



# The Socratic Turn: Knowledge of Good and Evil in an Age of Science (Haney Foundation Series)

By Dustin Sebell

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*The Socratic Turn* addresses the question of whether we can acquire genuine knowledge of good and evil, right and wrong. Reputedly, Socrates was the first philosopher to make the attempt. But Socrates was a materialistic natural scientist in his youth, and it was only much later in life—after he had rejected materialistic natural science—that he finally turned, around the age of forty, to the examination of ordinary moral and political opinions, or to moral-political philosophy so understood.

Through a consideration of Plato's account of Socrates' intellectual development, and with a view to relevant works of the pre-Socratics, Xenophon, Aristotle, Hesiod, Homer, and Aristophanes, Dustin Sebell reproduces the course of thought that carried Socrates from materialistic natural science to moral-political philosophy. By doing so, he seeks to recover an all but forgotten approach to the question of justice, one still worthy of being called scientific.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Review**

"A book as clear as it is profound." -Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., Harvard University

"A remarkable and penetrating study of what has come to be known as the Socratic turn, namely, Socrates's having turned away from his youthful quest for a (materialistic) science of nature in favor of the kind of inquiry that he is known for, an examination through dialogue of such humanly significant matters as justice and the good." -*Review of Politics*

"Dustin Sebell's *The Socratic Turn* is one of the best books on Plato written in the last quarter century. At its core, it is a brilliant and meticulous analysis of the 'intellectual autobiography' of Socrates...His account, written with extraordinary clarity and penetration, brings to life the difficulties and dilemmas that led Socrates eventually to abandon natural science and turn to the study of ethics and politics. His book will be of enduring interest to political theorists and political scientists--for whom it is essential--but it is also a must-read for modern natural scientists, who will be confronted with a bold and far-reaching challenge to the very possibility of the science they seek...An extraordinary achievement." -*Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy*

"A detailed and rich interpretation...Attractive for specialists in ancient philosophy as well as for political scientists struggling to come to terms with the predicament of the modern materialistic worldview...Sebell suggests a valuable reconsideration of political science." -*Political Studies Review*

"In *The Socratic Turn*, Dustin Sebell argues that Socrates' efforts to find a way forward after coming to see the shortcomings of pre-Socratic natural science can help political theorists today as we grapple with the predicament of political philosophy in a world transformed by modern science. *The Socratic Turn* deserves a wide audience, not only because Sebell's textual interpretation is of the highest order, but also because Sebell raises and confronts theoretical problems that are too often ignored or evaded."—Devin Stauffer, author of *The Unity of Plato's Gorgias: Rhetoric, Justice, and the Philosophic Life*

"This extraordinarily ambitious book aims to vindicate the scientific character of political philosophy by elucidating the 'Socratic turn,' that is, the novel approach to the study of nature as a whole and of human nature in particular that marks the Socratic revolution in the history of thought. This book offers a singularly focused, detailed, and precise analysis of Socrates' founding of political philosophy and the complex critique of natural science on which that founding is based. Drawing on Aristophanes, Hesiod, Xenophon, and Aristotle, as well as other Platonic dialogues, Sebell's fresh, rigorous, and provocative interpretation of Plato's *Phaedo* sheds important light on the intellectual autobiography of Socrates. This should also prove to be a genuinely significant book insofar as it raises far-reaching questions about Plato's understanding of natural science, teleology, the Ideas, and the philosophic life."—Peter J. Ahrensdorf, author of *The Death of Socrates and the Life of Philosophy*

"Few studies of Plato's dialogues are as textually meticulous, intellectually demanding, and replete with insight as Dustin Sebell's *The Socratic Turn*. Approaching a most difficult work, the *Phaedo*, with the deftness of a seasoned student of Plato, Sebell unpacks the dialogue with surgical precision and relentlessly pursues every lead in the argument and drama. The result is an extraordinary guide to the 'intellectual autobiography' of Socrates as it is presented in the *Phaedo*: an exacting investigation of Socrates' famous turn to the moral and political questions and a model of textual and philosophical clarity."—Susan Collins, University of Notre Dame

"Dustin Sebell should be congratulated for writing a meticulous commentary on ancient physics that is engaging, provocative, and generally persuasive. His book raises important questions about the foundations and authority of modern science, and contemporary philosophy, that should not be ignored."—Mark Lutz, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

#### About the Author

Dustin Sebell is Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Michigan State University

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