

Socrates on the *Cyropaedia's* Pedagogy: Persia's Zero Tolerance Education

As a result of recent attempts on the part of scholars to understand why the Persian republic in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* was flawed and prone to collapse, scholars have exposed several shortcomings with its constitutional structure. Among the most serious of the flaws in the republic is its tendency to stifle the intellectual development of its citizens. In this paper I suggest that the Persian public School's policy of corporal punishment intended to eliminate incorrect philosophical thoughts about justice is the common cause of these intellectual problems plaguing the republic. I identify the School's pedagogy as the most significant contributing factor to the republic's collapse.

Among the most troubling of the flaws in the republic, as Nadon (2001) argues, are its inherent vulnerability to the “unfamiliar and therefore potentially corrupting ways” of new or foreign ideas (41) and, as Rasmussen (2009) puts it, the inherent lack of “choice-worthiness of the austere virtues instilled by Persian education” (12). The Persians cannot engage with foreign ideas without risk of their society collapsing. Thus they organize their society to encourage their fellow citizens to pursue virtue in isolation, but ultimately cannot even then convince anyone to truly prefer virtue to short-term financial profit. For both Nadon and Rasmussen, the consequence is that Cyrus, with his ambition and foreign education, is easily able to manipulate the Persians into destroying the constitutional foundation of the Persian republic (Rasmussen, 13; Nadon, 41). Yet as I argue in this paper, these flaws are only symptoms of the fundamental problem of Xenophon's Persia: their pedagogy.

At the heart of the republic's collapse is the Persian public School, which freely educates Persian children with the stated intent of teaching them justice and training them to be excellent leaders. The School is, moreover, organized upon the model of Socrates' circle of followers—

although within the pretense of the sixth century setting, it is implicitly an independent pedagogic development. Well-intentioned and well-organized, it possesses one fundamental flaw: the teachers beat their students for philosophic errors.

With reference to Socrates' arguments in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, I argue that the beatings of Persian Socratic education are implicitly criticized because they undermine the intentions of the Socratic method upon which they are modeled. As Socrates makes clear in the *Memorabilia*, free thought is fundamental to the development of a sound, philosophical, intelligent mind. The Persian elites, by teaching their justice and severely punishing even the voicing of alternatives, are not teaching their children *how* to think but *what* to think. The teachers emphasize strict obedience to legitimate leadership in all matters and expel from the program those students whom the beatings are unable to convince. Compare this to Socrates' encounter with Euthydemus in the *Memorabilia* (4.2.1 ff.) wherein he shows how easily a few questions are able to destroy Euthydemus' fervently held, but poorly considered, beliefs about justice. Socrates shows the necessity of *understanding* virtue: simply knowing what is virtuous is not enough. Like Euthydemus, the Persians, when tempted by Cyrus, quickly abandon their long-held virtues without a struggle. Unlike Euthydemus, who in his ignorance had the fortune to meet Socrates, the Persians met Cyrus, a Thrasymachean figure.

The parallel between the education system established by Socrates in the *Memorabilia*, however informal and un-institutional it may have been, and that established by the Persian republic in the *Cyropaedia*, rigid and institutional, is not coincidental. Balancing the arguments and practices of Socrates against those of the Persian state, it is possible for the reader of Xenophon to come to understand how close the Persians came to Socratic education while missing the point entirely. By beating their students, they inhibited, rather than encouraged, their

children's ability to think. It should come as no surprise when Cyrus, educated in Media, is able to use and abuse his obedient and philosophically stunted subordinates.

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