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Paul Schollmeier
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Human Goodness

Pragmatic Variations on Platonic Themes

Human Goodness presents an original pragmatic moral theory that successfully revives and revitalizes the classical Greek concept of happiness. It also includes in-depth discussions of our freedoms, our obligations, and our virtues, as well as adroit comparisons with the moral theories of Kant and Hume. Paul Schollmeier explains that the Greeks define happiness as an activity that we may perform for its own sake. Obvious examples might include telling stories, making music, or dancing. He then demonstrates that we may use the pragmatic method to discover and to define innumerable activities of this kind. Schollmeier's demonstration rests on the modest assumption that our happiness takes not one ideal form, but many empirical forms.

Paul Schollmeier is professor of philosophy at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He is the author of *Other Selves: Aristotle on Personal and Political Friendship* and the coeditor of *The Greeks and Us: Essays in Honor of Arthur W. H. Adkins.*

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To the Spirit

of Iver C. Berg

My Geometry Teacher

Who Taught Me What Congruence Is

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ὡς πυθώμεθα
ὅπου ποτ᾽ ἐσμέν· μανθάειν γὰρ ἥκομεν
ξένοι πρὸς ἀστῶν, ἅν δ᾽ ἀκούσωμεν τελεῖν.

– Οἰδίπους

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Acknowledgments

I extend my heartfelt thanks to the Departments of Philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, and at the University of Oregon. The archaic, if not anachronistic, courtesy of granting visiting appointments to wayfaring scholars is alive and thrives at both institutions. I also express my sincere gratitude to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, for a sabbatical leave. This respite from my pedagogical duties enabled me to begin to pull together my thoughts on the themes of the present work and to organize them into their current form.

I wish to acknowledge two anonymous referees for Cambridge University Press. With their comments they saved me from several errors of both substance and style. The remaining errors may serve to illustrate a theme of this book: Human knowledge, despite our concerted efforts, remains decidedly finite. Nonetheless, should you, my reader, spot any mistakes, I would be grateful to be informed of them. We surely ought not to let our limited abilities unduly limit our aspirations.

But I must not fail to thank my family, friends, and colleagues for their kind offices. The present enterprise and its success or lack thereof depended in innumerable ways upon our many informal conversations and discussions. Indeed, these informalities at times eclipsed in their insightfulness the formalities of more scholarly research.

I had the pleasure of discussing three papers on themes central to the present work at scholarly meetings when my thoughts were still nascent. I presented "Kantian Imperatives and Greek Values" during a symposium in honor of Arthur W. H. Adkins, who was a professor of mine at the University of Chicago. Robert B. Louden and I subsequently published the paper in a *Festschrift* entitled *The Greeks and Us* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 145–160. I presented "Happiness and Luckiness" at the XXth World Congress of Philosophy in Boston. This essay is available on the World Wide Web in *The Paideia Project On-Line* at <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/TEth/TEthScho.htm>. I presented

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"Practical Wisdom and Empirical Principles" at the XIIth InterAmerican Congress of Philosophy in Buenos Aires and at the annual meeting of the Ohio Philosophical Association. It was published in *The Proceedings of the Ohio Philosophical Association* (Delaware: Ohio Wesleyan University, 1989), pp. 92–103. To those who were kind enough on these occasions to offer me their comments and encouragements, I am very grateful.

One paper based on passages taken from the book manuscript has already found its way into print. "The Pragmatic Method and Its Rhetorical Lineage" was published in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, vol. 35 (2002), pp. 368–381. Another paper, a spin-off from the manuscript, has also been published. "Ineluctable Slavery" appeared in *Skepsis*, vol. 12 (2001), pp. 134–141. I presented this paper at the XIth International Symposium of Philosophy.

A request to write a book review inspired me to rethink the ancient doctrine of the mean. The result is a new interpretation that shows how closely allied are Aristotle's concepts of the practical intellect and the moral mean. The book was *Aristotle, Virtue, and the Mean*, and my review came out in *Dialogue*, vol. 38 (1999), pp. 610–614. I thank the editors for this little scholarly assignment.

A final word on the paraphrases and translations. The translations and paraphrases of passages from the primary texts in the Greek or the German are my own versions of modern and contemporary translations. These versions, please note, are of greater or lesser originality, depending on my facility with the language of a text, on the apparent difficulty of the passage in question, and on my perception of the abilities exhibited by previous translators.

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Preface

You shall find, dear reader, no new ideas in my book. At least, I trust not. If you seek novelty, you had best search another volume for the pleasures of your diversion. I cannot presume on a topic of so great an importance as ethics to have discovered a truth not yet known to my fellows, whether philosophically inclined or not. Even this very point others made centuries ago. Immanuel Kant did, for example.

If, however, you are a seeker of self-knowledge and its pleasures, read on. I have attempted to explore knowledge of this variety, and I do believe that I have met with some success. But I must offer you a word of caution at the very outset: Any success in an endeavor of this alluring sort is at best rather elusive, and whatever success one might actually claim could quite possibly be illusive.

But how can I hope to gain self-knowledge without discovering a new truth? you may ask. This book, I would respond, is merely an experiment in the analysis of ideas about human goodness. But the ideas I intend to analyze are not at all unique to me. I propose to take a concept of happiness gleaned from the ancients and to see what the consequences might be if we were to take it seriously as a principle of moral philosophy. What could happiness tell us about ourselves, our autonomy, our obligations, and our circumstances, not to mention our virtue?

One might be tempted to think that an experiment with self-knowledge is itself a novel idea. But proponents of the experimental method for the moral sciences have in the past century made the idea very current. I am thinking of William James and John Dewey, especially. These philosophers themselves claim an ancient lineage for the procedure. They trace its origins through David Hume and John Stuart Mill down to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

In my experiment I shall elaborate a hypothesis that is rather limited. I pretend to no divine knowledge of any eternal or necessary sort. One cannot but at times feel that certain ideas do provide a glimpse of eternity. But even

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these ideas, though they may fill us with ecstasy, we cannot take for certain. They may perhaps approach the ideas of a god, I concede, and we ought surely to treat them with some diffidence. But I must ask, How could we ever be sure that we have stumbled upon any idea truly divine?

My hypothesis concerns human knowledge. I take our knowledge to rest on a feeble intellect and on frail senses. Our faculties with their contingent natures can hardly grasp even their proper objects. What is more, these objects themselves are apparently contingent. They not infrequently change under our very gaze. How could one ever hope to grasp their truths with much confidence?

Nor dare I attempt an experiment that would tie all truth, if only human, into one tidy bundle. Truth, if it is one, is too grand a thing for our mind to grasp. We must therefore choose our experiments and choose them carefully. I have chosen to elaborate a hypothesis that sheds some light on truths now forgotten by many. There are surely good reasons for our forgetfulness. But our lapse has consequences that appear to me equally great, if not grave. The truths by which we presently live do have their advantages. But because they are not exhaustive, these truths also have their disadvantages.

If you wish, you may think of this book as dedicated to the idea of an ephemeral teleology. An ephemeral teleology?! Yes, the phrase does sound oxymoronic. We are today much accustomed to thinking of teleologies, especially moral ones, as requiring eternal, fixed forms. But need they? I for one do not think so. We are surrounded by plants and animals whose forms of life are very obviously teleological and yet constantly changing over their lifetimes, not to mention their species evolution and extinction. I wish to remind you that we ourselves are of these fleeting forms as are the ecosystems within which we dwell. And so I shall ask, What are the implications of a temporal teleology, autochthonous and almost evanescent by comparison to its alternative, for moral theory and practice?

I shall, then, have repeated recourse to the ancient Greek philosophers. I mean Plato and Aristotle. They expound a natural and moral teleology that we would do well to take into consideration. Many philosophers, of course, would argue that their teleology requires eternal forms for its foundation. I am not convinced that it does. But my reservations need not trouble you. My purpose is to trouble you with a larger question. I wish to ask, Need a moral or a natural teleology rest on invariable forms? I think not. What I shall do, then, is take the ancient concept of teleology and make use of it as if it were of variable forms.

David Hume and Immanuel Kant provide extraordinary confirmations of this principal idea, especially if one considers how inimical their philosophies seem to be to those of the Greeks. With his distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact, Hume echoes the ancient distinction between knowledge and opinion. Kant advocates a moral teleology that includes a concept of value very similar to that of the ancients, despite its

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transcendental form. His teleology also contains other concepts useful for my analysis, such as freedom, imperative, and cosmology.

But Kant and Hume remain the Scylla and Charybdis of our efforts to understand the Greeks. These gentlemen are veritable demigods who cast conceptual shadows so long as to obscure our vision of ancient philosophy. I suspect, for example, that our tendency to attribute fixed rational forms to moral teleology arises in large part from Kant. From Hume would appear to arise our reluctance to accept a rational teleology of any sort in moral matters.

I shall borrow from the American philosophers their method, albeit with some modification. I shall also attempt to reconstruct their general philosophical outlook. My intention is to apply the experimental method to moral problems with the purpose of advancing intellectual teleologies and not emotional ones. A moral experiment, I shall argue, is successful if its hypothesis is conducive to the enriched activity of our mind rather than to the enhanced passivity of our emotions. The consequences of this change for our felicity are not insignificant.

My hope, then, is that by recalling an idea, almost archaic by contemporary standards, and by arraying it before you, gentle reader, with other ideas, both ancient and modern, I can foster in your soul a forgotten moral outlook and attitude.

But I must now ask you, if you be of kindred spirit and so inclined, to peruse my book itself.

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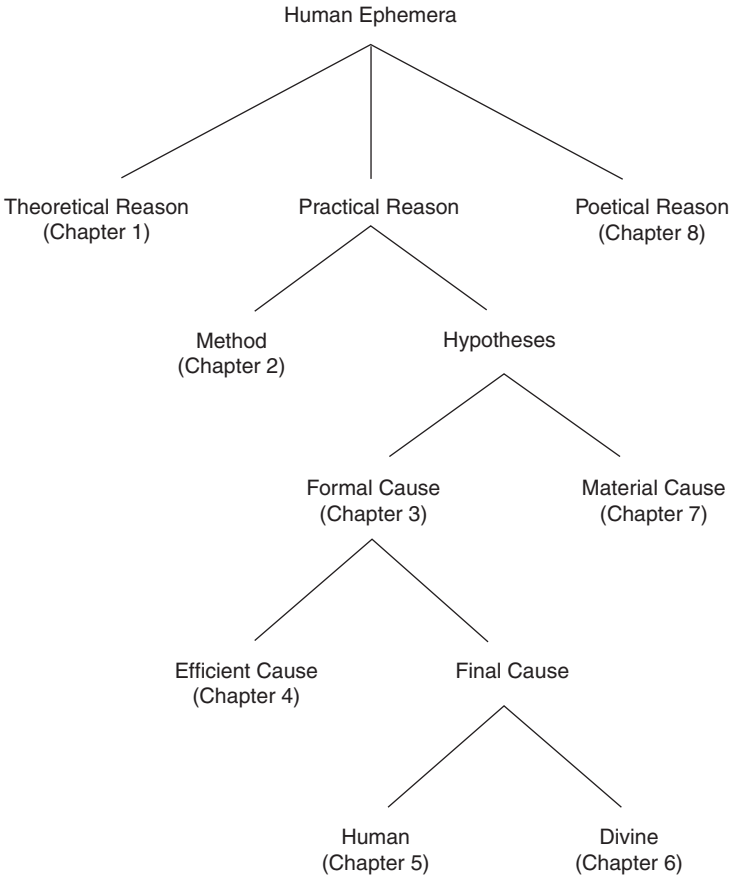
A Schema of Topics Analyzed



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