In his account of the Persian general Cyrus, Greek historian Xenophon chronicles political events while revealing the moral decay and imperial disintegration he saw within them. In his essay for Professor Vincent Renzi’s Freshman Seminar, “Xenophon of Athens—Cavalry Commander and Socratic Philosopher,” Daniel Getzler explores the final chapter of the Cyropaedia and reveals how a historian can be both objective and conscientious.

**CYROPAEDIA 8.8:
XENOPHON’S FINAL CHAPTER**

Daniel Getzler

Just like the closing passages of the Anabasis, Xenophon’s ending to the Cyropaedia (The Education of Cyrus) has left many readers and historians puzzled by its significance and intent. Interestingly, the confusion surrounding the two conclusions to the work has prompted many to question whether either of them are actually Xenophon’s writing. However, one consequence from focusing so much on who wrote the final chapter of the Cyropaedia is that the debate has detracted from looking at why Xenophon might have considered it a fitting ending to the story and message of the text. As Paula Winsor Sage notes in her article “Dying in Style: Xenophon’s Ideal Leader and the End of the Cyropaedia,” debate over whether Xenophon wrote 8.8 “has served as a distraction from more revealing explorations of the effect this conclusion has on the rest of the work” (162). Despite that lack of exploration into the purpose and role of the final chapter, there are still several intriguing theories as to why Xenophon ended the story that way and what he was hoping to accomplish in doing so.

Sage’s suggests that 8.8 not only concludes the book in an appropriate way but also even enhances the message Xenophon expresses in the opening chapter and throughout the entire story. If the main idea of the text is that ruling over people is extremely difficult and that only one as exceptional as Cyrus was able to achieve it, then seeing his
incredibly constructed empire fall apart after his death should only further support that notion. Had Cyrus’ sons, without the same gifted nature and education of their father, effortlessly filled in as rulers of his empire, then maybe ruling over humans isn’t so difficult and Cyrus not so special after all. The key to understanding this argument comes from connecting the events in the final chapter to how Xenophon sets the tone for the content and purpose of the story in the opening. In particular, Xenophon does not claim that Cyrus’ regime is the ideal for all others to follow, nor does he suggest that a monarchy or despotism is the most effective method of governance that works perfectly all the time. If anything, he almost suggests the opposite by claiming that he considered ruling humans “among those tasks that are impossible” prior to considering Cyrus (1.1.3). Even though Cyrus still alters Xenophon’s perspective, he does it not by showing that ruling over humans is simple, but that it is possible for a unique man with such incredible virtue to accomplish it. Consequently, as he states at the end of the opening chapter, the Cyropaedia is an attempt to uncover how and why Cyrus might have been able to achieve this singular success. In his own words, Xenophon writes that “on the grounds that this man was worthy of wonder, we examined who he was by birth, what his nature was, and with what education he was brought up, such that he so excelled in ruling human beings” (1.1.6).

Even as Cyrus’ empire expands across several countries and hundreds of thousands of people by the beginning of Book eight, Xenophon, just as in the introduction, still makes sure to emphasize that the success comes from the exceptionalism of one man: Cyrus. In the first chapter of Book eight, Xenophon hints at what is to come by remarking that “as it is with the other things, so it is with these: When the person in control is better, the lawful things are observed with greater purity. When he is worse, they are observed in an inferior way” (8.1.8). Xenophon also reiterates this message after describing how the empire fell apart so quickly after Cyrus’ death in Chapter eight; “everyone in Asia has been turned towards impiety and injustice, for of whatever sort those who are foremost may be, such also, for the most part, do those beneath them become” (8.8.5). In attributing the fortunes of an empire to the virtue of its current leader, Xenophon not
only gives Cyrus the credit for his regime’s success, but also absolves him of much responsibility for any of its failings after his death.

Furthermore, Sage claims that Xenophon illustrates how the disintegration of the empire arose, not from Cyrus laying the foundations for its destruction, but by his successors ignoring the practices that Cyrus had established. As she points out, “those who find the statements in 8.8 critical of Persia, and in contradiction to statements made earlier in the Cyropaedia do not, I think, take sufficient notice of Xenophon’s specific point—that the people, without their patriarchal leader as role model, were less able to live up to the standard of virtue established by Cyrus, despite the nomina which had been left behind” (Sage 166). Speeches given by Cyrus and Chrysantas at the end of Book Seven and start of Book Eight appear to further Sage’s assertion. In them, the two men thoroughly instruct Cyrus’ closest aides and allies on how to continue the success of his empire after he is gone. The fact that they failed after disregarding Cyrus’ actions and advice is difficult to use as evidence against the success of his leadership. Sage even argues that the failure of his successors in the conclusion allows Xenophon to present Cyrus “as the more exceptional, partly because he lacked rivals—rivals of his greatness or rivals who were contenders for his power. From beginning to end, he in fact emphasizes that Cyrus was one of a kind” (173).

Even though Xenophon clearly suggests that the virtue and strength of a leader is the crucial factor in an empire’s success, that doesn’t mean he automatically renders Cyrus blameless for the failures of his sons’ regime. To better understand the intended message in the conclusion, it is important to figure out how Xenophon intends the swift collapse of the empire to reflect on Cyrus himself. Even if he believes that the virtue of the present leader is fully responsible for everything that takes place in an empire, it still leaves the question of how much influence Cyrus had or should have had in the development of his two sons. One way to better gauge Xenophon’s intentions is by looking at how he responds to the allegations surrounding Socrates’ culpability for how Critias and Alcibiades harmed Athens in the Memorabilia.

The two situations are not identical, but the questions raised surrounding the master’s responsibility are extremely similar. In both
instances, two young men, despite once spending plenty of time with virtuous leaders, showed no regard for their teachers’ advice or behavior and went on to cause great harm for their respective peoples. Consequently, the manner in which Xenophon goes about defending Socrates in the Memorabilia could shed some light on his views about Cyrus’ guilt for the collapse in the final chapter. In response to the suggestion that Socrates should be blamed for how Critias and Alcibiades became less moderate after leaving him, Xenophon questions “what master of the flute or master of the cithara or other teacher who has made his students competent is blamed if they appear worse after they have gone onto others” (1.2.27)? After claiming that a father shouldn’t hold a first and better master responsible, Xenophon continues by examining a father’s responsibility for the immorality of his sons. He remarks that “fathers themselves are companions of their sons, and they are not blamed when their sons strike false notes if they themselves are moderate” (1.2.27).

That sentence, especially the remark about the father’s moderacy, probably gives the best indication into how Xenophon intended the final chapter to reflect on Cyrus. Had Socrates or Cyrus been immoderate themselves and then passed that onto their followers, only then, Xenophon argues, should they be held responsible for those actions. Additionally, even if they had been moderate in their own behavior but “were to praise those whom he saw taking low actions, he would have been justly censured” (1.2.28). Xenophon declares in the Memorabilia that one who acts and instructs moderately deserves no shame for the immorality of any of his students. Provided that Cyrus remained moderate until his death, the same logic would have prevented him from using the collapse of the Persian empire to detract from the exceptionalism of Cyrus or his leadership.

Although Sage doesn’t connect the conclusion to the passage from the Memorabilia, she echoes the idea of there being limitations to the extent, even the most virtuous people, can dictate future behavior. She contends that Xenophon intends to show “that not even Cyrus, most remarkable human being that he was, could ensure the behavior of his sons and subjects after he was gone” (171). As Bodil Due also points out, this approach to understanding the ending makes “the first and last chapter form a circle or train of thoughts around the
whole work” (19). In the beginning, Xenophon tells us that ruling humans is a formidable task only possible for those with exceptional virtue. In the following six books, he explains how Cyrus’ unique brilliance allowed him to accomplish it. In the conclusion, he re-emphasizes how Cyrus’ exceptionalism overcame the difficulty of ruling people by showing that his empire couldn’t be maintained after his death.

In Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia: Style, Genre, and Literary Technique*, Deborah Levine Gera presents an entirely different approach to understanding the closing sections of the *Cyropaedia*. Whereas Sage’s argument suggests that the empire’s collapse began with Cyrus’ death, Gera turns the debate on its head by claiming that the “seeds of destruction have been sown by Cyrus himself” through his behavior in the final two books (299). Gera argues that “Xenophon lets us see—but never explicitly says—that the developments initiated by Cyrus after the conquest of Babylon will eventually lead to the moral downfall of his regime” (299). In this chapter of her book, she points out several instances in which Cyrus’ behavior has deteriorated or at least shifted from his conduct earlier on. Gera also notes that if Cyrus’ earlier rule is supposed to represent a near perfect regime, his more despotic rule in Babylon can’t also represent an ideal.

One passage Gera highlights as an example of Cyrus’ decline is the progression from Chapter three of Book eight. Even though all his subjects bow down before him, Gera notices that “Xenophon rather cynically adds that perhaps all those present bow down to the Persian leader, not because they are impressed by his appearance but because they have been commanded to do so” (292). The distinction in that passage between willful and forced obedience is crucial, as it is a key theme in both Cyrus’s original success and Xenophon’s other works. More importantly, it also illustrates how Cyrus is now betraying the earlier advice of his father. In Book One, Cambyses tells him “this is indeed the road to obeying by compulsion, but to what is far superior to this, to their being willing to obey, their is another road that is shorter, for human beings obey with great pleasure whomever they think is more prudent about their own advantage than they are themselves” (1.6.21). Cyrus also ignores his earlier standards, as well as those of Socrates, in his moderacy toward food. In Book One, Cyrus tells his father that “first, by Zeus, I try never to overeat, for it
is oppressive” (1.6.17). By Book Eight, his moderacy has drastically disintegrated, as Gera points out: “as ruler of Babylon he is served expensive and elaborate meals which could rival those of Astyages” (293).

The fact that the once-disciplined eating habits of his empire had already begun to decline before Cyrus’ death is a key point, as it suggests the complete collapse of discipline. It sets the path towards the “breakfast to bed meal” that had already started in Chapter Eight during Cyrus’ reign. It also changes the significance of Xenophon’s remarks in the Memorabilia that fathers “are not blamed when their sons strike false notes if they themselves are moderate” (1.2.27). In comparing Cyrus’s initial moderacy to his rule after capturing Babylon, Gera points out that “the discrepancies and difficulties are too numerous and obtrusive not have been deliberately included by Xenophon” (296). If Gera is correct in asserting that Cyrus’s flawed later behavior is a deliberate ploy by Xenophon, who himself believed that only moderate fathers are blameless for their sons’ misconduct, then Xenophon’s intentions in Chapter Eight are likely far different from what Sage and Due suggest. Rather than using the collapse of the empire to highlight Cyrus’ unique exceptionalism, Xenophon then more likely intended it to be seen as a continuation of the defective regime he left behind.

In Xenophon’s Imperial Fiction: On The Education of Cyrus, James Tatum presents another angle to Xenophon’s unusual ending in the final chapter. Like Due and Sage, Tatum agrees that Xenophon intended Cyrus to be an almost ideal leader, yet his theory on about the conclusion is completely different. While he acknowledges that the failure of Cyrus’s successors might further highlight his unique brilliance, he argues that it isn’t Xenophon’s primary intention. Additionally, he suggests that Cyrus’s achievements “would amount to very little if he did not change the world for the better” (189). However, Tatum still refuses to attribute the discrepancies in the final chapter to its being added by a different author. Instead, rather than focusing on what the conclusion is designed to reveal about Cyrus, he focuses on “what this ending reveals about the connections between what Xenophon created and actual political experience” (225). Tatum argues that, even if the Cyropaedia is mostly an idealized fiction, it is
still based loosely on historical facts. For instance, Cyrus did establish an empire similar in size to the one Xenophon outlines and it did collapse under his descendants. Even if Cyrus’s virtue and conduct in between all of that is pure fiction, Xenophon still made sure the story stayed in line with the most basic historical facts.

Tatum argues that the conclusion illustrates Xenophon’s struggle in reconciling his idealized account of Cyrus with the Persian empire’s fall after his death and its decline during Xenophon’s own life: “the gap between the perfections of Cyrus and all the imperfections of present day Persia is so great the fantasy cannot continue” (238). Although Tatum’s argument raises an interesting perspective, especially given the uncertain relationship between historical accuracy and idealized fiction in Xenophon’s other works, I disagree with how it seems to isolate the final chapter from the rest of the story. His theory almost suggests that the entire story is pure fiction until Xenophon bridges his fantasy with reality in the closing chapter. This approach seems to ignore how the content in 8.8 connects with the trends from the previous several chapters. For instance, the final two books both include several scenes with Cyrus and his aides discussing the increased difficulty of maintaining an empire and advising others on how to continue the regime after he passes away. Furthermore, as Gera points out, there are numerous hints that the collapse in the final chapter is a continuation of Cyrus’s declining moderation after capturing Babylon.

Although Sage, Due, and Gera have different theories on what particularly Xenophon hoped to illustrate through the collapse of the empire, they all agree that he intended to show a decadence from the guidelines set forth by Cambyses and followed through by Cyrus in the opening books. Additionally, many of those guidelines, such as the ones regarding willful obedience, avoiding idleness, and moderacy with food, are all concepts echoed by Socrates in the Memorabilia and consistent throughout Xenophon’s other works. However, while Sage and Gera disagree in deciding who Xenophon might hold responsible for the empire’s decline, that may be missing the larger meaning of the closing chapters. Instead of focusing on the particular personnel to blame, Xenophon’s main intent might have been to illustrate the value of the principles that he, Socrates, and Cambyses all encour-
aged. As Cyrus embraces those standards in the earlier books, he and his empire are unparalleled in their accomplishment. However, as the leadership begins to drift away from those standards, there is a sharp decline in success and obedience afforded to them. This trend continues through the final passages in which there is a complete lack of discipline that contradicts everything Xenophon and Socrates advocated for in their other works. Especially considering that the Cyropaedia’s Cyrus is predominantly a fictional character, it seems unlikely that showing him in a certain light to readers was Xenophon’s primary intent with his ending. Rather, especially if Cyrus’s earlier achievements are written as a celebration of the Xenophonic leadership principles he followed along the way, then the closing chapter might therefore represent the utter chaos that unfolds when they are ignored.

WORKS CITED