

AGRICULTURE AND JUSTICE IN XENOPHON'S *ECONOMICS*

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Resumen: Las principales interpretaciones del *Económico* de Jenofonte consisten en leerlo o bien como un *tratado económico*, o bien como un *diálogo ético* sin contenido económico. En este trabajo, siguiendo los pasos de L.A. Dorion, sostengo que es posible conciliar ambas lecturas, es decir, el contenido económico del texto y su naturaleza socrática, la cual significa su finalidad ética y su forma dialógica. Para ello, me enfoco en un pasaje del *Económico*, en el que Sócrates explica que “la tierra enseña la justicia”. En primer lugar, muestro los límites de las lecturas de inspiración straussiana según las cuales las referencias a la agricultura son puramente alegóricas e irónicas en boca de Sócrates, y la agricultura es ajena a la ética. En segundo lugar, me remito a otros pasajes del *Económico* y otros textos de Jenofonte para demostrar que, y explicar por qué, su Sócrates considera la gestión doméstica (*oikonomia*) en general.

Palabras clave: Agricultura, administración doméstica, *oikonomia*, justicia, Jenofonte

Abstract: The main interpretations of Xenophon's *Economics* consist in reading it either as an *economic treatise*, or as an *ethical dialogue* with no economic content.

In this paper, in the wake of L.A. Dorion's approach, I claim that it is possible to reconcile both readings, that is, the economic content of the text and its Socratic nature –i.e., its ethical purpose and its dialogical form. To do so, I focus on a specific passage of the *Economics*, in which Socrates explains that “earth teaches justice”. I first show the limits of the Straussian-inspired readings according to which references to agriculture are purely allegorical and ironic in Socrates' mouth, and agriculture is alien to ethics. Second, I refer to other passages of the *Economics* and other texts by Xenophon to demonstrate that, and explain why, his Socrates considers household management (*oikonomia*) in general and agriculture in particular as activities propitious to individual and collective ethics.

Keywords: Agriculture, household management, *oikonomia*, justice, Xenophon

Introduction¹

Xenophon's *Economics* has lent itself to many different readings because of the complexity of its form, structure, and theoretical content. Its form raises the question of whether or not the dialogical dimension of the text is a true *sokratikos logos*.² Its structure—a theoretical dialogue between

¹ I am very grateful to Dr. Miguel Badía Cabrera for his careful review of my text.

² On the complex origins of the *sokratikos logos* genre, see D. Clay 1994. Against the idea that the *Economics* would be a *sokratikos logos* or has only the appearance of it: Delebecque 1951, 37; Merchant 1923, vol. IV, xxiv. Translations from the Greek are mine.

Socrates and Critobulus in which the former questions the latter, followed by practical conversation between Socrates and Ischomachus—invites us to question the unity of the whole text.³ Finally, the appreciation of the theoretical content of the work varies according to whether we consider that Socrates is really interested in domestic administration or household management (*oikonomia*), or on the contrary, that Xenophon seeks to show the distance or even, according to some scholars, the opposition between a life devoted to *oikonomia* and a philosophical and virtuous life—which is an issue which implies to think about the distance or the proximity between Ischomachus and Socrates,⁴ and about the possible irony of the latter towards the former.⁵ Schematically, the readings are polarized as follows: some see in the *Economics* a treatise on domestic economy centered on agriculture, and/or on its political stakes, which reduces the dialogical character of the text to an artificial expository process. Thus, according to Chantraine, “this dialogue *which gives itself for Socratic* is introduced according to a rather complicated procedure. [...] The articulation of these dialogues with each other [i.e. the conversations between the various characters involved] may

³ On the question of the unity of the text, see Lasserre 1969, 64; de Martinis 2013, 629-630.

⁴ On this point, see Johnson 2021, 232-235. Pangle 2014 argues that Socrates is aware of the superiority of his way of life over that of Ischomachus but does not deny its own value; Kronenberg 2009, on the contrary, believes that Socrates is expressing himself throughout in an ironic mode, and denies the moral value of Ischomachus' way of life.

⁵ Inspired by Leo Strauss, the contemporary “ironic” reading consists in assuming that the meaning of Socrates' words is not literal, but that they carry an implied critical charge, the perception of which depends on the subtlety of his interlocutor, or on that of Xenophon's reader. This type of reading is that of Stevens 1994, Kronenberg 2009, and to some extent, Danzig 2003.

seem to us a little stiff.” (1949, 7; emphasis added). And then, Chantraine states: “The *Economics* teaches us how to run a farm.” (1949, 11). Other commentators see Xenophon’s text as a Socratic dialogue, essentially concerned with moral and educational issues, which leads to (or implies) relegating its economic aspects to mere anecdotal mentions—a position best exemplified by the following formula: “the *Oeconomicus* is a Socratic dialogue, not a treatise expressing Xenophon’s views on farming.” (Stevens 1994, 235). The idea that Socrates cannot be interested in *oikonomia* for its own sake is echoed in the denial of the book’s economic interest by historians such as J.A. Schumpeter and M.I. Finley.⁶

These two opposing readings—between which there is a whole range of nuances, giving a “kaleidoscopic” vision of the book—⁷ are however based on a common principle: that of a thematic and methodological matching. In other words, if Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* deals with economic issues, it could not be a genuine Socratic dialogue; but if, on the contrary, we are to take it as a Socratic dialogue, it could not deal with economic issues. One may nevertheless wonder whether it would be conceivable—and above all necessary—to propose a unitary reading of the *Economics*, that would take it as both a Socratic dialogue *and* a text in which economic issues would play a central role. In a 2008 article, L.A. Dorion has proposed such a reading and has shown, in my opinion convincingly, that it is possible to uphold at the same time the ethical and pedagogical stakes common to Xenophon’s Socratic dialogues, *and* Socrates’ genuine interest, and even competence, in *oikonomia*. Otherwise, neither the continuity he keeps maintaining between good

⁶ On this denial, see Helmer 2021, 23-28.

⁷ Frazier 1997, 218-219.

administration of the *oikos* and good administration of the city, nor his claim to train politicians, would make sense. According to Dorion, Xenophon would present in this work two economic models which, although distinct in that one takes shape in an *oikos* (Ischomachus) while the other assumes a retreat from the administration of an *oikos* (Socrates), are nonetheless based on the same ethical foundations—in particular self-control (*enkrateia*)—which are those of Socrates in all of Xenophon's Socratic texts, as well as in the *Cyropedia*.

Based on the same premises as Dorion's—i.e. that (1) the *Economics* is a true *sokratikos logos*, (2) Socrates is positively interested in *oikonomia*, and (3) Ischomachus is neither superior to Socrates nor his counter-model, but he is his avatar in charge of an *oikos*—this article focuses however on a more specific aspect of the text, namely the importance given to agriculture, because it stands at the crossroads of economic, political and moral considerations which link this activity to justice. According to Socrates, "the earth, being a deity, also teaches justice (δικαιοσύνην) to those who are capable of learning [...]" (*Econ.* 5.12). In what sense is agriculture a propaedeutics to justice? What is the relationship between an activity with an economic purpose and the exercise of that central Socratic virtue?

To understand it, I will first show the limits of the interpretation according to which agriculture is only an allegory charged with irony, aiming to deconstruct the figure of the good or honest man, i.e., the *kalos kagathos* incarnated by Ischomachus. Such a reading, in fact, does not allow to explain the justice that Socrates attaches, without any irony, to agriculture in the *Economics*. I will then show that by linking agriculture and justice, Xenophon takes part in an important economic debate of his time, which

consisted in wondering which activity was the best to acquire what was necessary in order to satisfy the needs of individuals and cities. This debate is inseparable from moral and political considerations that must be taken into account, if it is true, according to K. Polanyi's expression, that the economic field remained for a long time "embedded" in the other spheres of social life. As we shall see, Xenophon inscribes the practice of agriculture in the circle of reciprocity, which he considers essential to moral and political relations based on "social friendship" (*philia*) and justice. Rather than an opposition between *oikonomia* and "friendship", Xenophon's *Economics* draws a possible isomorphism between them, which reconciles the moral and economic spheres that the allegorical interpretation unduly opposes.

Limits of the allegorical and ironic reading of the Socratic praise of agriculture

Agriculture plays an important role in the *Economics*, starting with Socrates' conversation with Critobulus (4.4-25; 5.1-20) and even more so in his conversation with Ischomachus (15. 1-10; 15-20). Agriculture is certainly one of the most common acquisitive practices in the economic literature of the time, that of the *oikonomikos logos* whose tradition Hesiod's *Works and Days* inaugurates by making the work of the earth the principal economic resource.⁸ But it is not the only one possible: a few centuries later, the Epicurean Philodemus of Gadara, in his own treatise on domestic economy—the *Peri oikonomias*, which is the book IX of his treatise *On Vices*—criticizes Xenophon for giving too much space to the technical dimension of agriculture,

⁸ On the *oikonomikos logos*, see Descat 2010, and Helmer 2021, 38-42.

and especially for making it the central acquisitive practice of *oikonomia*. According to Philodemus, and in accordance with Epicurus' principles and practices, to receive relief from the necessities of life in exchange for philosophical talks is much more appropriate to the Epicurean ethic based on the prudent calculation of pleasures as well as on the security provided by the bonds of friendship. To mention agriculture in a treatise on *oikonomia* is therefore not self-evident at all. So why does Xenophon do it, and why does he give it so much importance?

In her 2009 book, Leah Kronenberg answers this question by hypothesizing that, in this text of Xenophon as well as in other ancient economic texts,⁹ the reference to agriculture is metaphorical or symbolic, and fulfills a very specific critical role. Socrates' speech in the *Economics* would be in great part ironic: his talk with Ischomachus would not aim at presenting Critobulus as an authentic honest man (*kaloskagathos*), accomplished through the exercise of domestic administration centered on agriculture. On the contrary, it would aim at dissuading him from engaging in *oikonomia* by deconstructing the traditional notion of *kalokagathia* associated with success in the economic and agricultural field. Because it would have material wealth as its end and would be the place of violence and selfish interests to the detriment of the common good and cooperation, the *oikonomia* depicted in Xenophon's text would be the antithesis of the most fundamental Socratic virtues. Entirely absorbed by his economic tasks, Ischomachus would thus have only the reputation of the *kalos kalagathos*, without being a real one. Agriculture would thus be an allegory of the vices linked to conventional moral values, which Socrates would implicitly criticize by

⁹ Varro's *De Rustica* and Virgil's *Georgics*.

assuming an “anti-economic” position (Kronenberg 2009, 29).

Such an interpretation presupposes a questionable identification of the speaker’s point of view in the passages of the *Economics* dealing specifically with agriculture, as well as the values that these passages mention. Concerning the conversation with Critobulus, Socrates’ presentation of the supposed benefits that Cyrus the Great, then Cyrus the Younger (*Econ.* 4.4-25) would have received from agriculture would not express Socrates’ own position, but that of these Persian kings (Kronenberg 2009, 42). Through them, Socrates would show that agriculture has more to do with physical needs than with moral virtues, and that the nobility the Persian kings associate with agriculture is reduced to the satisfaction of physical and material enjoyments (Kronenberg 2009, 43; 46). Similarly, the continuation of the “praise” of agriculture in the Chapter 5 of the *Economics* would not express Socrates’ point of view either, but that of the Greeks. This passage would also let us perceive the baseness of their morality which, rather than expressing moral progress (Kronenberg 2009, 45-46), focuses on the body and the enjoyment of material goods, whereas the Socratic idea of the free man would be that of the person free from sense pleasures (Kronenberg 2009, 47). The passage of *Economics* 5.12 that interests us in particular—in which Socrates says that “earth teaches justice” —would be the most ironic formula of the book,¹⁰ since it should be read as a reference to the conventional idea of justice as helping one’s friends, of which agriculture would only offer a degraded version because it would be geared

¹⁰ “The final ‘moral’ section of Socrates’ praise is the most potentially ironic of all, for in it, Socrates makes the bold claim that the earth ‘teaches justice’ (δικαιοσύνην διδάσκει, 5.12).”, Kronenberg 2009, 48.

only towards the search for material profit (Kronenberg 2009, 48). Hence, Ischomachus' values would thus be those of Persia and Athens, namely material order and wealth rather than moral progress (Kronenberg 2009, 55), in such a way that we could perceive this lower moral model also in the educational principles that he inculcates to his slaves and in his conception of agriculture as the art of enrichment as well (Kronenberg 2009, 61-66). A true slave of his own appetites and conventions, Ischomachus would have only the appearance or the reputation of the honest man (Kronenberg 2009, 61), without being a genuine one. In this sense, he would be an "anti-Socrates" (Kronenberg 2009, 55).

Since I cannot discuss all the details of this interpretation, which radicalizes readings inspired earlier by Leo Strauss and reworked by others,¹¹ I will focus on three main points, whose common feature is to be based on false antitheses or, more exactly, on antitheses that are themselves very "conventional". First, the idea that Xenophon's Socrates would not value pleasure and the body in his ethics is wrong. Such an idea, based on an alleged opposition between pleasure and self-control (*enkrateia*), is explicitly denied by Socrates himself. According to him indeed, "self-control is what, more than anything else, makes us feel pleasure" (ἡ δ' ἐγκράτεια πάντων μάλιστα ἡδεσθαι ποιεῖ, *Mem.* 4.5.9) because it makes us endure the difficulties or strains inherent in the most necessary needs. Frugality, for example, does not exclude pleasure; on the contrary, it is the condition for a pleasure that does not lead to any pain, as the following passage explains:

[Socrates] helped himself to as much bread as he ate with pleasure (ὅσον ἡδέως ἤσθιε), and he approached it with such a disposition that the desire

¹¹ In particular, the more subtle one by Danzig 2003.

for bread was a delicacy to him. Any drink was pleasant to him from the fact that he did not drink if he did not feel thirst (ποτόν δὲ πᾶν ἡδὺ ἦν αὐτῷ διὰ τὸ μὴ πίνειν, εἰ μὴ διψῶη). If he consented to go to a meal to which he had been invited, he very easily avoided filling himself beyond satiety, unlike most people who have the greatest difficulty in avoiding it. (*Mem.* 1.3.5-6).

This idea of pleasure *through*, and, in a way, *of* asceticism itself is consistent with Socrates' words to Aristippus: efforts bring pleasure to those who make them (πονεῖν ἡδέως, *Mem.* 2.1.19). The prosopopoeia of Virtue says nothing different when addressing Herakles:

To my friends, the consumption of food and drink is pleasant (ἡδεῖα), and does not lead to any complications, for they abstain from it until they feel the desire of it. Sleep is more pleasant to them than to those who make no effort (ἡδίων ἢ τοῖς ἀμόχθοις), for they are not distressed to leave it, nor does it cause them to abandon their duty. (*Mem.* 2.1.33)

These passages belie the idea that the free man is free from all pleasures.¹² A recurrent idea of Xenophon's and Plato's Socrates is rather that not all pleasures are equally pleasurable, or not all truly pleasurable.¹³ Now those that Xenophon evokes about Cyrus the Younger—the pleasures taken in gardens, in their perfumes and in their aesthetical order (*Econ.* 4. 21)—are precisely those which cannot lend themselves to excess. That agriculture is a source of pleasure (ἡδυπάθειά τις, *Econ.* 5.1) does not, therefore, necessarily

¹² *Contra* Kronenberg 2009, 46.

¹³ See for instance Plato's *Philebus* 36e sq.

mean that it is a source of excess, especially since the Greek term ἡδυσπάθειά, which sometimes refers to pleasures without measure (*Mem.* 2.6.24, and *Symp.* 4.9), can also be associated with pleasures under control. In the *Symposium* (4.41), Antisthenes says he experiences pleasure (ἡδυσπαθῆσαι) with little, because he takes for measure his needs, which are subject to harsh endurance.¹⁴

A second unfounded antithesis consists in opposing the appearance of virtue and true virtue, as the numerous occurrences of “*dokein*” in connection with Ischomachus’ *kalokagathia* may suggest,¹⁵ in the idea that appearance or reputation are necessarily synonymous with illusion, deception, and fake. However, Xenophon’s Socrates doesn’t deny the importance of appearance, especially in the moral field, nor does he denounce its alleged fake character. On the contrary, appearance or good reputation is essential, in power relationships, to gain the trust of men: the most important thing is to know how to conform one’s abilities or skills to this appearance. Thus, “Socrates always said that there is no better way to achieve a good reputation than to become good at what you want to appear to be good” (ἀεὶ γὰρ ἔλεγεν ὡς οὐκ εἶη καλλίων ὁδὸς ἐπ’ εὐδοξίαν ἢ δι’ ἧς ἄν τις ἀγαθὸς τοῦτο γένοιτο, ὃ καὶ δοκεῖν βούλοιτο, *Mem.* 1.7.1).¹⁶ This holds true for the pilot and the army leader (*Mem.* 1.7.3) but also for the one who wants to lead the city (*Mem.* 1.7.5). It is thus reasonable to think that it also

¹⁴ *Contra* Stevens 1994, 228.

¹⁵ Among others: Kronenberg 2009, 38 about Ischomachus; 44 about Cyrus the Younger; Danzig 2003, 66 about Ischomachus; and Stevens 1994, 212 and 236 about Ischomachus.

¹⁶ Similarly, Cyrus the Great says to his son that the best way to appear sensible is to be sensible (οὐκ ἔστιν ἔφη, ὃ παῖ, συντομωτέρα ὁδὸς ἐπὶ τό, περὶ ὃν βούλει, δοκεῖν φρόνιμος εἶναι ἢ τὸ γενέσθαι περὶ τούτων φρόνιμον, *Cyropedia* 1.6.22).

applies to the administrator of his *oikos* or household manager. Rather than the divorce between being and appearing, it is on the contrary their union or coincidence in *oikonomia* that Socrates proposes to show Critobulus in the person of Ischomachus. In other words, the latter is not an imposter. The coincidence in him of being and appearing regarding *oikonomia* in general, and agriculture in particular, certainly doesn't prejudice the value of his life model. But even if it were inferior to the philosophical life—which is debatable—it would not be for all that vain, fake, or misleading. One cannot then affirm that Xenophon tries to show his reader that “apparent virtues can conceal hidden vices”.¹⁷

These two false oppositions support a third one, between, on the one hand, the ethical or moral field, and, on the other hand, the economic field unduly identified with the rule of selfish interests. According to Kronenberg, “Xenophon’s Socrates in the *Oeconomicus*, far from promoting the conventional Athenian virtues of the gentleman-farmer Ischomachus, instead deconstructs the traditional notion of *kalokagathia* (‘nobleness, goodness’) associated with Ischomachus’ ethics and is *as fully ‘anti-economic’ as Plato’s Socrates*.”¹⁸ Besides the fact that it is hard to see how Socrates could be ‘against’ (‘anti-’) what is a matter of necessity, the presupposition that economy in general, and domestic administration in particular, are alien to the reign of values is debatable. It is precisely because they are so closely related that Plato’s Socrates shows himself to be very concerned with economic issues.¹⁹ Certainly, in the *Republic*, Socrates believes that economic ties are motivated

¹⁷ *Contra* Kronenberg 2009, 46.

¹⁸ Kronenberg 2009, 29; my emphasis.

¹⁹ See Helmer 2010.

by self-interest (*Rep.* 2.369c). But this fact is not amoral or immoral for all that, as long as it is not motivated by the desire to prevail over others. The first city, in which measure and peace reign, offers an example of economic practices where self-interest does not spill over into violence towards others (*Rep.* 2.372a-c). Faced with the frenetic appetites, which seem however inevitable, Socrates invites to organize the city (*polis*) so that its economy may contribute to its unity and justice—this is the meaning of the rejection of both poverty and wealth (*Rep.* 4.421e-422a), of the establishment of functional reciprocity between the political and the economic sectors (*Rep.* 5. 463a-b), and of Plato's critical remark about the devastating effects of practices such as interest-bearing loans (*Rep.* 8. 556a-b). All these elements, among others, show that Plato's Socrates, far from being 'anti-economic', is on the contrary very much interested in economics for positive reasons, if only as an instrumental means of achieving political justice. The more classical treatises on domestic economics—notably those by Ps. Aristotle and Philodemus of Gadara—but also Aristotle's passages on chrematistics in the *Politics*, identify even more clearly a moral dimension in the very exercise of economic functions within the *oikos*. Ps. Aristotle considers that the ability to get up early is "as beneficial to health as to *oikonomia* and philosophy", three aptitudes that the master of the *oikos* must unite in himself (*Econ.* 1.6. 1345a16-17). Philodemus of Gadara, on the other hand, explicitly limits his object of study to "the acquisition necessary for a philosopher, and not for anyone," *i.e.*, for an Epicurean concerned with ethics (*On Vices IX*, 12.15-17; my emphasis). As for the Aristotelian distinction between exchanges aiming at natural, *i.e.*, limited wealth, and chrematistics, which is only indefinite accumulation of money (*Pol.*

1256b40-1258a19), it is clear that it also signals a moral attitude at work in economic practices.²⁰

Xenophon's Socrates is also part of this trend. In the *Memorabilia*, Xenophon lists all those who spent time with Socrates "not to become public speakers or litigators, but to be good men and *to be able to use their houses*, their servants, their relatives, their friends, their city and their fellow citizens *properly*." (ἀλλ' ἵνα καλοί τε κάγαθοὶ γενόμενοι καὶ οἴκῳ οἰκέταις καὶ οἰκείοις φίλοις καὶ πόλει καὶ πολίταις δύναιντο καλῶς χρῆσθαι, *Mem.* 1.2.48; my emphasis). A little further on, Socrates explains to Aristippus that voluntary pains are beneficial:

those who consent to efforts to make virtuous friends, or to subdue their enemies, or, once they have given the means to their body and soul, *to administer their own house well* (τὸν ἑαυτῶν οἶκον καλῶς οἰκῶσι), to do good to their friends and to be benefactors of their homeland, how can we not believe that it is with pleasure that they make efforts to achieve such goals [...]? (*Mem.* 2.1.19; my emphasis)

Shortly afterwards, Virtue, via Socrates, speaks in the same sense, as we have seen above. So, there is no reason to think that this position changes in Xenophon's *Economics*. The practices involved in the domestic economy are intrinsically ethical. Everything leads us to think that Xenophon's Socrates is really interested in their moral and political significance, as long as they are properly carried out.

²⁰ See Tabosa 2016.

Agriculture as a school of justice

The fragility of the allegorical and ironic reading of the passages devoted to agriculture in the *Economics* invites us to take seriously the link Socrates makes between this activity and justice. According to him, “the earth, being a deity, also teaches justice to those who are capable of learning; it is to those who show it the most regard that it grants in exchange the most goods.” (ἡ γῆ θεὸς οὕσα τοὺς δυναμένους καταμανθάνειν καὶ δικαιοσύνην διδάσκει: τοὺς γὰρ ἄριστα θεραπεύοντας αὐτὴν πλεῖστα ἀγαθὰ ἀντιποιεῖ. *Econ.* 5.12).

Four points deserve to be commented concerning this passage, starting with the general theoretical context in which it makes sense. The link Socrates makes between agriculture and justice fulfills both a general function of reminding us that the economic field and the question of values are not alien to each other, and a more specific function of legitimizing agricultural activity, or more precisely of giving it priority over other possible acquisitive activities, notably the commercial sector. The first point is confirmed by a similar approach at the beginning of Xenophon’s *Poroi*: it is indeed the concern for what is “most just” (ὄθενπερ καὶ δικαιοτάτον, *Poroi* 1.1) which, this time on the political level, leads Xenophon to propose a number of economic measures, in the idea that the knowledge of the “just” (τὸ δίκαιον, *Poroi* 1.1) which some Athenian statesmen pretend to possess, has nevertheless led them to be “unjust” towards the allied cities in order to relieve the poverty of their own people.²¹ Economics and politics can thus coincide

²¹ For an analysis of this passage, and the relative meaning to be given to this poverty, see Gauthier 1976, 38-42.

around a certain idea of justice, a coincidence analogous to the one Socrates invokes here about economics and ethics.

The second point refers to a debate that was omnipresent in the economic thought of the 4th century BCE. In the *Politics*, as we have seen, Aristotle makes a distinction between natural acquisition and chrematistics, that is, between legitimate productive and commercial activities on the one hand, and those which aim only at the unlimited accumulation of money, on the other hand. In the *Laws*, Plato recognizes the inevitability of trade, underlines its moral and political dangers —the corruption of ethics— and prefers agricultural activity as the primary acquisitive technique. But he also admits the necessity and even the positive impact of trade in strengthening trust and *philia* between the members of the just city, as long as it is well supervised and those who practice it are educated in justice.²² Xenophon, in the *Poroï*, also shows the positive political and geopolitical implications of a well thought-out commercial policy.²³ In this general context, the choice of agriculture not as an exclusive acquisitive practice but as a central one, constitutes a position that makes even more sense if we realize that there is no doubt that the Greek cities were deeply engaged in foreign trade, in the context of what some have called “the merchant city” in ancient Greece.²⁴ We shall see later that agriculture also provides, in the eyes of Socrates, the opportunity for a relationship of reciprocity more isomorphic to justice than trade, which is always likely to make one’s own interest prevail over the common interest.

A second point concerns “teaching”, to which Socrates refers in the quote I focus on, as well as further in the text (ὁ

²² Plato, *Laws* 4. 704e-705b; II. 918d-919d. See Helmer 2018.

²³ See Gauthier 1976.

²⁴ Bresson 2000.

θεὸς διδάσκει, *Econ.* 17.3). Whether we translate, as Chantraine does, by “to those who are able to learn it?”—the pronoun “it” then referring to justice—or, as Marchant does, in a more general sense, by “to those who can learn”, in both cases the issue at stake is the “ethical universality”. In other words, is this learning dependent on the psychic nature of the subject? For if it were the case, it would not fit Critobulus, as he is driven by his passions and seems unfit for moral progress, such as the “incurables” evoked by Plato. But the conversation with Ischomachus will show that agriculture is an easy art, and even “the easiest to learn” (*Econ.* 15.4 and 13). Whether or not this alleged facility is a solid argument—some prefer to call it a “propaganda”—intended to motivate the Athenians to go back to the work of the ground to better defend the national territory,²⁵ it pleads in all the cases in favor of the idea that *all* can learn, without restriction. This facility is of a theoretical nature.²⁶ For on the practical level, agriculture is not easy in the sense that the land does not allow one to take “with softness” (μετὰ μαλακίας λαμβάνειν, *Econ.* 5.4.) the fruits it provides. Agriculture requires efforts, as the rest of the passage will confirm. An example of this theoretical facility concerns the question of the nature of the ground (*Econ.* 16.1-6). Distancing himself from those who “speak in great detail” (λέγουσι ἀκριβέστατα) about this subject and consider it “the most complex of agriculture” (ποικιλώτατον τῆς γεωργίας, *Econ.* 16.1),²⁷ Ischomachus dismisses the idea that a thorough or theoretical prior knowledge (εἰδέναι, *Econ.* 16.2) is required on this point in order to farm. Observation (ὀρῶντα, *Econ.* 16.3) is sufficient to recognize (γνῶναι,

²⁵ See Frazier 1997, 222.

²⁶ On the relationship between this facility and the rejection of *mētis* or cunning, see Frazier 1997, 223-224.

²⁷ See Pomeroy 1994, 322 on these more technical treatises.

Econ. 16.3) what a portion of land is or is not capable of producing. This point is important insofar as it guarantees a pathway to the possibility of moral progress for all, and it is also a way of validating the “conversion of the gaze” to which Socrates has invited Critobulus at the beginning of the book (*Econ.* 3.6-9): by offering him “in speech” the spectacle of those who succeed and those who fail in agriculture, Socrates intends him to look at it not as a source of pleasure—as when he goes to the theater “to take pleasure in seeing and hearing something” (*Econ.* 3.9)—but with a view to finding in it a source of knowledge by indirect experience.

The practical efforts required by agriculture, and the simultaneous emphasis on the empirical grounding of agricultural learning, are consistent with the third point, namely that justice cannot be merely a matter of discourse: it means something only in the acts that manifest it.²⁸ As far as agriculture is concerned, it is the practice of the “*ergā*” (works or tasks) that, for Ischomachus, must take precedence over theoretical thought. Thus, still on the question of the nature of the ground, the “talkers” mentioned in the passage quoted above—*i.e.*, those who “speak of it in great detail” (λέγουσι ἀκριβέστατα) and consider this subject to be “the most complex of agriculture” (ποικιλώτατον τῆς γεωργίας—are precisely those who “put it least into practice” (ἥκιστα δὲ ἐργαζόμενοι) (*Econ.* 16.1). Such practice nurtures the experience of those who engage in it, and also of novices, like Socrates here. It offers, through its tangible results, indications about the nature of the land, so that the observer does not need to inquire the owner about it, especially when

²⁸ This emphasis on practice makes Xenophon’s Socrates unique: not because Plato’s Socrates neglects it, but he emphasizes discourse in the name of the idea “that there is more truth in lexis than in acts”. (*Rep.* 5, 473a).

the latter leaves his land unproductive out of laziness (*ἀργίαν*) (*Econ.* 16.4). The “speech” of truth is in the acts and their results, more than in the words, and it is in this sense that Ischomachus can say that “the earth does not deceive but makes clear in truth what it is capable of and what it is not capable of” (οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν ὅ τι ἐπὶ ἀπάτη δείκνυσιν, ἀλλ’ ἀπλῶς ἅ τε δύναται καὶ ἅ μὴ σαφηνίζει τε καὶ ἀληθεύει. *Econ.* 20.13). For this reason also, the earth, and more exactly its productivity, reflects the work or the laziness of its owners (*Econ.* 20.14-15). This importance of the practical component can be found in the Socratic version of justice. In the *Memorabilia*, Socrates emphasizes the ethical importance of practice, contrasting “fortune” on the one hand, and “action” or “practice” in the other hand (πᾶν μὲν οὖν τοῦναντίον ἔγωγ’, ἔφη, τύχην καὶ πράξις ἡγοῦμαι). While good fortune (τὴν εὐτυχίαν) depends on chance, “success” or “good practice” (εὐπραξία) consists in “doing well a thing one has learned and practiced” (τὸ δὲ μαθόντα τε καὶ μελετήσαντά τι εὖ ποιεῖν εὐπραξίαν νομίζω, *Mem.* 3.9.14). And it is precisely by doing their work well (εὖ πράττοντας) that men make themselves “dear to the gods,” “like farmers do in agriculture (ἐν μὲν γεωργίᾳ τοὺς τὰ γεωργικὰ), doctors in medicine, or politicians in politics” (*Mem.* 3.9.15). This passage, which makes agriculture the possible ground for a form of moral fulfillment, is consistent with Xenophon’s Socrates’ idea of justice. To Hippias, who asks him to “reveal what he considers to be right,” and who reproaches him for shirking “by never revealing his position on anything” (*Mem.* 4.4.9),²⁹ Socrates replies that he never “ceases to show what seems to him to be right,” “if not by speech, at least by deeds” (εἰ δὲ μὴ λόγῳ, ἔφη, ἀλλ’ ἔργῳ ἀποδείκνυμαι, *Mem.* 4.4.10). This importance given to acts

²⁹ Cf. the similar accusations, associated with “irony”, that Thrasymachus addresses to Socrates in the *Republic* I, 337a.

accounts for the connection established by Socrates between justice and agriculture.

A final and fundamental reason for this connection lies in the idea of reciprocity that constitutes the common ground of the two notions at stake. If agriculture is propaedeutic to justice, it is because it rests on a form of gift and counter-gift between the farmer and the land, and that this exchange is also essential to justice. Vincent Azoulay's studies have shown the central role of *charis* and reciprocity in Xenophon's thought.³⁰ Xenophon sees them as inherent norms of human conduct and values, which his Socrates takes up, for example, when he declares: "Is it not everywhere the use that we do good to those from whom we have received good?" (τοὺς εὖ ποιοῦντας ἀντευεργετεῖν οὐ πανταχοῦ νόμιμόν ἐστι, *Mem.* 4.4.24). The same is true in the *Economics*, where agriculture is the immanent expression of this generalized reciprocity. Shortly before the passage I have been focusing on since the beginning of this paper, Socrates detects such a norm even in the conduct of some animals, as if they had initiated it themselves or, better, as if it were a law of nature: "In exchange for the utility they derive from agriculture, dogs and horses on their part render service to the farm (ὠφελοῦμενοι δὲ καὶ οἱ ἵπποι καὶ αἱ κύνες ἀπὸ τῆς γεωργίας ἀντωφελοῦσι τὸν χῶρον)" (*Econ.* 5.6). Turning to men, he continues:

What art pays better returns (ἀντιχαρίζεται) to those who practice it? Which makes more pleasant (ἥδιον) welcome to those who indulge in it? You approach him, and he holds out to you and offers you whatever you desire. Which welcomes guests more generously? (*Econ.* 5.8; quoted by Azoulay 2004, 49).

³⁰ See in particular Azoulay 2004.

The fact that Socrates makes more emphasis here on the pleasure received in return than on the effort required by agriculture,³¹ does not mean that agriculture does not require efforts. The prosopopoeia of Virtue addressing Heracles confirms this point, by making the exercise of agriculture a case among others of the general law of reciprocity, with the effort it requires:

Of what is really good and beautiful (τῶν γὰρ ὄντων ἀγαθῶν καὶ καλῶν), there is nothing that men obtain from the gods without effort or application (ἄνευ πόνου καὶ ἐπιμελείας): if you want the gods to be propitious to you, you must honor them; if you want your friends to cherish you, you must do them good; if you seek the consideration of a city, you must do it service; if you believe that your virtue deserves the admiration of all Greece, you must strive to be its benefactor; if you want the earth to give you fruit in abundance, you must take care of it (εἴτε γῆν βούλει σοι καρπὸς ἀφθόνουσ φέρειν, τὴν γῆν θεραπευτέον) [...]. (*Mem.* 2.1.28)

That Virtue itself places agriculture among the ways of obtaining what is “*really* beautiful and good” forbids us to see in this practice a school of material enjoyment and wealth to which the Socratic version of justice could not correspond.³² Ischomachus himself warns against this utilitarian or egoistic interpretation of agriculture: “It is not by sowing and planting *what one needs* that one can best obtain what is necessary, but *what the earth likes* to grow and nourish.” (*Econ.* 16.3; my emphasis). Agriculture is a school of

³¹ Azoulay 2004, 42.

³² *Contra* Kronenberg 2009, 48-49.

dialogue, without which reciprocity and justice cannot take place.

Conclusion

Rather than an opposition between *philia* and *oikonomia* supposedly turned towards personal profit—as if Socrates were inviting Critobulus to make his choice between them in order to lead a truly human life—³³ it is on the contrary their isomorphism and their close link that Xenophon's Socrates underlines in the coincidence of agriculture and justice. Such an interpretation, which is in line with the analyses and conclusions of a recent study devoted to the relationship between “economics” and “friendship” in ancient Greece,³⁴ invites us to take note of the real interest of Xenophon's Socrates, and more generally of the ancient authors, in economic subjects. It also shows us that an idea of economics distinct from the science of maximizing individual gain is conceivable, and that as such, a detour to the Ancients is never in vain. And if we ask why Socrates does not dedicate himself to household management, it is because the good life is said and lived in several senses, as he himself admits when speaking of *oikonomia*.

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³³ Stevens 1994, 214.

³⁴ Berkel 2020.

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