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Book Review of *The Socratic Turn: Knowledge of Good and Evil in an Age of Science*, by Dustin Sebell

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The Socratic Turn begins with a meditation on an impasse in contemporary political theory. Political science aspires to the standards of method and rigor found in the hard sciences, which are 'reductive' insofar as they posit as real only the constituents and causes of physical things. These do not include characteristics such as justice and nobility, yet political discourse is compelled to make claims concerning them. Sebell tells us that we are compelled to turn to the thought of the ancients, specifically Socrates, as portrayed in the *Phaedo*. For in this dialogue we encounter him imprisoned by the polis on the grounds of having acted unjustly, wondering whether there can be a scientific account of the situation in which he finds himself. For Socrates as for the contemporary political theorist, the prevailing model of scientific explanation does away with purpose. Sebell, following Socrates, insists that a causal account of a political reality such as imprisonment that makes no appeal to purpose must be incomplete and unsatisfactory.

Sebell neglects theories of emergence and the persistence of teleological explanations in science, so he overstates the extent to which reductionism prevails in contemporary philosophy of science. His account of Presocratic science likewise has gaps; Anaxagoras and the atomists are run together as reductionists of the same

ilk. No mention is made of the appeal to the just in Anaximander and to love and strife in Empedocles, which surely have a major normative component. There are more problems when Sebell argues that pure reductionism is self-refuting since an explanation of a whole on the basis of its parts (the sort of explanatory account that Sebell attributes to Anaxagoras) must ultimately appeal to parts that are wholes of sorts, of which no further account can be given. Sebell says that Socrates must have drawn this conclusion as part of his refutation of Anaxagoras, but surviving fragments and testimony show that Anaxagoras addressed this regress problem by denying that any fundamental kind, by which things are to be explained, can ever exist as a subsistent whole. Surely Socrates was aware of this from his study of Anaxagoras' writings.

Like many political theorists who study Plato, Sebell mines the text for nuances of expression in order to unearth clues to Plato's true authorial intention. Sebell detects a recurrent vacillation in Socrates, unremarked by his interlocutors, concerning the limitations of knowledge concerning the nature and fate of the human soul. Sebell takes this vacillation to be an indication that Socrates himself has concluded that these matters lie beyond the scope of human knowledge.

Sebell places great emphasis on Socrates' reference at 96c7-8 to 'what is clear to everyone' and contrasts this with Socrates' reference (with Anaximander in mind) to 'what others know' (pp. 31-44). What is clear to everyone are the wholes of pretheoretical life. These wholes are what they are by virtue of the form (*eidos*) that people recognize. But the sort of reductive science promoted by the 'others' is concerned not with the being of things, but the becoming of things and for this, different sorts of answers are to be found. Sebell finds in the *Phaedo* an anticipation of all four modes of Aristotle's causes. The physicalist science that Socrates takes to be unsatisfactory for the investigation of human things appeals to material and efficient causes alone. Socrates argues that appeal to formal and final causation is necessary if we are to make sense of those aspects of things that 'everyone knows'.

Sebell discusses Socrates' dissatisfaction of the thesis that one person is taller than another 'by a head' (96d-e). Sebell takes 'head' here to refer to one of the material parts that constitutes the whole. To deny the intelligibility of saying that one person is taller than another by a head is to deny that one can make sense of relations through purely reductive explanations. There must be some appeal to wholeness, which is goodness. This is why formal causation is impossible without final causation. Final causation has its source in a mind that seeks to both find and establish order. Accordingly, Sebell interprets Socrates as claiming that wholes are intelligible only by virtue of the mind's grasp of them as united by some form or order (p. 105). Metaphysical speculation concerning wholes is incapable of offering an account that grasps things as they are. Rather, the forms by which wholes are grasped are mind dependent.

Sebell detects an ambiguity within Socrates' account of mind as cause. Is it the cause of something's being a whole? In that case, mind is the cause of a thing's being *good*. Or is mind the cause of why a particular is a part of a whole? In that case mind seeks the cause of how particulars are related to each other; it is the cause of *order*. If scientific inquiry seeks the first kind of cause, its focus is that state which is best for a whole, not what is best for the particulars that constitute it. If scientific inquiry seeks the latter kind of cause, its focus is the parts of an ordered system, and how it is best for each to have the place in the system that it has. Consider the cosmological question that led Socrates to the study of Anaxagoras: why is the earth in the center of the cosmos? Are we seeking goodness of the cosmos as a whole, its form? Or are we seeking the cause of its being ordered, why it is best for a part, for example the earth, to have the position that it has? Such an inquiry reduces the cosmos to the particulars that make it up. The distinction between the two approaches has political implications. Seeking the good of the polis as such involves seeking the just or the noble (or beautiful). On the other hand, seeking the reason why a particular human being is where he is (for example, seeking why the particular man Socrates is sitting in jail) is to search for why particular people stand in certain relationships to one another, inviting a kind of reductionist analysis. When we investigate whether it is best for Socrates to be in

jail we consider him as a particular aiming at what is to his own benefit. There are two different understandings of final causation at work here, and Socrates' discourse vacillates between them. Sebell takes the tension found in the *Republic* between the good of the polis and the place of the philosopher in regard to the civic order, to be mirrored here in the *Phaedo* and in the ambiguities implicit in Socrates' account of the search for final causes.

Sebell's line of interpretation rests on the inference that because it takes a mind to detect order and form, order and form can only come about through the providential ordering of a mind. From this he concludes that according to Plato, formal causation is impossible without a purpose being who orders (perhaps the polis or the individual embodied soul). Many will find this sort of move unwarranted by the text. A more general issue: Like many in the field of political philosophy, Sebell flags metaphysical puzzles or difficulties that arise as indications that there can be no such thing as satisfactory metaphysical knowledge. Those scholars of ancient philosophy of a more metaphysical bent will take these difficulties to be invitations for closer and more probing analyses of the arguments. But there will be some (among the group of scholars, far from an ordered whole, who are loosely grouped together as 'Straussians') who will accept Sebell's argument that the appeal to what is clear to 'everyone' in the 'second sailing' involves a kind of concession to beautiful wholes that are manifest in the lived, everyday world, but may well be ultimately unreal, and, even if they are real, are beyond the grasp of science (as contrasted with political philosophy). I am in the first group, and take the *Phaedo* to be offering a different path to resolving the dilemma with which Sebell's book begins: Plato's teaching is that there are formal structures that are really inherent in the world and are responsible for structure, beauty, and goodness that all human beings, non-philosophers included, are capable of grasping. These are not aspects of the human or political alone, though, to be sure it is mere human beings who inquire into them, and necessarily do so in the context of the polis.