

The Vicious Rich: Socrates' Democratic Philosophy in Xenophon

This paper argues that in the course of Socrates' numerous conversations about friendship in the *Memorabilia*, Xenophon's Socrates establishes the sharing of goods and services amongst friends as central to virtue. His focus on communal sharing, taken alongside his further emphasis on the immoderation and vice that results from material goods, offers, I argue, the attempt by this Socrates to undermine the power of money. By categorizing the material benefits of wealth as vicious and by categorizing the material scarcity of poverty—ameliorated by communal friendship—as virtuous, the *Memorabilia's* Socrates tacitly offers a roadmap for undercutting the power of the elites.

Xenophon and his Socrates have typically been read as anti-democratic either because of the perception of their preference for oligarchy/monarchy or their sympathy for social elites. Johnstone (1994: 219) has argued that Xenophon aims to empower the rich; for Newell (2013: 186), Xenophon prefers an absolute, albeit kindly, monarch. Others, including Seager (2001: 396) and Brown Ferrario (2016: 71), have argued, respectively, that Xenophon, although he provisionally supports the Athenians' democracy, aims to reform it by Laconizing or aristocratizing it. My argument moves in the opposite direction. By aligning Socratic virtues with the quotidian reality of non-elite, *demotic* poverty, Xenophon's Socrates aims to break the power of the Athenian elite.

I argue that in the *Memorabilia* Socrates tries to create an impoverished, virtuous communalism that eliminates the special advantages accrued by familial or personal wealth. Socrates repeatedly convinces his followers to share their money and abilities with each other at need. He expects friends to benefit friends in substantive ways (*Mem.* 1.6.9): for example, he convinces Crito (2.9.7) and Diodorus (2.10.6) to offer poorer friends money in exchange for various sorts of help. Socrates similarly spent his own money helping friends poorer than himself (1.2.61). Yet even as he advocates this transfer of money from the rich to the poor, he undermines most advantages of being wealthy. For example, he rejects the notion that more expensive sacrifices are more pious (1.3.3) and demands pot-luck dinners be split equally so the rich cannot use even these occasions to self-promote (3.14.1). He, moreover, repeatedly and vigorously argues against enjoying any of the baser

benefits of affluence: he argues against indulgences of food, sleep, and sex as vicious (2.1.2-3), for example, and argues in favor of minimalist consumption as virtuous (1.3.5).

The *Memorabilia*'s narrator claims his purpose is to prove that Socrates wasn't an anti-democratic subversive who deserved his execution (1.1.1). I argue that a close reading reveals that this Socrates was in fact a pro-democratic subversive who tacitly aimed to convince his students, young aristocrats, to sympathize with and imitate the Athenian *demos*. By convincing the scions of the aristocracy that virtue is impoverished and even *demotic*, he undermined the power of the aristocracy by convincing their heirs to abandon the interests of their class as vicious.

Works Cited

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