



Project
MUSE[®]

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

and in the school room for the use of students who should profit especially from its copious annotations, as well as in the library of general readers who wish to understand the meaning of Emerson in his historical context. The Edwin Mellen Press should be commended for good service to Callaway and Emerson—having produced a handsome book with a daguerreotype of the elder Emerson on a pale blue cover.

Richard A. S. Hall

Fayetteville State University

Human Goodness: Pragmatic Variations on Platonic Themes

Paul Schollmeier. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

John Dewey's favorite philosopher is Plato. In one of his few autobiographical accounts, *From Absolutism to Experimentalism*, he states,

Nothing could be more helpful to present philosophizing than a "Back to Plato" movement; but it would have to be back to the dramatic, restless, cooperatively inquiring Plato of the *Dialogues*, trying one mode of attack after another to see what it might yield; back to the Plato whose highest flight of metaphysics always terminated with a social and practical turn, and not to the artificial Plato constructed by unimaginative commentators who treat him as the original university professor. (Dewey 5:155)¹

To the student of American pragmatism or, for that matter, classical Greek philosophy, the affinity might not be immediately apparent, for it is the contrasts rather than the similarities between the two that customarily stand in relief. Although the differences cannot be denied, the affinities exist as well. Perhaps one such semblance might be the emphasis upon dialogue and its role in a community of inquiry. Learning often occurs when one takes on the point of view of one's interlocutor, which is, of course, the value and advantage of pluralism. It is precisely such a deeper discernment that Schollmeier is striving for as he promotes an exchange between philosophers with millennia of interpretation between them. He clearly has an appreciation for both, which enables him to uncover unexpected divergence and surprising congruence.

Schollmeier's first pragmatic variation on a Platonic theme (this book is a series of riffs that take their cue from Plato) is an epistemological one, with a brief foray into ontology. From an analysis of Socratic ignorance, the

reader is quickly propelled into the distinction between divine and human knowledge where “know thyself” is tantamount to the idea that we are “apt to err,” and the “unexamined life” is equated with “foolish confidence.” To say that we know humanly rather than divinely is to acknowledge that we know our world and ourselves by way of hypothesis. This assertion, of course, pulls one into the orbit of William James’ radical empiricism, which the author allows to inform particular shortcomings in the Platonic notion of opinion. James explains how objects of becoming, which are fleetingly arising and falling away in perception, can be known. While they clearly contend on the concept of knowledge, the Jamesian concept of knowledge approximates the Platonic concept of opinion. As Schollmeier attempts to flesh out this insight, he reveals his annoyance with the embodied character of human experience, including the inherent roles of the emotions and nostalgia for the objective, if not absolute, perspective that will irritate the students of pragmatism. Nonetheless, Schollmeier asserts that, given our inaccessibility to the divine point of view, the pragmatic stance proves to possess merit.

If access to absolute truth is denied, how will we then know the good? How shall we then live? Here in the second chapter, Schollmeier’s riff starts with William James but quickly returns to Plato. The experimental method of the pragmatists is tantamount to the rhetorical method of the ancient Greeks: same structure, same ontology—from particulars to generalities to other particulars. This method, asserts Schollmeier, can provide an objective foundation for ethics, or at least as much as we—given our limitations in intellectual ability, moral habit, and emotional states—are likely to obtain. What passes for truth in the pragmatic method, according to Schollmeier, is quite similar to what Plato calls informed opinion. More importantly, it is enough to supply an objective yet empirical foundation for morality, although Schollmeier disputes the importance James places upon the emotions. The ancient art of rhetoric appeals to objective opinions (arising from intellect) rather than haphazard ones (generated by the passions). It is in this chapter that the role of hypothesis comes to the fore; it persists throughout the book as the key concept. There seems to be sufficient stability in our cognition and perception to assert practical hypotheses as moral principles—so long as we manage to keep our emotions in check—adequate to determine objectively our conduct and develop our character. But we must give up the dream of being philosophers and admit that we are but philodoxers.

Schollmeier plays a riff on the classical Greek notion of *eudaimonia*, which he translates and interprets as happiness in the next chapter. It is clear at the outset that he seeks a *raison d’être* for humanity that is not mercurial,

which is no easy task given the tentative character of knowledge. He settles for what he sees as a reasonable hypothesis: that human beings are essentially an intellectual activity or, more specifically, an activity that is an intellectual inquiry. This *raison d'être* provides a *telos* for human action and flourishing which is sufficiently stable, although admittedly not eternally fixed, to act as a Platonic form might. Schollmeier finds the intrinsic to be more compelling than the instrumental. His assertion that pragmatists neglect to give any consideration to the content of the ancient Greek concept of *eudaimonia* seems curious; moreover, his reading of William James as a faculty psychologist and hedonist will likely produce concern among those who read James deeply. For James, the human mind is embodied—of that there can be little doubt—but to interpret this as crude hedonism is to give insufficient consideration to the radicalism of his insight that thought and meaning are deeply influenced by the nature of the body and physical environment in which it is housed. Be that as it may, Schollmeier presses on through Kant and then Hume; both reject Plato's notion of human happiness—one as insufficiently rational and the other as hyper-rational. The author then argues for “a rational activity for its own sake without pretending to a rationality presumed to be absolute” so that “we may use empirical reason to define a rational activity for ourselves and to pursue this activity for its own sake” (109–110). It is worth noting that Schollmeier's knowledge of the Platonic texts is clearly extensive. The footnotes will lead the reader, regardless of whether he is sympathetic or not to Schollmeier's endeavor, to relevant texts both primary and secondary. It is for this reason that one is perplexed as to why Plato's *Philebus* does not play a more significant role. The mixture of pleasure and thought while defining the good in this dialogue would seem pertinent.

From human happiness, the author takes us, in the fourth riff, to moral freedom by asking how free we really are. Given our bifurcated character, an important theme here is eschewing bodily passions and natural emotions which tend to enslave our reason. Professor Schollmeier has discerned the essence of humanity to be a rational activity, so the die is cast; it should come as no surprise that he has little patience for Hume, James, or modern-day sociobiologist and cognitive scientist that envision a more inclusive nature for humankind. Although our freedom is merely relative (given our ignorance of the absolute and universal we can act as *if* we were free hypothetically), our reason can master our passions by way of our understanding of ourselves, albeit merely contingently and generally. Interestingly, it is at this point in his argument on liberty that Schollmeier presents the example of the “sip of whiskey” to illustrate his notion of a “pleasant concept”; momentarily, the mind

and the body, heretofore meticulously separated, seem to somehow unite (131). By way of Kant, the author returns to the tension between the rational and the irrational in the context of autonomy. Although Schollmeier respectfully demurs in part with Kant, he is careful to incorporate Kant's notion of reason as the "primordial spring" for action. This chapter is tied to those before by the conclusion that we become more or less free insofar as our hypothesis is more or less true. As we hypothesize concepts that construe ourselves as agents and percepts that describe ourselves as actions, "we can with our will impose our concepts on our percepts in what appears to be a physical world. In other words, we can apparently act" (139). Consequently, the courage to pretend is necessary if we are to live free and, unsurprisingly, "we thus find ourselves obliged to grapple endlessly with an absurdity" (148).

However ludicrous a life of such pretense may seem, we are compelled to assert—albeit approximately—moral imperatives and to follow them categorically. Not the least of these imperatives, states Schollmeier in the fifth chapter, is our own goodness or well-being. Thus begins his next riff on hypothesis and obligation. In opposition to Kant, Schollmeier holds onto the notion of our rational end as an end in itself, while discarding the self-legislative aspect, so that happiness might be maintained as an end for morality. What is more, all imperatives, even categorical ones, are actually hypothetical, and, paradoxically, are categorical (159). This variation on the theme of hypothesis explores Plato, Kant, and Aristotle. Although Dewey is conspicuously absent in this book, he is nonetheless echoed as Schollmeier advocates for a natural moral teleology when he affirms that "any necessity in our endeavors depends upon what we believe to be our end . . . but we determine what our end is by hypothesis only" (164). Yet how are we to arbitrate our values when they are not known to be universal? Maintaining that our goodness is an essential rather than an accidental end, Schollmeier insists that "we ought to recognize a motive not of pure concepts but of empirical concepts derived from external percepts" (189). Even as he—like Socrates, Kant, and James—brushes against the absurd mystery of mortal morality, Schollmeier keeps hope alive in "the mysterious divinity of life and of existence itself" (192).

Insofar as we fail to grasp this mysterious divinity, we are estranged from the cosmos and each other. Moreover, in order to comprehend the sort of divinity he has in mind, Schollmeier insists in the penultimate riff, we must relinquish our access to absolute moral principles and admit our moral principles to be absurd. For us the universe is simultaneously teleological and contingent—that is to say, an "organized accident" (194). The definition of life is expanded to include all teleologically organized systems—the universe,

the solar system, individual ecosystems, and animal bodies—thus he embeds reason and soul into the natural world. Following Plato's lead, Schollmeier invokes a personification of this organized accident in the form of a demiurge or divine artisan who is a contingent self-mover. He subscribes to a pluralistic universe, so there exists a pandemonium of gods. If the dualism between the temporal and the eternal is inadequately overcome to beget mysticism, then at least it is sufficiently overlooked to give rise to a mystery worthy of respect, reflection, and reverence. Lest his reader think that he has wandered too far astray, Schollmeier enlists not only Plato but Hume, Kant, and James as well to support the cogency of his argument. A consecrated and incarnate teleology is prerequisite to the moral teleology which "represents for us the ultimate end of our parochial corner of the universe" (223).

Schollmeier argues for a permanence and order—one that is not eternal, necessary, and immutable—that is receptive to change while being sufficiently stable to allow for hypothesis and action. We are compelled to conduct ourselves in ignorance of literal knowledge, which is to say, "We are acting out a myth" (235). Here again, "we cloak our ignorance in divine myth, then, if we are not enmeshed in fear or mired in pleasure" (236). The suspicion that Schollmeier is only a sympathizer with naturalism, not a true believer, remains difficult to shake. One cannot but help wonder: if the notion of infallible knowledge is so unserviceable, why not discard it as a useless burden? Healthy skepticism generates humility and combats dogmatism, but there is a less productive sort—hauteur and detached—that is best confined to academic halls, coffee houses, and bars. Given the absurdity of our lot, to which Schollmeier returns with alarming frequency, it would seem that the only two rational responses would be to laugh maniacally or open a vein. If these two execrable alternatives are rejected, then faith in one's experience—however fallible—is the remaining choice. When this choice is *real*, then one begins to grasp the gravity of the Pragmatic Turn. A less reluctant pragmatist than Schollmeier might be willing to jettison the fabricated problem of the absolute and necessary—that is to say, the disembodied mind—and thus become more focused on the problem at hand than with the absurdity of it all.

Given our epistemological handicap, it comes as no surprise, as we learn in the final riff, that virtue (*aretē*) and happiness (*eudaimonia*) are beyond our grasp. Nonetheless, we can ascend toward absolute truth—as Plato's metaphor of the charioteer indicates—insofar as we strive for greater competence when we reformulate our moral hypotheses. Through knowledge—however short of the mark—we can rein in our irrational, emotional impulses while rehabilitating our tripartite soul. Yet it would be more accurate to say that

each individual is a cacophony of souls, for insofar as soul is equated with teleological system then each faculty and organ is so imbued. Between ignorance and variance, self-combat rather than self-control seems inevitable. By unpacking “the ancient and venerable doctrine of the mean,” Schollmeier discerns the possibility of “a geometric proportion between ourselves and our functions or between our functions and their objects” (256). The mean is best ascertained and new moral principles discovered through rhetorical arguments by example. Thus Schollmeier completes the circle by connecting with his earlier riff in praise of rhetoric. One’s function is defined by the moral principles applied and, Schollmeier points out, “we would appear to have as many principles as there are systems of which we are a part” (262). This may prove jarring at first, but Schollmeier finds support for his conclusion in the epistemology of William James. He laments that James fails to offer a robust concept of moral virtue. If that is the case, John Dewey certainly does; this book would be stronger if it had been taken into account.

In the first chapter of his book entitled *Pragmatism*, William James makes a nonjudgmental distinction between two philosophic temperaments: the tender-minded on the one hand and the tough-minded on the other. Neither term is pejorative; that is to say, James insists that he makes no claim that a given individual ought to be one or the other. Of course, others have not been quite so squeamish. There are moments while reading this text that one wonders if Schollmeier is a tender-minded soul wrestling with tough-minded answers to the issues that inevitably arise when attempting to steer a third course between Scylla and Charybdis. His Platonism is noneternal while his rhetorical pragmatism provides an objective yet empirical foundation for morality. The fact that his position is meticulously argued lends no comfort to the enemy, whoever the enemy may be in each instance. Schollmeier asserts that pragmatists are rhetoricians and philodoxers, rather than philosophers, but not in a bad way. Converting these labels into compliments rather than insults is the upshot of his somewhat novel interpretation of Plato and James. His analysis of Plato is careful; he utilizes Kant and Hume seriously; his reading of James is sensitive, although it seems to miss the radicalism of his empiricism. Nonetheless, interpreting each in the light of the insight of the other is a worthy endeavor and worth the read, even if the adherents within each camp feel bothered in the process.

Here is a book that will undoubtedly make no one happy. While attempting carefully to wrestle with Platonic issues in light of pragmatic thought, and vice versa, it is doubtful that members of either camp will be satisfied with the analysis and argument presented by Professor Schollmeier. While he is

taking a pluralistic approach, baptized Platonists and born-again pragmatists are likely to view him as hacking through underbrush that both consider no-man's-land. Whether or not Schollmeier successfully blazes a path toward rapprochement can only be decided by each reader who comes to his work here. What is clear is that the engaged reader will emerge with an enhanced understanding of what separates, as well as what may unite, these various perspectives on the task of philosophy.

C. Anthony Earls

University of Wyoming

NOTE

1. Dewey, John. "From Absolutism to Experimentalism." *John Dewey The Later Works, 1925–1953*. 5 (1929–1930). Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1988. 155.