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On The Socratic Education

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Dustin Sebell has written an excellent book on Xenophon—the most thorough and comprehensive account of Book IV of the *Memorabilia* known to me. He develops his argument powerfully, rigorously, and his conclusions about the character, methods and goals of the Socratic education are compelling. Book IV has often been described—not without reason—as dull and insipid. Sebell succeeds in showing, however, that while Socrates's education of the young Euthydemos is indeed a caricature, a careful reader can discover through that caricature the core of the Socratic education. In my view, the most important contribution of the book is to offer a masterful explanation of how and why Socrates often chose to educate good natures indirectly, not through dialogue but by making them the silent witnesses of the "education" of youths who could not be truly enlightened. By revealing his thought "with a view to" Euthydemos—the ungifted pupil of *Memorabilia* IV—Socrates was simultaneously able to adumbrate his genuine thoughts to good natures (36). And Sebell explains convincingly the reasons for Socrates's indirect pedagogy.

As an interpreter, Sebell is indefatigable. He is ready to scrutinize even the most insipid passages of *Memorabilia* IV to show that there is purpose behind Xenophon's apparent superficialities. And he does this always insightfully and with great precision. His book is also courageous and generous. He notes the seminal role of Leo Strauss in the modern recovery of Xenophon and criticizes scholars who fail to acknowledge this role even as they ransack his work for spoils. In the present review, it is impossible to do justice to even a fraction of the many outstanding passages of Sebell's book. There ought to be no doubt, however, that his contribution to Xenophon scholarship and the recovery of the genuine Socrates is major.

For the purposes of this exercise, I offer three criticisms. First, I doubt that the Socratic education can be adequately understood, as Sebell suggests, on the sole basis of *Memorabilia* IV; secondly, Sebell's account of the effects of the Socratic education are not stated without ambiguity; finally, Sebell writes in an un-Xenophonic manner.

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Sebell argues that *Memorabilia* IV contains "the whole course of a Socratic education, touching on everything relevant to the purpose, in order, from start to finish" (6). Nowhere else in classical literature—not even in Plato—he argues, do we find such a thing. But this claim seems overdone. *Memorabilia* IV is undoubtedly an important text. But like any other text by Xenophon, it must be read in light of the rest of his corpus, as part of a larger whole. For example, in order to flesh out adequately Xenophon's conception of self-knowledge, the *Cyropaedia* must not be neglected. The dialogue between Cyrus and Croesus, for instance, which culminates in a playful celebration of private life,[1] confirms Sebell's analysis of self-knowledge, especially if we consider this dialogue together with the two tragic scenes that surround it: the noble death in battle of Abradatas[2] (cf. 85) and the noble suicide of Panthea.[3] But the dialogue also adumbrates a point not developed in the *Memorabilia*, and therefore somewhat neglected by Sebell: the Delphic exhortation "Know Thyself," which Socrates appropriates and reinterprets, does not mean at its core merely "obey the laws," as Sebell suggests (cf. 52–53). It also means "know your humble station," "know that you are radically inferior to the gods," or "know your rank in the order of being." Properly understood, self-knowledge is somehow inseparable from knowledge of God.[4] Secondly, Sebell's near exclusive focus on *Memorabilia* IV makes it hard to understand the place within Xenophon's corpus of the *Oeconomicus*, a work Strauss called "Xenophon's Socratic *logos* or discourse par excellence."[5] Sebell argues convincingly that Socrates was trying to learn something from his students even as he endeavored to educate them. He was trying to establish a basis in *knowledge* for his non-believing stance toward the gods. And Sebell explains why carrying out this task was necessary: religious belief poses a radical challenge to reason; the failure to confront this challenge would expose reason to the danger of self-destruction (1–6). By refuting his companions about justice and the human things, in other words, "Socrates conversed about the nature of all things", i.e., he sought *knowledge* of the highest principle or cause of the whole (167). But all of this means that *Memorabilia* IV sketches not just the Socratic education but also, or at the same time, the Socratic Turn. What role does that leave for the *Oeconomicus*, then? For Sebell seems to agree with Strauss that the *Oeconomicus*, too, is an account of the Socratic Turn (cf. 5–6). This question is not unimportant since the two accounts are not identical. To mention only one obvious difference: *Memorabilia* IV ascribes a central role to Socrates's refutations—the Socratic elenchus—as Sebell rightly stresses. But there are no refutations in the

[1]Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* VII.2.15–29.
[2]Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* VII.1.
[3]Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* VII.3, read together with VI.4.1-11.
[4]Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1, c. 1.
[5]Leo Strauss, *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse: An Interpretation of the Oeconomicus* (South Bend, IN: St Augustine's Press, 1998), 86.

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Oeconomicus. While Socrates does converse with the gentleman Ischomachus, he never attempts to refute him. Why the difference? To state the same objection differently: would something important be missing from the political philosophy of Xenophon had he written only *Memorabilia* IV and not the *Oeconomicus*? Sebell claims that the god Apollo is a "gentleman" (53). And of course, the *Oeconomicus* takes up the question of what a gentleman is. Does this mean that the Oeconomicus somehow (also) takes up the question of what a god is? Be that as it may, Sebell's wish to read *Memorabilia* IV as a sufficient basis to understand the Socratic education leads him to commit the occasional sin of overreading. His discussion of continence regarding the pleasure of hope, for example, seems forced as an interpretation of IV.5, though convincing as an argument about the matter itself (149–50). But hope is never mentioned in IV.5.[6] Sebell is unlikely to persuade people who are not already convinced (as I am, though not on the basis of IV.5) of the underlying position he is defending.

According to Sebell, two related effects flowed from a successful Socratic education: rejection of political life in favor of private life and loss of belief in the gods. Regarding the first, Sebell suggests that "learning, knowledge, or the wise man's stance toward learning or knowledge is unnecessary for *and incompatible with doing politics*" (39 and *passim*, my emphasis). In other words, to learn the truth about political or vulgar virtue is to discover the essential irrationality of political life. But did Xenophon himself not possess the knowledge at issue? Yet he obviously "did" politics, as we know from the *Anabasis*. Surprisingly, Sebell does not address this objection. And even if we could somehow explain away Xenophon's willingness to do politics—I am not sure that we can—Sebell's account of the effects of a Socratic education is not stated without ambiguity. For the most part, he argues that there exists an outright incompatibility between the Socratic education and political life (pp. 39, 40 bottom, 86, 90). At times, however, he is more cautious and seems to argue—more correctly, as it seems to me—that while the Socratic education would indeed reduce profoundly and necessarily the appeal of political life, it might not destroy that appeal completely (p. 40 "some bearing"; p. 83 "less strongly"; p. 89 "weaken"). As for the second (and primarily intended) effect of the education Socrates gave his companions, Sebell is careful to indicate that his refutations did not prove—by way of definitive proof—the truth of his stance toward the gods. The existence of "superhuman wisdom," which by definition eludes the grasp of human reason, remains to the end a "very real possibility" (p. 203, n. 29). The reader is therefore left to wonder why (or whether) the seemingly modest results achieved by the Socratic refutations sufficed to vindicate reason's claim to be "'our only Star and compass'" (p. 90). Still, one is grateful to Sebell for a rich opportunity to further our reflection on this crucial point. However, precisely if the question of the gods is never definitively answered by Socrates (because it cannot be),

[6]Cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* IV.3.17.

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it must be going too far to say, as Sebell does, that Socrates's self-knowledge is "absolutely certain and beyond dispute" (p. 90). Socrates's self-knowledge—which includes his knowledge of his rank in the order of being—cannot be more certain than his knowledge of the gods, and that knowledge cannot be absolutely certain.

Reading Sebell's book is an enriching but at times puzzling experience. He offers a masterful explanation of the indirect pedagogy of Socrates, as I said. But for the most part, he chooses not to imitate this indirectness. According to Sebell, Socrates as a teacher refused to "tell good natures the truth in the simplest and clearest manner" because doing so "would have been contrary to nature and incorrect, violent" (p. 24). Telling good natures the truth in the simplest and clearest manner would be repulsive to them, for several reasons, not the least of which is that "the truth, to begin with, appears 'terrible'" (p. 66). Agreeing with this view, Xenophon imitated Socrates's pedagogical indirectness. For although he chose to write books, unlike his teacher, Xenophon deliberately wrote down the Socratic education "incorrectly"—that is, he refused to write down (to mention only one most noteworthy example) the third and final stage of the elenchus about justice.[7] Xenophon left it to readers to piece together the crucial peak (or nadir) of this refutation—on the basis, incidentally, not just of *Memorabilia* IV but also of texts like *Cyropaedia* 1.3.16–18. Yet Sebell himself is not unwilling to state hard truths straightforwardly and even, at times, bluntly (on law p. 31, democracy p. 80, incest p. 135). Above all, he leaves no doubt about the conclusion reached, as he thinks, in the final stage of the elenchus (p. 61). But if the indirect pedagogy of Socrates and Xenophon is according to nature and correct, as Sebell insists repeatedly, should it not be imitated more closely than he chose to do? Let me repeat in conclusion that Sebell's book is an achievement from which serious scholars will profit handsomely, not only despite, but even (as I freely admit) occasionally because of its overly direct pedagogy.

[7]Xenophon, *Memorabilia* IV.2.

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