Eric Buzzetti


For over three decades, a steady stream of research on Xenophon and his works has poured forth in dissertations, journal articles, and monographs written by scholars in a range of disciplines. Into this array of recent contributions on Xenophon’s _Anabasis of Cyrus_ comes a new book written by Eric Buzzetti and published in the ‘Recovering Political Philosophy’ Series at Palgrave Macmillan. Buzzetti demonstrates the seriousness with which one must read the work of an author whose writing is characterized by an art of rhetoric and imbued with the lessons of Socratic philosophy. Aspects of his insightful and complex reading of Xenophon’s _Anabasis_ will be disputed, particularly by scholars who do not approach the text with questions and concerns fundamental to political philosophy, but the comprehensive account he offers is impressive. This book raises the stakes in the quarrel over how to read Xenophon, for it compels us to consider the crux of Xenophon’s _corpus_: What governing principle holds together his radical diversity of works and sustains the tense opposition of rival polarities represented therein?

Buzzetti’s reading of the _Anabasis_ offers an answer: the life of philosophy, represented by Socrates (p. 36). Here in the _Anabasis_, he argues, we witness Xenophon’s account of ‘the political relevance of the Socratic education’, and how he put into practice lessons he learned from Socrates, who taught ‘what is sometimes called the kingly or royal art, the art of ruling with knowledge’ (p. 2). What this teaching entails above all is an examination not merely of certain practical problems associated with ruling, but of essential philosophical issues embedded within political life itself – such as ‘the tension between the common good and the demands of moral virtue, or the tension between the good of the ruler and the good of the ruled’ (p. 32). These concerns rest at the heart of the _Anabasis_, according to Buzzetti, and a proper reading of the work demands we consider these philosophical questions along with Xenophon. This argument first surfaced in his introduction to Ambler’s 2008 translation of Xenophon’s _Anabasis of Cyrus_, where he briefly considered to what extent his Socratic education contributed to Xenophon’s capacity for political rule. But in neither his introduction nor this book does Buzzetti choose to take ‘the longer and perhaps more obvious path of spelling out what the Socratic education is’.

The ‘argument’ of the _Anabasis_, according to Buzzetti, goes strikingly far beyond the limited aim of showing how relevant Socratic education is as
preparation for ruling. Xenophon intends, in this view, to persuade ambitious young readers that the philosophic life is superior to the political life, even at its best. This is more than a reading of the *Anabasis* in light of Xenophon’s Socratic works, an important reading in itself (although often overlooked) which interprets the *Anabasis* by taking into account Xenophon’s Socratic education – with its influence on both why Xenophon as author writes the way he does, and why the character Xenophon speaks and acts as he does in the work. Buzzetti instead boldly argues that in content and purpose the text itself is genuinely Socratic: ‘The highest aim of the work is not to prepare for politics… but to educate ambition and cause high-minded and talented youths to consider the alternative embodied by Socrates’. So, for the ‘most promising readers’, the *Anabasis* is ‘a study in Socratic rule and an introduction to philosophy in the form of a critique of the political life’ (pp. 2, 30, 73, 229, 297-299).

To read Xenophon’s text ‘as it was intended to be read’, we must pay attention to the ‘argument’ (*logos*) of the dramatic action – a method propounded by certain interpreters of Plato’s dialogues. But reading the action of Xenophon’s text (in contrast with Platonic dialogues or Xenophon’s own Socratic dialogues) is all the more difficult because the surface of the text is already so compellingly dramatic. Xenophon, as philosopher and as author, intends for the contrast to be noted. Buzzetti comes at this from another angle: by stressing the quality of the writing as purposefully dramatic, in part to convey a sense of the exciting events being described, but more importantly to capture the attention of politically ambitious young men, who (if inclined to take seriously author and text) would discover in the action Xenophon narrates a subtle, yet persuasive account of the superiority of the life of philosophy to the hopes and prospects associated with political life and ruling. This truth, among others, Buzzetti contends, can only be grasped by readers who attend closely to the winding *logos* of the work, for Xenophon as a ‘defender of the politics of virtue’ does not ‘attack openly’ but quietly the insufficient ground of the piety, courage, and justice upon which that kind of politics inevitably rests. Such truths Xenophon merely whispers, rather than proclaims, because – despite his partial attachment to political life – ‘he is above all a philosopher’ (p. 201).

The title of this book is curious because it refers to ‘Xenophon the Socratic Prince’, though Buzzetti speaks almost exclusively throughout his study of Xenophon as ‘the Socratic King’. This title seems to link his study, at least on its surface, with Machiavelli’s *Prince*. References within the study to Xenophon as ‘the Socratic King’ contrast better with the epithets applied to Cyrus and Klearchos, and even more provocatively recall to mind the challenge that Xenophon and his *Anabasis* pose to another student of Socrates, Plato, and