agrees with Kant that we are rational beings who exist as ends in themselves. We hypothesize about what form defines who we are, “the final cause that inspires our action,” and hypothesize how to attain our end, “the efficient cause to initiate our action” (164). The particular actions one is obliged to take, however, depend on the situation: Schollmeier is too pragmatic and too Greek to advocate absolute laws. He strikes a precarious balance between absolutism and skepticism, suggesting that we are “mortal sprites, one might say, who are most moral when we perform actions that we presume to be felicitous. We are merely rational animals, whose imperatives, which are general and contingent, need not be inharmonious with our nature, which is equally contingent and particular” (178). The alternative to this humble lot is a crisis of spirit: left without inspiration to pursue happiness, one is sentenced to chase fleeting objects of desire dancing on the flickering television.

In perhaps the most thought-provoking and poetically arresting chapter, Schollmeier explains how our love of order and hypotheses about our own ends raise “a question of cosmology.” Drawing from Plato’s *Timaeus* as well as an array of scientific theory ranging from Stephen Hawking to Daniel Dennett, Schollmeier populates the cosmos with gods. If there is a human *daimon* that imparts order and encourages our self-knowledge, why can there not be other spirits as well? We are surrounded, he argues, by organisms and increasingly expansive systems that are guided by their own particular end but which also constitute “a whole that can maintain itself” (231). We exist, in other words, in a living (or at least lifelike) and ordered multiverse of which we may have only provisional knowledge. Schollmeier’s moral philosophy thus contains an environmental ethic that encourages humans to investigate these orders and yet cautions us against the hubris of tampering with such orders for our own necessarily shortsighted ends.

The attentive reader may find him- or herself asking at this point how it is that we could possibly be virtuous if our knowledge rests on such

shifting sands. Drawing primarily from Plato's *Phaedrus* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Schollmeier paints a picture of virtue that is measured proportional to the given situation and our constantly evolving self-knowledge. Virtue is a product of our "remembered or imagined selves and their situations with our present self and its situation" (256). We are virtuous when we enlarge our consciousness and see happiness not only in the context of our individual ends but also in that of our ecosystem, the whole in which we are but a part.

A careful scholar, Schollmeier takes great pains to do justice to his source material. He is quick to alert the reader to rough spots in the philosophical marriage (most charmingly with Kant and Hume appearing in ghostly form) as well as debates between contemporary philosophers. Schollmeier uses these moments to add nuance to his argument, and his explanations benefit readers who may be only roughly familiar with certain Platonic dialogues or particular works by Aristotle, Kant, Hume, or James. Borrowing pieces while rejecting others, Schollmeier offers a perspective with an illustrious lineage, yet which is itself unique.

Readers who share Humean or Jamesian sympathies regarding the primacy of the passions, however, may find such subordination of the emotions to be problematic. Schollmeier speaks of passion's positive role all too briefly and its negative role too often. I may, however, hazard a guess at Schollmeier's answer by briefly visiting a notoriously enigmatic claim made in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle suggests that the good person's existence is desirable because "of his perceiving himself, that self being good; and such perceiving is pleasant in itself" (1170b10).¹ On its face, this passage seems a narcissistic nightmare. However, taking Schollmeier at his word, perhaps this is affirmation of the positive role of desire in an essentially empirical and rational activity. Our happiness, in other words, is the pleasure we take in consciously fulfilling our function to the best of our ability, in perceiving ourselves being good. This is "right desire," the organic unity of intellect and emotion that characterizes our happiness. We need not deny the potent emotional content of happiness to also affirm that it is the product of our rationality.

Perhaps we need go no further in our search for harmony between intellect and emotion than the book's conclusion. Here Schollmeier eschews a traditional summary in favor of a dialogue, cheekily titled "A Symposium." The author, newly returned from sabbatical, chats with a colleague about the messiness of the human condition over a few (and perhaps a few too many) drinks. The dialogue gives concrete form to the otherwise

abstract concept of happiness as an intellectual activity that is its own end. As the two friends volley ideas back and forth, joined occasionally by the bartender (an expert on the human condition if ever there were one!), Schollmeier captures the oft-forgotten joy inherent in thinking and being with one another—a happiness perhaps more easily found after sabbatical. With the Socratic *daimon* at heart and spirits in hand, these jolly interlocutors explore how we have the courage to act in a fickle world.

Human Goodness is invaluable to both moral philosophers and rhetoricians interested in the epistemological and ontological status of opinion. Rhetoricians should take note, however, that because Schollmeier uses rhetoric as a methodology, his deployment of the term is carefully limited. Yet one of the greatest strengths of the book is that Schollmeier's reconciliation of philosophy and philodoxy pushes back against the tendency to consider opinion merely "second-class" knowledge and invites further consideration of the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric. Schollmeier's sprightly prose both illuminates the discussion at hand and delights the reader. Even readers skeptical of either the primacy of rationality or the contingency of human knowledge will find in Schollmeier a thought-provoking and amiable discussion partner. Perhaps this is the best proof of the hypothesis driving *Human Goodness*: engaging in this challenging intellectual conversation, both with author and with one's self, is a felicitous activity indeed.

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NOTE

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Sarah Broadie, trans. Christopher Rowe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).