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Xenophon's Subversive Socrates: A Reading of *Memorabilia* 4.1-4

O Sócrates subversivo e Xenophonte: uma leitura de Memorabilia *4.1-4*

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Abstract: This article argues that Xenophon's conception of Socrates' exemplary qualities, by which he sought to exonerate him of the charges of impiety and harming the youth, was not that of the average Athenian. The difference was such that someone who was pious in the way Xenophon represented Socrates as being might even appear to be impious to the majority of his fellow citizens. So too, what Xenophon described as Socrates' benefits to others might have seemed quite otherwise, when measured by popular views. The article thus challenges the still prevailing image of Xenophon as a man of mediocre intelligence, who perhaps misunderstood Socrates, but was incapable of creating a picture of him that was coherent and informed by an original, and perhaps even accurate, vision of his teachings.

Keywords: justice; law; piety; Socrates; theodicy; Xenophon.

Resumo: Este artigo argumenta que a concepção de Xenofonte sobre as qualidades exemplares de Sócrates, pelas quais procurou exonerá-lo das acusações de impiedade e de prejudicar a juventude, não era a do ateniense médio. A diferença era tal que alguém que fosse piedoso na forma como Xenofonte representava Sócrates poderia até parecer ímpio para a maioria dos seus concidadãos. Da mesma forma, o que Xenofonte descreveu como os benefícios de Sócrates para os outros poderia ter parecido completamente diferente, quando medido pelas opiniões populares. O artigo desafia assim a imagem ainda prevalecente de Xenofonte como um homem de inteligência medíocre, que talvez tenha entendido mal Sócrates, mas foi incapaz de criar uma imagem dele que fosse coerente e informada por uma visão original, e talvez até precisa, dos seus ensinamentos.

Palavras-chave: justiça; lei; piedade; Sócrates; teodiceia; Xenofonte.

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Introduction

The title of this paper[1] is bound to raise eyebrows, if not alarms. Xenophon's declared purpose in composing the *Memorabilia* was to defend Socrates against any charge of impiety or harming – corrupting, in the language of the indictment – anyone at all. As he puts it in the final chapter of the work: "For my part [ἐμοὶ μὲν δή], I have described him as he was: so pious as to do nothing without the judgment of the gods; so just as not to do the least harm to anyone, but rather to benefit all who associated with him in the greatest degree." He was supremely self-controlled, most sensible (*phronimos*) and independent in his judgment, capable in speaking as well as in cross-examining others and urging them to excellence and nobility (*kalokagathia*). Xenophon sums him up by saying that Socrates seemed (*edokei*) the very model of the best and happiest (*eudaimonestatos*) of men. How could such a figure be remotely thought of as subversive?

Let me state my position at the outset. That Socrates seemed to Xenophon – I think we must understand ἐμοί after the verb ἐδόκει in that penultimate sentence of the book (ἐδόκει τοιοῦτος εἶναι οἷος ἂν εἴη ἄριστός τε ἀνὴρ καὶ εὐδαιμονέστατος, 4.8.11) – to be the best of men

[1] This paper was conceived during my stay at the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies, to whose support and stimulating atmosphere I am deeply grateful. I must also express my gratitude in particular to the members of the research group, "Triangulating Socrates," held at the Institute. Together, we met weekly, online, for more than half a year, and read in minute detail the fourth book of the *Memorabilia*. These colleagues are Gabriel Danzig, Jamie Redfield, Dave Johnson, Chloe Balla, and Olga Chernyakhovskaya. I am indebted too to the many others who participated in the series of talks sponsored by the research group. I delivered this paper on two occasions. Once was under the sponsorship of the International Society for Socratic Studies, on 7 July 2021; a recording of the event is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kOus1NqjJk>. I am grateful for comments during that session. The other was for a seminar on "Philosophy and Religion," delivered on 12 November 2021 and organized by Sylvana Chrysakopoulou in the Classics Department of the University of Ioannina. Again, I am grateful for comments during that virtual meeting, and especially to Andrei Lebedev, Richard Seaford, Ronna Burger, and Sylvana herself. None of these scholars is responsible for the views I present here.

does not necessarily imply that he would have been perceived that way by the majority of contemporary Athenians. The mistake, as I see it, lies in assuming that Xenophon's views were that of a typical citizen of Athens; or, if not that precisely, that his intention was to exonerate Socrates of the charges of impiety and harming the youth by showing that he conformed in thought and action to what Athenians regarded as consummate piety and beneficence. But what if Xenophon's conception of these exemplary qualities was not that of the average Athenian, of the sort who sat in judgment over Socrates in the trial and condemned him to death? Suppose that what Xenophon meant by piety was quite different from what an average Athenian would have understood by the term, so much so, in fact, that someone who was pious by Xenophon's lights (or as he represented Socrates as being) might even look sacrilegious to the majority of his fellow citizens. Suppose too that what Xenophon chose to describe as beneficial might again seem quite otherwise, when measured by popular views of advantage and of good and bad conduct. This is not a particularly challenging thought experiment. We do it readily enough when considering Plato's idealized image of Socrates, which was not necessarily such as to commend itself to the Athenian man in the street. And yet, for all the progress that has been made in recent decades in our understanding of Xenophon's views, which are in many respects very much his own, we still, I think, find it hard to shake off the conception of him as a man of mediocre intelligence, who perhaps dumbed down Socrates, to the extent that he understood what he had to say, but was incapable of creating a picture of him that was coherent and informed by an original vision, however much, or little, this corresponded to the real Socrates.[2]

To put it schematically, we may identify three images of Socrates. At one extreme, there is the ostensibly real man, whose views we must reconstruct hazardously from the testimonies of his disciples. At the other, there is the Socrates whom the Athenians, or at least the majority

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[2] I am aware that this statement needs considerable qualification, in the light of many brilliant interpretations, too numerous to cite, of Xenophon's originality as a writer and (to a more limited extent) as a thinker. But that he self-consciously represented Socrates as subversive has not, I believe, been affirmed, or at least not argued at length. The present paper is a preliminary essay in that direction.

of the jurors, convicted and saw as worthy of the death penalty for his impiety and corrosive influence on the young, although a great many others voted to acquit him and so doubtless saw him differently. Between these extremes, there is the Socrates we see in the pages of Xenophon (or of Plato). On the most common view, Xenophon's purpose in recording his memoirs of Socrates is to show that those who condemned him got him wrong. If they had seen Socrates as Xenophon represented him, they would have appreciated his virtues and honored him as the best of citizens. I wish to suggest that this was not Xenophon's intention. Rather, he offers a portrait of a Socrates who, by Xenophon's own standards, is all those good things. But Xenophon's ideas of piety and beneficence are not those of the general public, any more than Socrates' own were. To put it starkly, an average Athenian, upon reading Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, might as easily have concluded that the jurors were right in convicting Socrates as that they were terribly misguided. That is what I mean by saying that Xenophon's Socrates was subversive of ordinary Athenian values.[3]

The *Elenchos*

And so, to the text. In the fourth chapter of the fourth book of the *Memorabilia*, Xenophon writes: "But neither did Socrates hide his view concerning what is just" (ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ περὶ τοῦ δικαίου γε οὐκ ἀπεκρύπτετο ἣν εἶχε γνώμην, 4.4.1); this follows on the preceding discussion of piety. Now, this is not necessarily the most promising defense of Socrates' character, if it carries the suggestion that Socrates had a conception of his own about the just, which may not have accorded entirely with what others supposed. It is just this kind of wedge that I propose to insert between Xenophon's Socrates and what we might, with Kenneth Dover, call popular morality. Xenophon begins the fourth book by explaining that, when Socrates spoke of being in love, it was not the physical attraction of boys that aroused him but the souls of those who

[3] Contrast, for example, Bydén (2009), reviewing Sedley (2008a): "it should be kept in mind that what Xenophon is trying to show in these chapters is that Socrates was not only a critic of other people's vices, but himself a model of virtue, especially of piety and temperance. It seems to me that it would have been counterproductive for him to depict his hero as a spiritual revolutionary."

were naturally drawn to *aretê*.[4] He recognized these by the fact that they were quick learners, had good memories, and were passionate to learn everything that was useful for managing both the home and the city (4.1.2). Now, Matthew Christ (2020) has argued forcefully that the target audience for Xenophon's works in general, and not just the Socratic writings, was the Athenian elite, with a view to motivating them to re-enter politics, not so as to overthrow the democracy but to guide and improve it. Broadly speaking, that may well be right, but the group that Socrates picks out here is not the traditional aristocracy, who for all I know were as dim as the conventional image of the British landed nobility, but rather those most gifted intellectually. Some among this class, Xenophon tell us, believed that they were naturally good (φύσει ἀγαθούς, 4.1.3), and to these he explained that those natures that are thought to be, or perhaps regard themselves as, best (αἱ ἄρισται δοκοῦσαι εἶναι φύσεις) are most in need of *paideia*. In the same way, the most spirited horses and dogs are most in need of being broken in early. Socrates further qualifies this type as "naturally outstanding, fittest in soul, and best able to accomplish whatever they set their hands to" (τοὺς εὐφυεστάτους, ἐρρωμενεστάτους τε ταῖς ψυχαῖς ὄντας καὶ ἐξεργαστικωτάτους ὧν ἂν ἐγχειρῶσι, 4.1.4). In addition to these people of natural talent, Socrates has also to deal with the wealthy, who on this account are arrogant and confident that they are not in need of education. Socrates is particularly harsh on these types, asserting that anyone who thinks he can distinguish the harmful from the useful without learning is a moron (μῶρος, 4.1.5), and a fool (ἠλίθιος) if he thinks that money without knowledge will bring him esteem. Still a third type that Socrates has to win over consists of those who think they already know it all, like the adolescent Euthydemus, who prides himself on his wisdom because he has read all the poets and sophists. Xenophon proceeds to show how Socrates humbled the youth, first arousing his interest by staging some

[4] That the charge of corrupting the youth, as cited in Xenophon's and Plato's *Apologies*, in fact referred to just this type of corruption has been argued forcefully by Gabriel Danzig (2010). Cf. Johnson (2021, p. 187): "Xenophon's Socrates, as it turns out, is a far better advocate for what we call Platonic love – love without sex – than Plato's Socrates ever is."

conversations near the leather shop where the boy hung out, and then by a series of cross-examinations that cast the poor kid into despondency.

Socrates first raises the question of whether Themistocles achieved his abilities by associating with some wise person or was simply gifted by nature, and he avows that it would be simple-minded (εὔηθες) to suppose that ordinary skills require teachers but governing a city comes spontaneously (4.2.2).[5] This piques Euthydemus' interest, though it does not quite speak to his case, since he believed he could acquire the necessary skills from reading, not simply on his own (ἀπὸ ταὐτομάτου). Then, when he saw Euthydemus hovering at a distance as Socrates discoursed so that he wouldn't seem too admiring, Socrates pointed to him directly and announced to the company that the boy thinks the best advertisement for his abilities, when he comes to advising the city, will be the appearance of not having learned anything from anyone (μὴ δόξῃ μανθάνειν τι παρά του, 4.2.3). Socrates mocks Euthydemus by ventriloquizing a similar declaration concerning medicine, which indeed sounds absurd. When Euthydemus continues to maintain silence (σιωπῇ) as a way of projecting an image of temperance (σωφροσύνη 4.2.6), Socrates adds that even flute and cithara players, and horseback riders too, affirm their credentials by reference to their teachers, yet those who propose to lead the city imagine that they can do it spontaneously and of a sudden, without preparation or practice (ἄνευ παρασκευῆς καὶ ἐπιμελείας αὐτόματοι ἐξαίφνης). Having now caught the boy's attention, Socrates comes to him alone at the leather shop, and asks him whether he has really collected so great a quantity of writings by men who are said to be wise (τῶν λεγομένων σοφῶν ἀνδρῶν, 4.2.8). We ought not to let the casual switch back to the authority of written texts go unremarked. Perhaps it makes sense to doubt that one can learn to play a musical instrument from books alone, and so too for riding, even if Xenophon himself composed an essay on the subject. This might not be true, however, of geometry. Does it obtain for politics, to the extent that this can be learned?

[5] On the following cross-examination and the elenchus in Xenophon's works in general, see Lachance (2018).

Socrates proceeds to flatter Euthydemus for preferring wisdom to wealth, and then asks him in what area he wishes to excel, thanks to his reading, suggesting in turn medicine, a field rich in written texts, architecture, geometry, astronomy (ἀστρολόγος, 4.2.10), and poetic recitation (ῥαψῳδός). He finally alights on politics, by which people are able to rule and be useful to themselves and others (4.2.11), to which Euthydemus assents as the excellence (ἀρετή) he most desires. When Socrates asks further whether one can be good at this art without being just, Euthydemus agrees that justice is indispensable, and what is more, affirms that he has shown himself inferior to no one in being just. Socrates then inquires whether those who are just can describe their deeds of justice (τὰ τῆς δικαιοσύνης ἔργα ἐξηγήσασθαι, 4.2.12), the way carpenters, for example, can point to their deeds (τὰ ἑαυτῶν ἔργα ἐπιδεῖξαι). When Euthydemus affirms that he can, and also to those of injustice, Socrates proposes that they make two lists, one labeled delta for deeds of δικαιοσύνη, the other alpha for those of ἀδικία (4.2.13). Euthydemus confidently places lying, deception, wrongdoing or fraud (κακουργεῖν), and enslavement under alpha (4.2.14), but Socrates shows that there are situations in which each of these behaviors is justified. For example, enslaving the people of a hostile city would hardly be deemed unjust, as Euthydemus agrees, nor is stealing and plundering their goods. To this, Euthydemus stipulates the proviso that such acts are unjust when committed against *philoi*. Socrates then demonstrates that lying to friends and allies may also be the right thing to do, as when a general tells his dispirited troops that help is on the way, so as to rouse their courage. So too, deceiving a child into taking its medicine or filching the sword of a friend who is in despair, lest he hurt himself, are just actions (4.2.17). Here we are readily reminded of Socrates' argument in the first book of Plato's *Republic*, where he shows that one ought not to return a sword to a man who has in the meantime lost his wits.[6]

The next step for Euthydemus might well have been to distinguish just and unjust acts on the basis of intention: willingly to harm a friend goes under alpha. But Socrates forestalls that move by asking whether it

[6] Xenophon several times endorses the value of lying in certain circumstances, as in *Cyropaedia* (1.6.27); *Anabasis* (1.3.5); for discussion, see Danzig (2007).

is more unjust to harm a friend voluntarily or involuntarily. Euthydemus by now no longer trusts his replies, but ventures to say that doing so voluntarily (ἑκών, 4.2.19) is less just. Socrates again trips him up by suggesting that being just is a matter of learning and knowledge (μάθησις καὶ ἐπιστήμη, 4.2.20), just as grammar is. One who knows his letters can certainly write or read incorrectly, but will do so consciously and is capable of doing both correctly (ὀρθῶς), whereas one who makes mistakes involuntarily is illiterate (ἀγράμματος). Thus, a person who knows what is just is both more just than one who is ignorant, and also more capable of doing something unjust, should he wish; what is more, he alone can do so intentionally. Euthydemus is thoroughly perplexed, and no wonder. One begins to wonder whether an Alcibiades or a Critias, having acquired a knowledge of justice from Socrates, might not still be among the more just of men, despite all the crimes they later commit.

With a characteristic leap, Socrates now inquires whether a person who wishes to tell the truth but keeps changing his mind from one moment to the next can be said to know what he thinks he knows, to which Euthydemus replies, certainly not. Socrates then equates a lack of knowledge (ἀμαθία, 4.2.22) with slavishness, though he is quick to point out that it is not ignorance of the coppersmith's art or of carpentry or leatherworking, since most of those who practice these crafts, Euthydemus avows, are themselves slavish – rather a tactless remark, given that he is availing himself of the hospitality of a leather worker at this very moment. The term rather applies to those ignorant of what is fine, good, and just (τὰ καλὰ καὶ ἀγαθὰ καὶ δίκαια). The barb strikes home. Euthydemus had prided himself on possessing just this kind of knowledge, as he practiced what he regarded as philosophy (so I understand the phrase, φιλοσοφεῖν φιλοσοφίαν, 4.2.23), but for all his efforts he cannot provide answers concerning the matters he most ought to know. Socrates has yet another trick up his sleeve, but let us pause to consider the effect of his interrogation to this point – not on Euthydemus, who is clearly driven to despair, but on the reader.

If Xenophon had intended to portray Socrates as a purveyor of conventional wisdom, or simply as harmless, he would seem to have gone about it in the worst possible way. For his Socrates displays that critical,

corrosive intelligence that must have disturbed a good many Athenians, whatever their social position. Euthydemus thought he could acquire wisdom by reading the poets and the sages, the traditional storehouse of moral instruction, only to find that such lore cannot stand up to the Socratic elenchus. If Socrates is the model of a live teacher, such as he insists is necessary for proper learning, what he has to offer leads to radical doubt about the very nature of what is just, and hence the basis of sound citizenship. Perhaps he will yet come up with some positive doctrine that will rescue poor Euthydemus from his aporia.

Socrates next makes another of his sudden shifts of focus, as he asks Euthydemus whether he has ever been to Delphi, and read the famous inscription on the temple of Apollo there: know thyself. It seems that this is an instance of writing that Euthydemus has not considered seriously, since he had supposed that he knew himself as well as he knew anything. Socrates once again narrows down the kind of knowledge in question to that of one's capacity (δύναμις, 4.2.25), just as someone purchasing a horse would wish to know its character. Those who know their own abilities fare best, since they understand what they can and cannot do; they steer clear of what they do not know, and so are unerring (ἀναμάρτητοι, 4.2.26). As a result, they are esteemed and honored (εὔδοξοί τε καὶ τίμιοι, 4.2.28), which is what Euthydemus, of course, aspires to, whereas those who do not have such knowledge fail in their enterprises, are punished for their mistakes, and are ridiculous and despised in the eyes of all, just as cities are which overestimate their power. Euthydemus is persuaded, and appeals to Socrates for instruction on where to begin the process of knowing himself.

Socrates then asks the lad whether he knows the difference between good things and bad (τὰ μὲν ἀγαθὰ καὶ τὰ κακά, 4.2.31), to which Euthydemus confidently replies that he does, for not to know this would make him worse than any slave – the repeated references to slavery are noteworthy. He offers health as an example of the former, sickness of the latter, along with whatever contributes to each condition, such as the relevant foods and activities. Socrates points out, however, that a healthy person may well undertake actions that lead to harm, which he would have avoided had he been ill. The illustration given is rather trivial: a person who, because of poor health, does not embark on a ship destined to sink

will fare better than the stronger person who did. So the consequences of health are uncertain, and this makes health itself no more a good than sickness, at least in absolute terms. Euthydemus next offers wisdom or skill (σοφία, 4.2.33) as surely an unequivocally good thing, and again Socrates demonstrates that σοφία, or at least a reputation for cleverness, can lead to harm, citing Daedalus and Palamedes as instances, the one having been enslaved by Minos, the other murdered by Odysseus for his ingenuity. This may seem like slippery reasoning: intelligence is in itself a good thing, we may be inclined to suppose, even if a brilliant atomic scientist runs a greater risk than you or I of being kidnapped by a foreign power. Perhaps a Stoic might have replied that, so long as he retained his virtue, such a fate is in itself indifferent. But Socrates is directing his arguments at an adolescent, who evidently takes it for granted that bodily wellbeing and personal freedom are important values. Euthydemus has one more candidate for an undisputed good (ἀναμφιλογώτατον ἀγαθὸν, 4.2.34), and this one would seem to be unimpeachable: τὸ εὐδαιμονεῖν. But Socrates is again ready with a counterargument: *eudaimonia* would be such, if it weren't made up of equivocal goods, such as beauty, strength, wealth, reputation, and the like, all of which Euthydemus counts among the constituents of happiness. But these attributes, like health and cleverness, have been the cause of harm to many, and so even *eudaimonia* fails as a good *haplôs*. Once again, we might try to come to Euthydemus' aid by proposing a sense of happiness that is independent of these worldly advantages, and perhaps a complete course under the tutelage of Socrates would reveal what that is. However that may be, Socrates has certainly undermined any trust in conventional notions of wellbeing, and I suspect that an average Athenian reader, even one belonging to the aristocratic elite, might find Socrates' line of inquiry unsettling rather than as proof of his incontrovertible utility to society.[7]

[7] Johnson (2021, p. 158) argues that Socrates in fact promoted the traditional virtues: "in the *Memorabilia* Socrates presents arguments purporting to show that neither wisdom nor happiness is always good (4.2.33-35). These arguments, however, come in the course of Socrates' initial humbling refutation of Euthydemus, and I suspect that neither of them gives us the full story. In his conversation with Euthydemus, Socrates shows only that the possession of wisdom, like the possession of any other good, could result in one being mistreated by envious rivals or kidnapped by rulers who want to

When Euthydemus, now wholly befuddled, exclaims that he no longer knows what to beseech the gods for – it is worth noting this formulation, as we shall see – Socrates ascribes his confusion to overconfidence, and then, since the boy aspires to be a political leader, he asks whether he knows what democracy is. Since understanding democracy, in turn, implies a knowing what *dêmos* means, as Socrates observes, Euthydemus promptly replies that the *dêmos* consists of the poor citizenry (τοὺς πένητας τῶν πολιτῶν, 4.2.37). And who are the poor, asks Socrates, and who the rich? To which Euthydemus replies that those who have not the resources to accomplish what is needed (ἃ δεῖ τελεῖν) are poor, those who have an abundance of such resources are rich. Socrates' response to this definition is predictable: many who possess little find it more than enough, whereas for some, such as tyrants, no amount suffices. Thus, tyrants must be included in the *dêmos*, and those who have little, if they are economical, among the rich. At this point, Euthydemus concludes that it's best for him to keep quiet (σιγᾶν, 4.2.39), since he clearly knows nothing at all. Whereas earlier his reticence was a pose to protect his image, here it is a genuine acknowledgment of ignorance. Xenophon concludes by observing that the boy departed in utter despair (πάνυ ἀθύμως ἔχων, 4.2.39), despising himself and believing he truly was a slave. However, whereas many, after such a humiliating dialogue, abandoned the company of Socrates (who regarded them as dumbbells), Euthydemus cleaved to him thereafter and even imitated him in some respects. In view of this, Socrates, Xenophon tells us, ceased to perturb the boy (ἥκιστα μὲν διετάραττεν, 4.2.40), and proceeded to explain to him in the simplest and clearest way (ἁπλούστατα δὲ καὶ σαφέστατα) what he thought one should know and the best way to behave (ἅ τε ἐνόμιζεν εἰδέναι δεῖν καὶ ἐπιτηδεύειν κράτιστα εἶναι).[8]

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put that wisdom to their own use. Elsewhere Xenophon's Socrates insists that one with knowledge of justice, piety, and courage acts justly, piously, and courageously (3.9.4-5; 4.6.2-6, 10-11)." Yes, elsewhere he may seem to. But in this crucial passage, which leads up to the equation of justice with obedience to the law, Xenophon has Socrates deliver a quite different message.

[8] As Johnson (2021, p. 92) notes, "When Socrates saw that Euthydemus was this committed, he left off refuting the young man, and instead 'explained to him as simply and as clearly as he could what he believed were the best things for a man to know

The Disquisition

Xenophon appears to be marking a distinction between two phases of the Socratic method. The first is critical, and proceeds by way of cross-examination or *elenchus* to undermine his interlocutor's confidence in his values and convictions. This is the part that presumably made Athenians uncomfortable, since their deeply held beliefs were challenged. The second stage takes the form of an extended exposition of Socrates' own position, the kind of great speech that Socrates insists he cannot abide in Plato's *Protagoras*, perhaps defensively, as Sarah Broadie and Barbara Sattler (2021) have suggested. If Socrates, contrary to his professions of ignorance, is prepared to enunciate a positive doctrine, it may be thought to compensate for the caustic effect of the elenchus, which is now seen as purely a preliminary or propaedeutic strategy to render his interlocutor receptive. That this approach, if indeed it is Xenophon's way of exonerating Socrates from the charge of corrupting youths, comes at the expense of his irony, is a price worth paying. So let us see what Socrates actually has to offer in this regard.

Xenophon's first move is to affirm that Socrates had no interest in making his associates more eloquent, effective, or astute (λεκτικοὺς καὶ πρακτικοὺς καὶ μηχανικούς, 4.3.1), but sought above all to render them σώφρονες (4.3.2), which alone could insure that they would not be all the more able to behave unjustly. The precise meaning of σωφροσύνη in Xenophon has been the subject of considerable discussion, but here Xenophon specifies that Socrates' primary objective was to make people σώφρονες with respect to the gods, so we can limit our investigation to this context. Xenophon affirms that he was himself present at the following conversation, a way of highlighting its importance, whatever the truth of the matter. Socrates begins by asking Euthydemus whether he has ever noticed how much care the gods take to provide whatever human beings need, to which Euthydemus replies that he has not. Now, this should alert the reader to the fact that Socrates is venturing on unfamiliar territory. There is no reason to doubt that Euthydemus was

and do' (4.2.40). It seems unlikely," Johnson adds, "that Alcibiades and Critias ever reached this phase."

pious enough, as ordinary conceptions went. This evidently did not entail the belief that the gods were essentially beneficent, and given the way the gods were commonly portrayed, it is no wonder. So Socrates' demonstration in what follows cannot be taken to exemplify his piety in the typical sense, and may even risk suggesting that conventional attitudes toward the gods were faulty, if they did not rest on such a conviction.

Socrates' arguments are at first blush rather elementary, but they exhibit a rising rhetorical crescendo. The gods have given us the alternation between daylight, by which we can see, and night, so that we may rest. Euthydemus agrees that this is worthy of gratitude (χάριτος ἄξιον, 4.3.4). So too, the sun marks the hours of the day, and the stars those of the night, during which they are visible, whereas the moon marks the divisions of the month. The gods are also responsible for the fertility of the earth in providing nourishment and more, as well as water and fire, which again, Euthydemus agrees, are signs of their φιλανθρωπία (4.3.7) and concern (προνοητικόν, 4.3.6). So too, the sun in its course provides just the right amount of heat and cold, all for the sake of human beings. Very well, says Euthydemus, but the gods provide the same for other creatures: how are human beings special? Socrates replies that it is precisely human beings who derive the most benefit from other animals, and for whose sake they are raised. Indeed, animals are more valuable than plants, since humans can survive on animals and animal products alone, not to mention that animals are also of use in war. Then again, the gods have bestowed us with the five senses, and with reason (λογισμός, 4.3.11), by which we understand what we perceive, and learn and remember what each thing is good for. And they too they have given us language or communication (ἑρμηνεία, 4.3.12), by which we share goods and live in common and establish laws and engage in civic life (πολιτευόμεθα), and to top it off they have provided for what we cannot foresee by means prophecy (μαντική), by which they answer our questions concerning the future. Euthydemus shrewdly remarks that they are friendlier to Socrates than to the rest, since they signal to him unbidden what he ought and ought not to do. Socrates ignores this allusion to his *daimonion* and simply adds that Euthydemus can confirm the truth of what he has been saying if he does not expect to see the

visible shapes of the god but is content to worship and honor them on the basis of their deeds, which he can see. For the gods in general do not manifest themselves when they bestow their favors, and what is more, that deity who arranges and binds together the entire cosmos, in which all fine and good things are located, and who unerringly delivers them fresh and sound and ageless – his activity is perceived, but he manages it all unseen. It is worth citing the Greek here:

> οἵ τε γὰρ ἄλλοι ἡμῖν τἀγαθὰ διδόντες οὐδὲν τούτων εἰς τὸ ἐμφανὲς ἰόντες διδόασι, καὶ ὁ τὸν ὅλον κόσμον συντάττων τε καὶ συνέχων, ἐν ᾧ πάντα καλὰ καὶ ἀγαθά ἐστι, καὶ ἀεὶ μὲν χρωμένοις ἀτριβῆ τε καὶ ὑγιᾶ καὶ ἀγήρατα παρέχων, θᾶττον δὲ νοήματος ὑπηρετοῦντα ἀναμαρτήτως, οὗτος τὰ μέγιστα μὲν πράττων ὁρᾶται, τάδε δὲ οἰκονομῶν ἀόρατος ἡμῖν ἐστιν (*Mem*. 4.3.13).

Who is this invisible deity who "orders and contains the whole cosmos" (ὁ τὸν ὅλον κόσμον συντάττων τε καὶ συνέχων)? Is it Zeus, or a subordinate, unnamed regulator of who oversees the working of the universe? Xenophon's Socrates does not speak of creation here; rather, it is a kind of supernatural manager and benefactor. Xenophon further remarks that one cannot stare directly at the sun, nor can we observe the coming and departure of the thunderbolt. The winds are unseen, though what they do is apparent to us. And finally, the soul, which more than any other human quality partakes of divinity, rules us but is unperceived. So we must recognize the power of invisible things, and pay honor to the divine (τὸ δαιμόνιον, 4.3.14).

Euthydemus is wholly persuaded and avows that he will never neglect τὸ δαιμόνιον (4.3.15), but he is in despair (ἀθυμῶ) over how a human being could ever compensate the services of the gods with the gratitude that they deserve (ἀξίαις χάρισιν). Before we turn to Socrates' reply, we may first ask where Xenophon got this extraordinary theodicy, and what its place is in his defense of Socrates. As to Xenophon's source, Aldo Brancacci (2008, p. 240) has identified two possibilities: "The peculiar character of these theological conceptions, and their very compactness, admit, in my view, of just two hypotheses: either they derive from Socrates, whatever the source utilized by Xenophon, or else

they derive from Antisthenes."[9] But Brancacci concludes, in part on the basis of explicit references to chapter 4.3 by Philodemus and Cicero, that the doctrines that Xenophon's Socrates espouses are incompatible with Antisthenes' views.[10]

> It is thus more likely that in the theological chapters of the *Memorabilia* one should discern traces of the beliefs that Socrates developed toward the end of the first phase of his philosophical activity, or at least the terms in which they were formulated in the sources on which Xenophon depended. What these sources were it is impossible to determine, and the only advantage, but the relevant one, of having excluded the hypothesis of Antisthenes as a source [...] consists in reinforcing the possibility that they were recollections or transcriptions, no doubt reworked by Xenophon, of conversations actually held by Socrates (Brancacci, 2008, p. 248).[11]

If so, then Xenophon was not attempting to soft pedal Socrates' theology but simply to reproduce it, without concern for the way it might be received by his readers.

The Derveni papyrus is suggestive of another possible source of Xenphon's theology. Andrei Lebedev, who has argued that the author of the papyrus is none other than Prodicus, has observed numerous points of contact between the papyrus and Socrates' account. For example, we read in the papyrus that the moon indicates the seasons (col. XXIV.7-11),

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[9] "La peculiarità di queste concezioni teologiche, e la loro stessa compattezza, consentono, a mio parere, solo due ipotesi: o esse provengono da Socrate, quale che sia la fonte utilizzata da Senofonte, oppure provengono da Antistene."

[10] See Philodemus *De pietate* 6D; Cicero *De natura deorum* 1.31.

[11] The full passsage reads: "È dunque più che probabile che nei capitoli teologico-teleologici dei *Memorabili* si debbano scorgere le tracce delle convinzioni che Socrate aveva maturato alla fine del primo periodo della sua attività filosofica, o, almeno, i termini in cui esse furono formulate nelle fonti da cui dipende Senofonte. Quali possano essere queste fonti non è possibile determinare, e il solo, ma rilevante, vantaggio di avere escluso l'ipotesi della fonte antistenica, la quale avrebbe dovuto a rigore condurre ad attribuire ad Antistene stesso le concezioni documentate da Senofonte, consiste nel rafforzare la possibilità che esse siano memorie o trascrizioni, certo anche rimaneggiate da Senofonte, di conversazioni effettivamente tenute da Socrate".

that the gods provided rain for crops and fire to protect us against cold and darkness, and so forth. However, there is one striking difference between the two accounts. As Lebedev notes,

> The connection of *Mem.* 4.3 with Prodicus' *Horai* and the benefaction theory is palpable. But there is one significant discrepancy, even a contradiction. The χρήσιμα and ὠφελοῦντα τὸν βίον are the same as in Prodicus, but they have been reinterpreted as gifts of the gods, as a result of which Prodicus' 'atheistic' theory of religion has been transformed into its 'creationist' opposite, the traditional popular belief in divine πρῶτοι εὑρεταί (Lebedev, 2019, p. 598).

This is indeed a radical difference, and Lebedev (p. 588-89) offers two possible explanations:

> A) The conversation of Socrates and Euthydemus in Mem. 4.3 has been invented by Xenophon. He took Prodicus' benefaction theory, made a 'pious' version of it, and put it into Socrates mouth as proof of his religiosity in order to defend him against charges of *asebeia* [...] B) The conversation is real, at least in substance. In this case the 'pious' version of the benefaction theory was held by the historical Socrates.

But this is not the only difference. There is also the introduction of the creator deity, distinct from the usual divine pantheon.

The reception of Xenophon's theodicy too suggests that we are dealing with an authentic Socratic position, at least in outline. David Sedley has remarked:

> In general, Socrates' teleological influence on Aristotle, such as it is, is mediated through Plato. However, *Memorabilia*, I 4 and IV 3 include ideas which seem to have had a direct impact upon Aristotle's thinking, without any corresponding passage in Plato to mediate them. One is Socrates' thesis, in IV 3, 10, that lower species were created for the sake of mankind (Sedley, 2008a, p. 331).

Sedley notes that these two passages have been "rarely discussed." But the passage we have been examining did, I think, make an impression on Plato. Sedley, in his book on creationism, notes a possible echo of the argument in Plato's *Philebus*. As he writes:

> the only point of similarity with Plato is found in [...] the "Cosmic Intelligence" argument (I 4.8), which as well as occurring here is placed in Socrates' mouth only in Plato's very late dialogue *Philebus* (29a9-30d9). The *Philebus* may even postdate Xenophon's death, making it if anything more likely that Plato has borrowed from Xenophon than vice versa. It seems to me that we have here in Xenophon a historical depiction of Socrates' ideas on divine creation which not only is inherently credible, but also represents exactly the reorientation from creationist science to creationist piety that we might expect of him. Whatever Xenophon or his source may have done to shape or adapt the material, its originality and significance make it a natural assumption that its authorship really does in essence belong to Socrates (Sedley, 2008a, p. 82).

However, an even more evident indication of influence is to be found, I think, in Plato's critique of atheism in the *Laws*. The Athenian visitor argues that the good soul "causes the perimeter of heaven to revolve of necessity, taking care and putting it in order" (τὴν [sc. ἀρίστην ψυχὴν] δὲ οὐρανοῦ περιφορὰν ἐξ ἀνάγκης περιάγειν φατέον ἐπιμελουμένην καὶ κοσμοῦσαν, 898C). He adduces the analogy of the sun, "whose body everyone sees, though no one sees its soul" (898D), which is the case as well for all creatures, living or dead (Ἡλίου πᾶς ἄνθρωπος σῶμα μὲν ὁρᾷ, ψυχὴν δὲ οὐδείς: οὐδὲ γὰρ ἄλλου σώματος οὐδενὸς οὔτε ζῶντος οὔτε ἀποθνῄσκοντος τῶν ζῴων, 898D). So much for those who deny the very existence of the gods. "But," the Athenian continues, "now we must encourage the man who believes that gods exist, but that they are not concerned with human affairs" (τὸν δὲ ἡγούμενον μὲν θεοὺς εἶναι, μὴ φροντίζειν δὲ αὐτοὺς τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων πραγμάτων, παραμυθητέον, 899D). He asks Clinias to assume the part of the young man in the discussion (900C), which perhaps recalls the role of Euthydemus in the *Memorabilia*, and proceeds to show that "the gods care for small things

no less than for those that are exceedingly large" (900C). The Athenian concludes: "Let us persuade the young man by our arguments that all things are ordered by the one who cares for everything, with a view to the preservation and excellence of the whole, and that of these things, each part too, to the best of its ability, suffers and does what is what is proper to it" (903B). There are many details in Plato's treatment that have no counterpart in Xenophon, especially the business about the two types of soul (good and evil) and emphasis on the virtues of the gods. But the overall progression from the proof of the gods' existence to their management and concern for every aspect of the world, together with the culminating affirmation of a single deity who is responsible for ordering the whole, strikes me as a plain echo of Xenophon's Socrates.

It is impossible to sort out precisely what, in Xenophon's account, may reproduce Socrates' own words. My point is simply that Xenophon has earnestly attempted to convey Socrates' reasoning, as he overheard and recollected it, and that his defense of Socrates' piety is not tailored to popular conceptions, but reflects a style of argument that, for all its high-mindedness, may not have assuaged suspicions that Socrates was indeed introducing new gods.

We may return, now, to Euthydemus' worry about showing sufficient gratitude for the gods' beneficence. Socrates encourages him not to despair (μὴ τοῦτο ἀθύμει, 4.3.16), since the Delphic oracle consistently advises that one propitiate the gods in accord with the customs of one's own city (νόμῳ πόλεως). For everywhere the rule (νόμος) is that it suffices to conciliate the gods according to one's ability – without, to be sure, falling short of that, for that is to fail to honor them. For the gods are most able to benefit us, and there is no better way to please them than by obeying them. "It was by saying such things," Xenophon concludes, and acting accordingly himself that Socrates rendered those who associated with him more pious and well-behaved (εὐσεβεστέρους τε καὶ σωφρονεστέρους, 4.3.18).

Justice and the Law

Having dealt with piety, which is always, for Xenophon, chief among the qualities of a good person, he turns next to Socrates' view

of what is just. According to Xenophon, Socrates never concealed his view (γνώμη, 4.4.1) of what is just, but manifested it in his actions, inasmuch as he treated everyone in due fashion and helpfully (νομίμως τε καὶ ὠφελίμως), was obedient to those in authority and to the bidding of the laws, and was disciplined (εὐτακτῶν) in the city and on campaign. Xenophon illustrates these claims by citing the instance when Socrates, when he was head (ἐπιστάτης) of the Boulê, did not permit the *dêmos* to vote contrary to the laws, and again how he disobeyed the Thirty when they unlawfully forbade him to converse with the young and when they ordered him to fetch a citizen to be put to death. So too, when he was on trial, he refrained from ingratiating himself with the jurors, preferring to die respectful of the laws than to live by transgressing them. Socrates is admirably even-handed in opposing the will of the *dêmos*, the Thirty, and the jury, but this preamble inevitably raises the question of how Socrates determines when an order or a practice conforms to the law and so should be obeyed, and when not. The answer comes in a reported conversation between Socrates and Hippias, when Hippias complains precisely that Socrates never reveals his own view, but rather, by questioning others, makes them look ridiculous. Socrates responds by pointing, as Xenophon had done, to his actions, which, he asserts, are far more credible than speech (ἀξιοτεκμαρτότερον τοῦ λόγου τὸ ἔργον, 4.4.10). He has never borne false witness, acted as a sycophant, or led his country into stasis. This list of negatives does not satisfy Hippias, and though Socrates professes to believe that "not wishing to commit an injustice is sufficient evidence of justice" (τὸ μὴ θέλειν ἀδικεῖν ἱκανὸν δικαιοσύνης ἐπίδειγμα εἶναι, 4.4.12), he adds the positive definition that "what is lawful is just" (τὸ νόμιμον δίκαιον εἶναι), and that the two terms are the same.

Socrates then proceeds to specify the sense of νόμιμον. Laws (*nomoi*) are what the citizens of a polis agree upon and inscribe, indicating what one may and may not do, and one who is νόμιμος behaves according to these, whereas one who is ἄνομος (4.4.13) contravenes them. Those who respect the laws perform just deeds, and one who does so is just; hence, a *nomimos* or law-abiding person is just, and ditto for the reverse (νόμιμος δίκαιός ἐστιν, ὁ δὲ ἄνομος ἄδικος). All very simple, except that, as Hippias observes, laws are unstable, since they are subject to repeal.

Socrates replies that it is always right to maintain discipline in war, even though hostilities may at some time cease and enemies be reconciled. Socrates cites the example of Sparta, where obedience to the laws is the supreme value. Socrates seems to equate such conduct with civic concord (ὁμόνοια, 4.4.16), the greatest good, he says, for cities. It is to such consensus (ὁμονοήσειν) that citizens swear throughout Greece, which is to say, obedience to the laws. What better way is there, Socrates asks, to become esteemed in the city, be acquitted in the courts (πῶς δ᾽ ἂν ἧττον ἐν τοῖς δικαστηρίοις ἡττῷτο ἢ πῶς ἂν μᾶλλον νικῴη; 4.4.17), or gain the trust of fellow citizens? I am not sure whether there is a deliberate note of irony in the claim about victory in lawsuits, given the verdict on Socrates. Such a person, at all events, is most desirable as a friend, least wished for as an enemy, and Socrates wraps it up with the QED: "I have demonstrated that lawful and the just are the same thing" (τὸ αὐτὸ ἀποδείκνυμαι νόμιμόν τε καὶ δίκαιον εἶναι, 4.4.18). Hippias professes his agreement.

All very well: but the problem that surfaced at the beginning, namely how to decide which laws are valid, and under what circumstances it may be right to disobey those in authority, has not at all be clarified. As though conscious that something is missing, Socrates abruptly asks: "Do you know, Hippias, of any unwritten laws?" (ἀγράφους δέ τινας οἶσθα, ἔφη, ὦ Ἱππία, νόμους; 4.4.19). Hippias says that these are laws that are believed in everywhere. Socrates then inquires whether human beings established these laws, to which Hippias replies that this is impossible, since people living in distant regions cannot gather together, nor do they speak the same language. He concludes, therefore, that the gods bestowed these laws on mankind, in evidence of which (καὶ γάρ) it is universally maintained that the first rule is to revere the gods. Again, honoring one's parents is universally upheld. When, however, Socrates adds the prohibition on sex between parents and children, Hippias demurs, on the grounds that some transgress this law. So too with many others, Socrates explains, but those who transgress divine laws pay the penalty, whereas with human laws some offenders escape the consequence. This sounds implausible on the surface, at least without some conception of retribution in the afterlife, or in future generations, but Socrates offers a quite different verification. Parent-child incest, he claims, is punished

because such unions produce defective offspring. The reason is that only one of the partners in such a union will be at his or her prime (ἀκμάζων, 4.4.23), when the seed is in the best condition. So too, reciprocating good treatment is everywhere νόμιμον (4.4.24), and those who do not respect this law find themselves deprived of worthy friends (ἀγαθοὶ φίλοι), and are hated for their ingratitude. Such laws, Hippias agrees, which contain their own penalty, are of a more than human legislator. And since gods legislate justly, Socrates concludes with a flourish, they too hold that what is just and what is lawful are the same thing.

One will naturally think here of Antigone's defense of her burial of her brother Polynices, despite Creon's edict to the contrary, by way of an appeal to unwritten laws, which are eternal and immutable. But Antigone did not state categorically that all laws must be obeyed. Had she done so, she might have argued that a decree or *kêrugma*, such as that issued by Creon, did not have the force of law, or *nomos*. Scholars have noticed the problem in Socrates' exposition of justice. As Tazuko van Berkel observes:

> it is striking that in *Mem*. IV.iv Xenophon's Socrates nowhere acknowledges a tension between a position that accords supreme validity to the legislation of the polis and a position that presupposes the existence of laws of a higher legislative status: nowhere in the dialogue do the conversation partners address the potential for conflict between the positive law of the city and the unwritten laws. Socrates simply seems to be in favor of both (Van Berkel, 2019, p. 173).

Scholars have offered various ways of addressing the problem.[12] On the surface, the general injunctions to revere the gods, honor one's parents, avoid intergenerational incest, and show gratitude to benefactors seem

[12] See, among many contributions, Johnson (2021, p. 175): "The refutation of Euthydemus in *Memorabilia* 4.2, in Seel's view, shows the folly of establishing any fixed rules for actions that are correct in all circumstances. But 4.2 is an elenchus of a man who had failed to form correct definitions before attempting to classify actions. To my mind the unwritten laws of 4.4.19-25 suggest a way of squaring this circle: certain actions are always to be shunned (or chosen) precisely because they unfailingly lead to negative (or positive) results. There is therefore no need to distinguish between

unlikely to run afoul of practical legislation. The danger arises when appeal to such principles underwrites certain specific actions, such as honoring one's kin when they have betrayed their city, as Polynices had done. It is for such reasons, among others, that, as van Berkel (p. 172, n. 183) writes,

> in the post-403 constitution νόμος came to refer by definition to 'written law' in Athens: the Athenians had adopted a resolution that banned the use of 'unwritten laws' to ensure that magistrates could only enforce laws that had been inscribed. By this time, the notion of 'unwritten divine law' had probably become suspect due to anti-democratic parties who attempted to invoke the notion in order to overrule the written, democratic law of Athens.

Xenophon, writing in the fourth century, was no doubt aware of the issue, even if the dramatic date of the dialogues he records was earlier.

If we consider Socrates' position on unwritten laws within the context of the *Memorabilia* itself, however, it may appear that he was providing a theoretical basis for acting contrary to the wishes of the assembled *dêmos*, or the ruling Thirty, or the sworn and seated dicasts. He insisted in each case that he was refusing to act contrary to the law or *nomos*, but nowhere did he specify which laws were at stake. The description of Socrates' behavior and the conversation about divinely sanctioned laws are bookends to the argument that obedience to the law is the same thing as justice. I would go further, in fact, and suggest that the primacy given to unwritten law may look back to Socrates' mockery of Euthydemus' book learning at the beginning of Book 4. And not just that: Socrates began by demonstrating that Euthydemus, for all his political ambitions, was unable to identify anything that was unequivocally good. The solution to his dilemma came, not in the form of a better answer, though we could imagine some, nor a radical skepticism about any such absolute, but rather of a disquisition on the indisputable beneficence of the gods, a position very likely that of Socrates himself, however much altered in transmission. This speech paves the way,

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deontological and prudentialist understandings;" the reference is to Seel (2006). See also Morrison (1995); Moore (2018).

I think, for Socrates' later argument that the gods have planted in us certain values, recognizable by their universality, and guaranteed them by rendering them self-enforcing. What is more, every city has its own laws concerning how to propitiate the gods, but all prescribe that we honor them – an anticipation of the universal rule to revere the gods, although the specific forms of worship, we may suppose, vary from place to place. Identifying conduct that may violate divine injunctions in any given case presumably takes some experience as well as dedicated reflection on such matters, although Socrates himself is blessed with a kind of shortcut, in the form of his *daimonion*. We might then see the overall trajectory of the argument as beginning and ending with an affirmation of justice, with a detour on the benevolence of the gods. Socrates begins by demonstrating that Euthydemus' ideas about the just are confused and indefensible. He ends by persuading Hippias that what is just is what is lawful, but with a hitch: some fundamental laws are indeed universal, and this is a gift of the gods. They provide a kind of general guidance, and have the further advantage of being self-enforcing. But just how to act in ordinary circumstances is not entirely clear, especially if divine law fails to coincide with human decrees. The only positive position is gratitude to the gods for their care and benefactions, which constitutes the core of piety. If this represents Socrates' own position, as Hippias demands, it does not seem anywhere like enough to withstand a Socratic elenchus. Taken in its entirety, Xenophon's representation of Socrates in these chapters may well have roused rather than allayed suspicions concerning his piety and service to the city. In being true to Socrates as he remembered him, Xenophon has given us a portrait not of an upright citizen of conventional integrity but rather of the potentially subversive figure that Socrates seemed to be – and was.

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