The Review of Politics 87 (2025), 593–595.
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doi:10.1017/S0034670525100181

Politics as Who Gets it and How

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Sebell's book offers a modest surface concealing a profound interior. Promising to examine a small portion of one work of Xenophon (*Memorabilia* 4.1–7), a portion that presents a seemingly dumbed-down education of Euthydemos, a less-than-promising youth, Sebell opens up that education to an altogether more comprehensive, genuinely Socratic one. As his title indicates, Sebell, through his remarkable and thorough analysis of this apparently half-baked education, reveals the education that Xenophon himself received, albeit indirectly (as all we readers perforce must do), from Socrates. As he suggests, insofar as the *Memorabilia* is Xenophon's "most defensive or apologetic" Socratic work, it would "make sense for it also, in places, to be his most daring" (p. 16). Moreover, as his subtitle indicates, Sebell's study promises a consideration of the fundamental question or questions of political philosophy: To what extent can politics be guided by reason? To what extent by religion? Do their respective modes of guidance somehow "limit" politics? Can they align or does the quarrel between the two itself somehow limit politics? And why does Sebell speak (in his subtitle) of the limits only of politics? As we discover in the course of his study, there might appear to be limits to both reason and religion as well, not least in their apparent inability to refute one another (Sebell insists Socrates acknowledges "the very real possibility of superhuman wisdom"; p. 203, n. 29).

The Xenophon who emerges from the pages of this subtle and masterful work is not quite the one either his detractors or (most of) his defenders take him to be. In fact, an invaluable part of the book is Sebell's extensive and detailed efforts to rescue Xenophon from some of his would-be defenders. In the Introduction, as well as in notes scattered throughout the work, Sebell shows how one contemporary interpreter after another misreads Xenophon, frequently by rediscovering in him the "average decent Athenian" (in W. K. C. Guthrie's words; p. 10), an image thought to have been put to rest by Leo Strauss's groundbreaking rediscovery of Xenophon as a genuine Socratic. Many of these recent interpreters find this "pre-Straussian" Xenophon, oddly enough, by freely employing "esoteric" (supposedly Straussian) methods of reading him. Rather too freely, it turns out.

In not speaking of the limits of reason, Sebell develops a Xenophontic argument that suggests we turn against reason when it fails to find a coherence,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670525100181 Published online by Cambridge University Press

especially a coherence that might benefit or comfort us, in the world. But that failure might, of course, reflect "flaws that are naturally part and parcel of the world as we know it" (p. 103). Sebell's deeply impressive chapter on "Natural Theology" (the title, quotation marks included, of chapter. 5) or Socrates's efforts to sketch what would have to exist above or behind a world understood as "made for us" and for our good, proves to be central. Such an argument, "Socrates' 'argument from design,'" proves to be ironic: while "it ends in failure," it was "as far as Euthydemos was concerned … an unmitigated success" (p. 103). Interpreters or readers would do well to heed Sebell's warning that they ("good natures"), prior to undergoing a Socratic education, might share some of Euthydemos's "bad nature," a nature too hopeful for both happiness and what politics is capable of. In particular, they would do well to avoid the power of beauty or the noble bewitching us into thinking that "chance and purpose [can] come together as one" (p. 107).

Sebell begins his implicit defense of Socratic reason by discussing John Rawls and his highly influential explanation—or assumption—of both the "self-destruction of reason" and the connection vaguely felt by Rawls (but concretely expressed by Sebell) of the "connection … between morality or politics and religion" (pp. 4–5). Sebell, then, implies that reason need not self-destruct, at least not insofar as any discovered limits on politics (or morality) will be charged to religion's account and not reason's. An undertaking can be said to be limited only when it cannot do what it seeks, upon full self-knowledge, to accomplish. Now, "the knowledge of the good things [we seek] arises, via self-knowledge, from knowledge of the truth about justice" (p. 111). Possessing such knowledge, Socrates might then ground a reason that would not "self-destruct." Sebell denies that reason is "limited" by failing to confirm Locke's (never fulfilled) suggestion that "Morality is capable of [rational] Demonstration, as well as Mathematics."[1] But, if purified of this unreasonable hope, we turn to "natural philosophy" (as our "only Star and compass"—Locke again, quoted at p. 171), we will be disappointed to find that Socrates discovered that "natural philosophy … *must* end in failure" (p. 176, emphasis added). Sebell might have explained more clearly how this failure differs from the "self-destruction" of Rawls's "reason."

The chapter on "Natural Theology" examines the attempt to rationally defend the moral purposes of religion. Its failure leaves us with a competition between two antagonists. Sebell points to the resulting grave problem: "if reason is unable to settle the dispute between … revelation … and … reason" then the supporters of reason must "in the very same breath that they bid farewell to revelation [also] bid farewell to reason" (p. 101).

It is quite impossible for a brief review to do justice to the many bravura sections of detailed textual interpretation on display in this book. Sebell

[1]John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: OUP, 1975), 3.11.16.

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uncovers the plan or structure of chapter after chapter of the work. And that means discovering the structure of one all-but-hidden Socratic argument after the other. Many of the interpreters Sebell takes to task for underestimating Xenophon will no doubt be bewildered by these sections. And these interpretations can, in following carefully Socrates's "one step forward, two steps back" method of dialectical analysis, seem confused, inducing the reader to retreat to the surface impression of the work as portraying a Socrates giving nothing but "conventional moral advice" (p. 22). This is where the reader would be well advised to consider and accept Sebell's crucial methodological assumption that the "conventional" teachings are directed solely to Euthydemos; the intricate analysis of those very teachings (which finds them wanting) is meant "with a view to" a different audience, the "onlookers," the "good natures" who silently witness the conversation. And they ought not be too sure they are far above Euthydemos. For even the more sophisticated readers—represented in the dialogue by Aristodemos who "did not serve the gods or resist unholy things even in public"—may still "think pious thoughts" (pp. 94, 101).

The "limits of politics" revealed in the course of Socrates's argument seem to be discerned on the basis of making a firm distinction between the good (what benefits us) and the noble (which seems to promise an escape from a sustained consideration of our needs)—and then coming to see that "cities and nations, laws, and citizenship" are not "good things," but "noble [or] beautiful" ones (p. 111). Politics so conceived cannot be said to bear the stamp of "rationality" (p. 112; see p. 210, n. 8). But why could there not be a politics, shorn of impossible expectations either of "perpetual peace" or of "justice realized" by our (or even God's) actions, that could meet (some of) our needs? A politics much like that practiced by Xenophon himself in the *Anabasis* or perhaps even like the quite unlimited politics proposed by Xenophon's modern admirer, Machiavelli?

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