

Aretē: Excellence or Virtue

Reading 9 – Xenophon & Socrates

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"Virtue is a kind of health and beauty and good condition of the soul." — Plato

"Virtue is a weapon that cannot be taken away." — Antisthenes

"Happiness is an activity of the soul that accords with perfect virtue." — Aristotle

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Reading 9

Xenophon & Socrates

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This reading comes from the Cave's

Aretē: Excellence or Virtue—What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Aretē.

As the title indicates, this reading, after a brief introduction, presents what Xenophon (and Socrates) thought and said about *aretē* (excellence or virtue).

XENOPHON (c. 430-354 BC) WAS an Athenian statesman and historian. He is known for, among other works, the *Anabasis*, or the *Expedition Up*, an account of the harrowing escape of the Ten Thousand, a Greek Mercenary force, after the Battle of Cunaxa (401 BC). In the attempt to flee, Xenophon himself led the Ten Thousand in a march to the Black Sea. Drawing on his experience with Socrates, he also wrote the *Apology*, a work recounting Socrates' defense before the Athenian assembly, and the *Memorabilia*, *Oeconomicus*, and *Symposium*, works also centered on Socrates

and his conversations with others.

It is from these latter Socrates-centered works that we will listen to Xenophon at times and Socrates at others speaking about virtue or things related to virtue (for a summary, see the end of the chapter).

Before getting to virtue, we should note that the same "Socratic problem" arises with Xenophon as did with Plato. In this case, the problem is that the Socrates we encounter in Xenophon is different—at least somewhat different—from the Socrates in Plato. While from one angle this is a problem, from another

it is quite a boon. Assuming both men presented the Socrates he actually knew, we may conclude we are getting something approximating the real Socrates through two sets of spectacles, as it were—those of Plato and Xenophon.

If this conclusion is something close to the truth,

then what we have with Xenophon is the presentation of a man he greatly admired. In fact, at one point he declares that “Socrates seemed to me the best of men, a truly happy man.”¹

As with Plato, all passages are from Xenophon’s own work unless otherwise noted.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Before getting to what Xenophon himself thought and wrote about virtue, let’s first turn our attention to much later testimony regarding the man himself and how he encountered Socrates and became his student in the matter of how men “become noble and good.”

Diogenes Laertius The story goes that Socrates met Xenophon in a narrow passageway in the marketplace. Socrates held out his staff to prevent him from walking on and asked Xenophon to tell him where each kind of food was sold. Upon receiving a reply, he asked another question. “And where do men go to become noble and good?” he asked. Xenophon had no idea. “Then follow me,” Socrates responded, “and learn.” From that moment on he was Socrates’ student.²

Eunapius of Sardis Xenophon the philosopher was unique among all philosophers in that he adorned philosophy not only with words but with deeds as well—for on the one hand, he writes of the moral virtues both in discourses and historical commentaries, while on the other, he excelled also in actual achievement.³

The remaining selections come from Xenophon’s Memorabilia. In the first, Xenophon makes the case that one must continue to train in virtue. Association with good men is a significant part of this training.

Xenophon: But many self-styled lovers of wisdom may reply that a just man can never become unjust. And a sensible and wise man can never become insolent and outrageous. In fact, no one, once he has learned any kind of knowledge, can become ignorant of it. But I do not agree with this view.

I notice that as those who do not train the body cannot perform the functions proper to the body, so those who do not train the soul cannot perform the functions of the soul—for they cannot do what they should do or avoid what they should not do. For this reason, fathers try to keep their sons, even if they are sensible and wise, out of bad company—for an association with good men is a training in virtue, but an association with bad men is virtue’s undoing.⁴

In the second set of selections, Xenophon speaks of Socrates’ virtue and his promotion of the same—contrary to the charges brought against him in court.

Xenophon: So far was Socrates from “rejecting the gods,” as charged in the indictment, that no man was more conspicuous for his devotion to the service of the gods. So far was he from “corrupting the youth,” as his accuser actually charged him, that if any among his companions had worthless desires, he openly tried to reform them and exhorted them to desire the most noble and magnificent virtue by which men prosper in public life and in their homes.⁵

Xenophon: It is amazing to me that some believed the charge brought against Socrates of corrupting the youth. . . . Of all men, he was self-controlled relative to the desire for sex and the gluttony of the belly. Moreover, he was fully capable of endurance relative to cold and heat and hard work of every kind. Besides, his needs were so schooled in moderation that whenever he had very little, he was nevertheless very content. Such was his own character. How then is it possible that he led others into impiety or lawlessness or gluttony or sexual lust or a lack of self-control? On

the contrary, Socrates put a stop to these vices in many by making them long for virtue, and by giving them the hope that with care they might be good and noble men. To be sure, he never professed to teach this, but by letting his own light shine, he led his students to hope that they would be like him if they imitated him.⁶

Next, Socrates himself argues that self-control is the foundation of every virtue.

Socrates: Men, if we were at war and wanted to choose a leader most capable of helping us to save ourselves and conquer the enemy, would we choose one whom we could tell was no match for the belly or for wine or for lust or hard work or sleep? . . . Or, if at the end of life, we wanted to entrust someone with the education of our boys or the protection of our girls or the safeguarding of our property, would we consider the man lacking in self-control to be trustworthy in these matters?

*No, we would not. Rather, says Socrates, Every man should hold self-control to be the foundation of virtue. And everyone should accordingly establish this foundation within his soul. For without this foundation, who can learn any good or practice it in a worthy manner? No, the man enslaved to these pleasures is in a shameful condition in both body and soul.*⁷

Speaking with the hedonist Aristippus,⁸ Socrates explores two paths one may take in life—the path of virtue and the path of vice. In doing so, he mentions Hesiod’s famous description of the two paths available to one in life and Prodicus’ story of Heracles encountering Virtue and Vice personified.

Socrates: Self-indulgence and enjoyment will never have the power to bring the body into its highest conditioning and health, as the trainers of athletes say. Nor does such sluggish satisfaction produce any knowledge in the soul worth talking about. Rather, as good men say, it is patient, enduring attention and work that leads to noble and good results.

For instance, Hesiod somewhere says, “It is easy to have Vice. She’s there in abundance for you. The

way to her is smooth, and she dwells very near to you. But the immortal gods have put sweat in front of Virtue. The path to her is long and steep, and so it is rough going at first. Nevertheless, when one comes to the highest point, then the path becomes easy—however hard it is at first.”

We also have the witness of Epicharmus’ with the line, “The gods ask for toil as the high price of every good thing.” . . .

Yes, and the wise man Prodicus makes the same point regarding virtue in his tale about Heracles. When Heracles was making his way from boyhood to young manhood, and so he was on the path to becoming his own master, he came to the point where he had to choose between a life of virtue or one of vice. So, he went out to a quiet spot and sat there puzzling over which path he should take. Sitting there, two very tall women appeared and walked up to him. One was fitting and noble in appearance—her body ordered with purity, her eyes adorned with modesty, and her bearing generally expressing discretion. She wore a white robe. But the other! She was plump and soft, with an unnatural pink and white face all made up, and an upright spine to exaggerate her height, and eyes wide open. As for her robe, it hung so as to reveal everything—all her charms. She eyed herself and looked away to see if anyone noticed her. She would also glance at her own shadow.

Socrates explains that it is these two women who approach Heracles, each making their case to him. The latter woman speaks first. Heracles should be her friend, she urges—if, that is, he wants to follow along the easiest and pleasantest road. He’ll have the best of everything—food, drink, sex, sleep, scents, and every other pleasure. All sweets! No hardship! No war or worries! And no toil because he’ll simply seize what he wants from others.

So then, Socrates said, when Heracles had heard her claims, he asked, “Lady, what is your name?” She responded, “My friends call me Happiness, but those who hate me have nicknamed me Vice.”

Now the other woman speaks. She promises a good result if Heracles will only follow her path. Yet, she says, it won’t be easy. “Of all that is truly good or noble, the gods give nothing to men without toil and effort.”

This woman goes on to explain what a man must do to get various goods. Favor from the gods requires worship. Goodwill from friends calls for kindness. A city's honor demands service. Greek admiration—the hard work of excellence. Fruits require cultivation; an increase in flock numbers, shepherding; and defense and power, training in the art of war. Lastly, a strong body demands the mind's command and much toilsome, sweaty training.

Socrates went on, saying, As Prodicus tells it, Vice here interrupted and said, “Have you considered, Heracles, how long and hard this road to enjoyment is that this woman Virtue is mapping for you? I will lead you along a short and easy road to happiness.”

Virtue strongly disagrees and declares, “But I associate with the gods and with good men, and no fine action, whether the deed of a god or of a man, is done without me. . . . So, Heracles, child of good parents, if you toil hard along the path that I, Virtue, have mapped for you, you can acquire the most blessed happiness.”

*Finishing Prodicus' story, Socrates said, Anyhow, Aristippus, you would do well to think about these matters and consider the life ahead of you.*⁹

Next, Socrates argues that virtue is increased by learning and practice, and that the thoughts of the wise make for virtue.

(Speaking to Critobulus) Socrates: You will find on reflection that every kind of virtue named among men is augmented by education and practice.¹⁰

(Speaking to Euthydemus) Socrates: The thoughts of the wise enrich their possessors with virtue.¹¹

In the final selections, Xenophon discusses Socrates' views on virtue and how Socrates himself was a virtuous man and led others to virtue.

Xenophon: Socrates drew no distinction between wisdom and moderation. But if a man knew and practiced what is noble and good, and knew and avoided what is base and shameful, then he judged that man to be both wise and moderate. . . . He said that justice and every other virtue is wisdom. For just actions and all forms of virtuous activity are noble and good. He who knows the noble and the good will never choose anything else. . . . So it is that the wise do what is noble and good.¹²

Xenophon: All who knew what kind of man Socrates was, and all who care for virtue, all these men continue even now to miss Socrates most of all as the most helpful man in the pursuit of virtue. As for me, I have described him as he was. He was so pious that he did nothing without a sign from the gods. He was so just that he did no harm, however small, to any man. Instead, he conferred the greatest benefits on all who dealt with him. He was so self-controlled that he never chose the more pleasant thing or way over the better thing or way. He was so wise that he never erred in judging between what was better and what was worse. He did not even have to ask others about these, but he relied on himself for his knowledge of them. He was skillful in explaining and defining such things—and in testing others, and in convincing them of error, and in urging them on toward virtue and noble goodness. For all these points, then, he seemed to me the best and happiest man.¹³

SUMMARY OF ARETĒ FOR XENOPHON (AND SOCRATES)

For Xenophon (and Socrates), virtue is something that is truly noble and good. It is an association with the gods and with good men, the expression of fine action. Virtue is the means by which we may achieve happiness.

Many in number, every virtue may nevertheless in some sense be identified with wisdom. Self-control

relative to various pleasures and pains is virtue's foundation. Other virtues are endurance, moderation, piety, knowledge, order, and justice—though this list is not comprehensive. Vices are the opposite of these.

How do we attain virtue? We must first realize that the path to virtue is long and hard, a way requiring

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great effort and endurance. Not only that but once we have accomplished some measure of virtue, we must vigorously continue to train in it. Association with good men is a significant part of this training.

So ends Reading 9. See you in Reading 10, “Aristotle.”

NOTES

¹ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.8.11.

² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 2.48. Noble is *kalos* (a word that primarily means beautiful, but in a moral sense, noble or good). Good is *agathos* (which can also mean noble or brave). Taken together (*kalos kai agathos*, noble and good), they were contracted by the ancient Greeks to *kalokagathos* (noble and good). Thus, a noble and good person possessed *kalokagathia* (the character of a noble and good person), which was equivalent to *aretē*. For the latter point, see Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.9.5: “For just actions and all forms of virtuous activity are noble and good.”

³ Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* introduction.

⁴ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.2.19-20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.2.64.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.2.1-3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.5.4-5.

⁸ Aristippus (c. 435-356 BC) was a philosopher from Cyrene (Libya). Originally a companion of Socrates, Aristippus is known as the founder of Cyrenaicism (called such after his home city), a philosophy that promotes pleasure as the chief goal of life. Happiness consists of the collection of particular pleasures. Bodily pleasures are superior to soul pleasures.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.1.20-34 (italicized portions indicate summarized parts).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.6.39.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.2.9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.9.4-5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.8.11. As we have before with other Greeks, we see again the connection between *aretē* and being the best (*aristos*), as well as being happy—here superlatively happy.

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