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A Classicist's Comments

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Sebell's book provides an intense and insightful commentary on *Memorabilia* 4, built around the thesis that Xenophon's central goal is to point good readers toward the theological solution to the problem of politics. That thesis is not overt in the *Memorabilia* itself, so the bulk of Sebell's book is devoted to showing how better sorts of readers benefit from thinking through arguments originally addressed to a decidedly limited Socratic interlocutor, Euthydemos. But Sebell's book is not easy. His sentences are sometimes labyrinthine in their complexity. And as someone Sebell would call, reasonably enough, a conventional classicist, my difficulties in following his argument are larger.

Sebell makes some telling remarks about the divide between classicists and those we classicists call Straussians. Much of Sebell's characterization rings true; too few classicists give Strauss the respect and patience he merits. But Sebell goes rather too far when he argues that classicists' newfound respect for Xenophon's subtlety is mainly a lesson learned from Strauss, and that this debt makes their continued skepticism of Straussian readings evidence of bad faith. Nor do I believe that the recognition of Xenophontic subtlety means that it is "scarcely meaningful" (p. 187, n. 57) to speak any longer of "Straussians" (or of "conventional classicists"?). We are not all Straussians now.

In my experience, classicists don't learn much from Straussians largely because we don't understand Strauss and Straussians very well. But the misunderstanding is not solely a matter of bad faith, loyalty to the conventional classicist clan, or stupidity, the factors Sebell suggests (the charge of stupidity residing in his occasionally scathing tone). Sebell does not deign to mention politics. Most Straussians are conservative and many are very conservative; few classicists are either. It doesn't help that, while classicists tend to be progressive in our politics, we worry that our field is inherently reactionary, a fear particularly acute amongst students of Xenophon, the supposed Laconophile exiled for disloyalty to the Athenian democracy.

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I find it useful to picture Straussians as reading texts vertically, in two senses. Great books have layers upon layers of meaning, and also participate in an ongoing conversation across time, not only drawing on past and contemporary texts but partaking in a timeless conversation. We classicists see Xenophon as engaged in conversation with his predecessors and his contemporaries—that is where much of his subtlety lies. But his text itself is or at least ought to be something we can more or less pin down. Our emphasis is on a synchronic reading, or at least one with a *terminus ad quem*, the author's own day; and we see texts as ultimately univocal if complex in their relationships with other texts. We devote most of our energy to developing synchronic connections, to showing how other classicists have misread Xenophon's text, or both. Classicists increasingly also engage in the study of "reception"—but use of this separate term shows we regard it as something different than our day jobs. Straussians, on the other hand, are as likely to cite John Rawls, Aquinas, or the New Testament (to mention three texts Sebell connects to Xenophon) as they are to cite Plato or Isocrates. And they do not so much disagree with other interpretations as say that other interpretations, particularly conventional ones, are shallow. We classicists bear a considerable kinship with interlocutors like Euthydemos. We aren't always wrong, but we are all too often superficial. On the other hand, Straussians, to us, aren't superficial; but they may be simply wrong.

Central to Sebell's project is the belief that Euthydemos, Socrates's interlocutor in book 4, is not a good nature. Sebell doesn't devote much space to arguing this point directly, as there is, to his mind, "no room for doubt" about it; he does, however, point us toward "the most obvious considerations" in a footnote (p. 190, n. 15, pointing to pp. 41–45). Euthydemos was certainly mistaken that he had "philosophized a philosophy"[1] through his collection of books. The question is whether his failures demonstrate that he is too limited to count as a good nature. I agree with Sebell that one major problem was Euthydemos's failure to discuss the books he had collected. Sebell is right to call our attention to the active nature of productive reading by noting that Socrates looks, with his friends, for treasures buried within those books.[2] Sebell argues that Euthydemos "did not really desire learning or knowledge" (p. 45). This, if correct, would indeed mark him as something other than a good nature, given that good natures are characterized by their desire and ability to learn everything which helps people succeed in households and cities.[3] And it is certainly true that Euthydemos plays hard to get, initially refusing Socratic instruction.

Euthydemos's error is compounded by his intellectualism, for "Xenophon understood virtue or everything noble and good to be a matter of training or

[1]Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.2.23.
[2]Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.6.14.
[3]Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.1.2.

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habit rather than learning (I.2.23, consider III.9.5)" (p. 44). "Xenophon's suggestion would have to be this: Socrates and his good friends distinguished between wisdom and virtue, whereas Euthydemos, failing to do so, understood wisdom to be, not (only) knowledge but (also) a virtue" (44). Sebell's parentheses here (as his alternatives "virtue or everything noble and good") do not contribute to clarity. I think he is also trying to allude to a distinction between moral knowledge (wisdom) and more technical knowledge ("learning"). But if I follow his argument, Sebell is crediting Euthydemos with the belief that virtue consists of knowledge—commonplace amongst conventional scholars of Xenophon's Socrates and Plato's Socrates alike—and rejecting that proposition. To do so, Sebell simply cites *Memorabilia* 1.2.23, where Xenophon argues that *sophrosyne* and everything noble and good must be practiced. But a few lines earlier Xenophon had spoken of people forgetting lines of poetry if they did not practice reciting them. That seems like a cognitive process. The passage in Book 1 also says that desires can produce forgetfulness—but this seems to show that virtue, like knowledge, can be lost. Virtue may indeed, in Xenophon's view, require a non-cognitive foundation, *enkrateia* ("self-mastery"), but that is compatible with the belief that virtue is knowledge, at least in some natural ways of understanding that expression. The right sort of knowledge, wisdom, suffices for virtue so long as it isn't masked or lost thanks to non-cognitive failings.

Euthydemos, Sebell believes, not only gathers the wrong books for the wrong reasons but fails to read them. His books, written by "poets and sophists of the highest repute,"[4] and which Socrates says were written by those "said to be wise,"[5] cannot be the same as the books read by Socrates and his friends, books by "wise men who were *not* necessarily reputed to be wise"[6] (emphasis in Sebell, p. 43). Euthydemos's books are those honored by convention, while Socrates's books are those of truly wise men. Sebell is employing the Straussian assumption that reputations, as appearances, are generally misleading. Sebell also omits to remind us that Xenophon says that Socrates's wise men are "the wise men of old." This suggests that they are recognized by tradition, which takes time to form, and implies conventional high repute. Sebell doesn't suggest different reading lists. One might wonder whether Socrates and friends were reading controversial Presocratics and sophists—but they would not be "wise men of old," and it is Euthydemos who is explicitly said to be reading sophists (though one cannot put too much weight on that term). This question about just what books were being read is more likely to occur to a conventional classicist or historian of philosophy than to a reader eager to put Xenophon in conversation with Rawls.

[4]Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.2.1.
[5]Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.2.8.
[6]Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.6.14.

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Sebell also asserts that Euthydemos believed that wealth "is necessary, if not sufficient, to make human beings better" (p. 43: I take it that "if not sufficient" is a sly way of saying "and presumably sufficient"). The ground for this is that Euthydemos bought expensive books. Perhaps, but Plato has Socrates note that Anaxagoras's books weren't costly.[7] Sebell reminds us, accurately, that we are told that Euthydemos collects books, not that he reads them, and Sebell criticizes classicists for reading between the lines and assuming that Euthydemos reads (p. 193, n. 1). But if Euthydemos did not read his books, that would make Sebell's fine observations about the right way to read things, not to mention Socrates's use of and references to writing in 4.2, otiose.

Sometimes Sebell's refusal to "read between the lines" results in an atomizing of the text, in which a great deal is made of minute differences in expression, or of the failure to explicitly connect dots that people in natural conversations connect for themselves (e.g., most buy books to read them—and while we may too often fail to read our books, we are not so fatuous as to assume that buying them means we know their contents). For Sebell, the text is not a coherent whole but an invitation for capable readers, truly good natures, to discover hidden depths. The risk, of course, is that readers will spot their own deepest concerns hidden within texts, like Sebell's belief that modern liberalism fails to account for revealed religion.

We classicists present other risks: we may go too far in attempting to smooth over differences within or between texts. The differences we see are most often between past and present, while Sebell and those in the Straussian tradition play for higher stakes, distinguishing wisdom from folly *sub specie aeternitatis.* There is more than one way to seek treasure in wise old books. One good way is to read scholars who read those books differently.

[7]Plato, *Apology* 26d.

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