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The Socratic Turn: Knowledge of Good and Evil in an Age of Science

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Dustin Sebell, *The Socratic Turn: Knowledge of Good and Evil in an Age of Science* (University of Pennsylvania, 2016)

Review by Joel Alden Schlosser, Bryn Mawr College

Dustin Sebell's *The Socratic Turn* begins by both defending and attacking political theory. On the one hand, Sebell takes the side of political theory against its more scientifically-minded colleagues, suggesting the importance of political theory as a potential science on its own terms. Yet on the other hand, Sebell asserts that political theory has failed in an essential way by relinquishing inquiry into "values," agreeing with empiricists that facts must stand apart as the proper subject of political inquiry. This promising, if paradoxical, overture to *The Socratic Turn* leads Sebell back to the figure who occupies the entirety of Sebell's book: Socrates, the "founder of political philosophy" who famously turned from an early interest in natural science to inquiry about justice pursued among his fellow Athenians. Sebell focuses his monograph almost exclusively on the five Stephanus pages of Plato's *Phaedo* in which Socrates describes his intellectual development (roughly 96a – 100e). This concentrated attention allows Sebell to work through the text with extremely fine-grained detail. The conventional account of the Socratic Turn generally follows Cicero's poetic rendition: philosophy once dealt with phenomena of the natural world; Socrates distinguished himself by calling philosophy down from the heavens into the *polis*. Cicero's description ostensibly comes from Plato's *Phaedo*, where Socrates describes what appears as a two stage process: Socrates was initially keen on the wisdom of natural science but then found these lacking; this disappointment turned Socrates to investigate human opinions about the good and the beautiful. Sebell's analysis does not displace this conventional story but complicates it in three parts: highlighting the limits of natural science in giving an account of its basic categories; showing the difficulty of scientific teleology (and teleology *in toto*); and elaborating the necessity of the Socratic Turn to examining opinions about justice in light of the limits of natural science. For Sebell, this step-by-step approach to Socrates' intellectual development (as described in the *Phaedo*) shows the error of separating political science from political philosophy and the urgency of returning to something like the Socratic project.

Sebell first turns to the problems young Socrates discovered in natural science. Materialistic natural science attempts to confirm that nothing can come without a cause. This approach fails, however, when one inquires about ultimate causes. The heterogeneity of the world, in particular its distinct classes and kinds of beings, is, in Sebell's words, "demonstrably noetic in origin" (13). In other words, Socrates' investigations lead him to see the primacy of form for an account of the causes of the world. Yet this form is separate from the material things under investigation. Something immaterial appears to put together distinct beings from separate parts, to count or calculate. "Only a mind can do this" (69).

The turn to mind brings Socrates to the question of teleology. Anaxagoras, on Socrates' account, had argued that "in fact mind (*nous*) is both the orderer and the cause of all

things” (97b8-c2; 75). Natural science had promised a teleological account of the universe, that things came to be to serve a final cause. Yet Anaxagoras’s account, as Socrates investigates it, prompts skepticism about this assumption. The materialistic approach of understanding beings “from below” failed but so too does the teleological approach of understanding beings “from above”: teleology still relies on assumptions about the nature of things, namely that they follow an order of the mind (83); when Socrates takes this account to the nature of the good, however, Anaxagoras’s account cannot show how *nous* constitutes particulars. The search for the cause of the whole, a search that animated the young Socrates’ first investigations, ends in failure.

The failure of natural science to respond to Socrates’ desire to know the causes of the whole prompts the Socratic Turn. Socrates’ “second sailing” begins from the insight that the accounts of natural science preempt choice; the accounts of the natural scientists, therefore, come into conflict with the idea that human beings can choose to be just. People living in society must examine their opinions about justice – they must figure out how, in Josiah Ober’s words, to go on together – and natural science does not help here. Yet the mode of questioning with which Socrates began and which led Socrates to see the inadequacies of natural science also shapes the path upon which Socrates embarks with the his turn. Seeking to uncover contradictions within definitions or hypotheses, a task that Socrates first pursued with respect to natural science, forms the substance of the dialectical approach that Socrates now brings to human opinions.

While *The Socratic Turn* does not detour in any radical way from the conventional account of Socrates’ development, it evinces a distinctive appreciation of how Socrates’ interest in natural science not only leads to his turn but shapes what follows. Socrates does not begin with abstract questions. Rather he turns to natural science out of a desire to know how to live; natural science does not satisfy these inquiries and indeed shows itself as presupposing certain unreflective answers to them. Hence Socrates must sail again, this time pulled by his own oars rather than the winds of the contemporary scientific movement around him. This second sailing marks the beginning of political philosophy yet the inquiry into causes and forms persists. Sebell suggests how separating political philosophy from political science fails to recognize the primacy of the former for negotiating political life itself.

Whether or not one finds this argument convincing will depend on a set of commitments that Sebell does not directly address. First, Sebell assumes that Socrates is a “philosopher” dedicated to imparting “teachings” to his benighted interlocutors. Second, Sebell assumes that a contemporary reader can understand these teachings through a “close reading” of Plato’s dialogues, one that foregrounds the text and relegates issues of language, dramatic situation, the place of a dialogue within Plato’s corpus, debates about the historical Socrates, genre, and audience to the footnotes or oblivion. Third, Sebell assumes an essential continuity between Socrates’ project of “political philosophy” and political theory as practiced today. Not defending (or even elaborating) these commitments means Sebell ignores many vital and interesting discussions in ancient political thought. I have serious questions about each one of these assumptions, but for the sake of space let me briefly address the final one.

Sebell begins his book with the provocative promise that political theorists can learn something important about their projects by examining the Socratic Turn. Sebell never states directly how his analysis would translate to the work of political theory today, but I would argue that Socrates' importance lies less in his intellectual autobiography than in the *practice* of philosophy that he carried out among his fellow citizens and non-citizens, a practice best characterized not in terms of teachings or doctrines but rather as aggressive and collaborative inquiry animated by erotic desire for wisdom that most Athenians found deeply disturbing of collective life. Sebell seems to think political scientists would best follow Socrates by accounting for the intellectual foundations of our research, but given that Socrates denied instructing anyone and never wrote anything down, I would counter that the most Socratic figures today pursue philosophy elsewhere – not among academic political theorists, but on street corners and in chat rooms, raising fundamental questions in disruptive and radical ways studies such as this one have yet to attend.