

Aristippus and Xenophon as Plato's contemporary literary rivals and the role of gymnastikè (γυμναστική)

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Abstrakt: Plato was a Socrates' friend and disciple, but he wasn't the only one. No doubt, Socrates had many followers, however, the majority of their work is lost. Was there any antagonism among his followers? Who succeeded in interpreting Socrates? Who could be considered as his successor? Of course, we don't know if these questions emerged after the death of Socrates, but the Greek doxography suggests that there was a literary rivalry. As we underlined earlier, most unfortunately, we can't examine all of them thoroughly due to the lack of their work, but we can scrutinize Xenophon's and Aristippus' work. All of them, Plato, Xenophon and Aristippus, presented to a certain extent their ideas concerning education. Furthermore, they have not neglected the matter of gymnastikè, but what is exactly the role of physical education in their work? Are there any similarities or any differences between them? Since, Xenophon and Aristippus (as well as Plato) seem to be in favor of gymnastikè, it is necessary to understand its role.

Keywords: gymnastikè, Plato, Socrates, Xenophon, Aristippus.

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Plato is a prominent thinker, whose influence on philosophy is an incontestable fact. The Renaissance philosopher and neo-Platonist himself, Marsilio Ficino didn't hesitate to describe the genius Athenian as "the father of philosophers"². That being said, it wouldn't be rational if one wasn't expecting any literary rivals. Nonetheless, we would like to focus only on his contemporary rivals, since some of these cases are seemingly interesting due to the relation of the rivals. Plato was a Socrates' friend and disciple, but he wasn't the only one. No doubt, Socrates had many³, however, the majority of their work is lost. Was there any antagonism among his followers? Who succeeded in interpreting Socrates? Who could be considered as his successor? Of course, we don't know if these questions emerged after the death of Socrates, but the Greek doxography suggests that there was a literary rivalry. As we underlined earlier, most unfortunately, we can't examine all of them thoroughly due to the lack of their work, but we can scrutinize Xenophon's and Aristippus' work. All of them, Plato, Xenophon and Aristippus, presented to a certain extent their ideas concerning education. Furthermore, they have not neglected the matter of physical education – gymnastikè. Are there any essential similarities or any crucial differences regarding gymnastikè? That is the question we will try to answer.

Aristippus, pleasure (ἡδονή) and gymnastikè

Aristippus is the founder of the Cyrenaic school and hedonistic philosophy⁴. We know that he was in a certain way a Socratic pupil⁵, nevertheless, it is quite clear that the other followers did not appreciate neither his behavior nor his ideas. In fact, Diogenes Laërtius informs us that Xenophon was hostile towards Aristippus, while Plato looked down on him⁶. It is quite interesting to mention that there is only one reference regarding Aristippus in the platonic corpus and it is certain that Plato does not seem to praise him, since he is implicating that during the last moments of Socrates in prison, Aristippus is missing⁷, perhaps with no excuse. In any case, it would be really interesting to juxtapose the philosophical ideas of these two, but Aristippus' work (apart from some fragments) is lost. However, the doxographical tradition may help us to shed some light on Aristippus' ideas concerning gymnastikè.

First of all, we do know that Aristippus had written a dialogue, which was undoubtedly related to gymnastikè, since the title was "To him who trains himself for the Olympic Games"⁸. Although we can claim it is clear that this work is somewhat associated to gymnastikè, we ignore completely its content. Was Aristippus trying to praise the athletic gymnastikè? Was he criticizing gymnastikè? Diogenes Laërtius informs us that Aristippus said once that:

² "Pater philosophorum" is the used term in Latin. M. Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, Vol. 4, XII, 1.

³ Plato, *Phaedon*, 59 b-c; Diogenes Laërtius, *Socrates*, 47.

⁴ N. Politis, *Φιλοσοφήματα*, p. 255; Diogenes Laërtius, *Aristippus*, 65, 85-86.

⁵ Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, B, I, 1; Diogenes Laërtius, *Aristippus*, 65.

⁶ *Ibid.* 65, 67, 69.

⁷ Plato, *Phaedon*, 59 c.

⁸ Diogenes Laërtius, *Aristippus*, 84.

“...those who eat most and take the most exercise are not better in health than those who restrict themselves to what they require...⁹”.

We would like to suggest that “those who eat most and take the most exercise” are probably the athletes (or perhaps, in this case Aristippus refers to those that exaggerate with gymnastikè, the *ἄθλιοι*). It is indeed a typical description of the athletes, since one can find it pretty often in the Greek literary tradition¹⁰. If that’s the case, then we may claim that Aristippus criticizes indirectly those who exaggerate with gymnastikè (or perhaps, the athletes themselves¹¹). But before we come to a conclusion about the matter at hand, we are obliged to analyze further Aristippus’ positions regarding gymnastikè.

Are there any indications that Aristippus was against gymnastikè? According to Diogenes Laërtius, the philosopher defined the « λεία κίνησις » as the « τέλος »¹². In other words, our purpose is a sort of movement without any obstacles. What type of movement does he mean? It is undoubtedly difficult to answer nevertheless, we may be certain this « λεία κίνησις » doesn’t relate strictly to corporal movement¹³. Diogenes Laërtius informs us that:

“...asserted that corporeal pleasures were superior to mental ones, and corporeal sufferings¹⁴ worse than mental ones. And they argued that it was on this principle that offenders were punished with bodily pain; for they thought that to suffer pain was hard, but that to be pleased was more in harmony with the nature of man...”¹⁵.

If the « λεία κίνησις » is the purpose and pleasure is the desirable, is there any sort of identification of these two concepts? We could suggest that every corporal suffering is a non-natural « κίνησις », while pleasure is considered to be the natural kind of « κίνησις », and that’s why Aristippus is in search of pleasure, for this type of movement is not only more agreeable, it is the natural movement, probably the natural state of the body and the human spirit, as believed by Aristippus. What does this mean for gymnastikè? It is quite clear that gymnastikè

⁹ *Ibid.* 71.

¹⁰ *Plutarch, On Socrates’ personal deity, 14 D; Precepts of healthcare, 133 D; Philopoemen, 3; Philostratus, On gymnastics, 35, 46.*

¹¹ *We have to indicate that he wouldn’t be the first. Hippocrates (Hippocrates, On regimen, I, 24), Xenophanes (Athenaeus, Deipnosophistae, X, 414 B), Euripides, (Athenaeus, Deipnosophistae, X, 414 C), Plato, (Plato, Republic, 403 e – 404 b), Aristotle, (Aristotle, Politics, VIII, 4) are some of the Greek thinkers expressing their opposition against athletic gymnastikè.*

¹² *Diogenes Laërtius, Aristippus, 85.*

¹³ *K. Urstad, Pathos, Pleasure and the Ethical Life, E-Logos, Electronic Journal for Philosophy, University of Prague, 6/2009, p. 4.*

¹⁴ *The Greek word that’s being used is « νόμος », a word strongly related to gymnastikè in Greek literature and language.*

¹⁵ *Diogenes Laërtius, Aristippus, 91.*

can't be considered as a pleasure for the body. Is it considered to be a sort of body suffering? Is it a non-natural movement? Aristippus clarifies that:

*"...physical exercises contribute to the acquisition of virtue"*¹⁶.

Is this a contradiction? It is difficult to say, since we ignore Aristippus' exact doctrines, but we have to admit that it may seem paradoxical. Under the prism of "hedonism", one must avoid any bodily pain, since pleasure is more desirable and more natural, yet, gymnastikè, which is a kind of bodily pain for itself, is important for the acquisition of virtue. It is impossible to evaluate this information due to the lack of Aristippus' work, but we would like to suggest that it is probably a paradox, whose explication could be pretty simple. Aristippus probably understands that an unhealthy body is obliged to abstain from pleasures. So, gymnastikè becomes a necessity, since bodily health is a prerequisite for pleasure. Anyhow, we have seen that Aristippus speaks in favor of gymnastikè, but he also believes that it is not justifiable to feel pride for the corporal qualities one may have¹⁷. So, gymnastikè is important, but it can't be an excuse for pride. Is it an indirect reference to the pride of the athletic victory? We can't be certain, but we could suggest that this indicates Aristippus refuses to give any primacy to physical education. Most unfortunately, we haven't any other elements on Aristippus' thoughts regarding gymnastikè.

Our first consumptions concerning Aristippus are that a) gymnastikè is a matter that interests Aristippus, b) the philosopher isn't against gymnastikè and physical education, c) there is a possibility of Aristippus being skeptical or even negative over the subject of athletic gymnastikè.

Military gymnastikè and hunting as gymnastikè in Xenophon's work

It's a fact that Socrates' persona plays a major role in Xenophon's work. Both Plato and Xenophon idealized and transformed in a way their common mentor¹⁸ in order to justify and promote their own ideas. Is there any antagonism between these two Athenian thinkers? That could explain why Plato never refers to Xenophon, while the latter makes only one reference of the former in his "Memorabilia"¹⁹. According to the Greek doxographical tradition, their relation was never the best²⁰ and there was always a suspicion concerning their literary rivalry²¹. It is quite interesting to note that we can trace some kind of literary reaction between these

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 91.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 73.

¹⁸ P. Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, ed. Albin Michel, 2002, p. 102.

¹⁹ Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, III, 6, 1.

²⁰ Diogenes Laërtius, *Xenophon*, 57.

²¹ G. Danzig, *La prétendue rivalité entre Platon et Xénophon*, ed. Picard, *Revue Française d'Histoire des Idées Politiques*, 2002/2, No. 16, p. 351.

two²². We have to admit that we can't be certain if that literary rivalry really existed, but it is quite possible that there is a reciprocal literary reaction.

No doubt, Xenophon demonstrates his interest in matters of education in his work. We find sporadically many references concerning education and we can easily come to the conclusion that Xenophon is greatly influenced by the Dorian ideal²³ and the concept of the military aristocracy²⁴. That explains why Xenophon relates gymnastikè with military preparation²⁵, seeing it as an excellent way to make capable warriors especially in comparison to those that don't exercise their body²⁶. In fact, it's the element of gymnastikè the one that gives the advantage to Spartan warriors against the « ἀπόνους » Persians, in other words, the untrained Persian troops. Gymnastikè becomes the factor that gives the victory, since the Spartans are those that exercise their bodies, while the Persians prefer to avoid any corporal "suffering" due to gymnastikè. That's why Xenophon says that obesity and feebleness characterize every Persian soldier²⁷. However, it is quite remarkable how easily Xenophon "forgot" these references, when he was writing "Cyropaedia", a work praising Cyrus. Xenophon says:

*"...when the king goes out to hunt, which he will do several times a month, he takes half the company with him, and each man must carry bow and arrows, a sheathed dagger, or sagaris, slung beside the quiver, a light shield, and two javelins, one to hurl and the other to use, if need be, at close quarters. The reason of this public sanction for the chase is not far to seek; the king leads just as he does in war, hunting in person at the head of the field, and making his men follow, because it is felt that the exercise itself is the best possible training for the needs of war. It accustoms a man to early rising; it hardens him to endure heat and cold; it teaches him to march and to run at the top of his speed..."*²⁸.

As one can see, Xenophon contradicts himself, indicating that the Persians do exercise their bodies. To be more precise, hunt becomes a physical exercise, described as "*the best possible training for the needs of war*". We won't be paying any attention to Xenophon's contradiction, for we are interested in focusing somewhere else. It is the second time that Xenophon relates gymnastikè to military preparations. Hunt becomes in a way a kind of physical exercise, a sort of military gymnastikè. In fact, it's not the only time that Xenophon tries to present hunt as form of gymnastikè. In his work "On hunting", it is pretty clear he seems to identify these two

²² *Ibid.* p. 351-368.

²³ *Regarding the Dorian ideal*, Éd. Des Places, Pindare et Platon, ed. Beauchesne et ses fils, Paris, 1949, p. 41-49.

²⁴ L. Canfora, *Le citoyen, in the collective work "L'homme grec" under the direction of J.-P. Vernant*, Éditions du Seuil, 1993, p. 172-173.

²⁵ Xenophon, *Agesilaus*, I, 25; *Cyropaedia*, I, 10.

²⁶ Xenophon, *Agesilaus*, I, 28.

²⁷ *Ibid.* I, 28.

²⁸ Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, I, 2, 9-10.

(hunting as gymnastikè)²⁹. Is he the first Greek thinker that considers hunt as a form of physical exercise? Perhaps, but we can't be sure about it.

Anyhow, there's a plethora of references regarding gymnastikè that allow us to evoke that a) Xenophon is interested in physical education, b) he speaks in favor of military gymnastikè and c) he presents hunting as a form of physical exercise.

The “other” Socrates and gymnastikè

Socrates is the protagonist in many works of Xenophon. “Memorabilia”, “Symposium”, “Apology” are some of them. It is remarkable that Xenophon use Socrates' persona in his works that relate mostly to ethics and socio-political life of the « πόλις ». As we've already mentioned, Xenophon idealizes and transforms to a certain extent in his own Socratic dialogues³⁰. According to Waterfield, Xenophon's purpose is to present Socrates as the incarnation of the Greek moral values, but a Socrates who's more “accessible” in comparison to Plato's Socrates³¹. What's Socrates' opinion on the subject of gymnastikè? Xenophon spoke in favor of military gymnastikè. Under the Socratic mask, does he “change” his opinion?

It is more than clear that Xenophon's Socrates appreciates gymnastikè. We read in “Memorabilia” that Socrates took care of his body, while he didn't approve those that didn't³². Also, Socrates, says Xenophon, used to exercise his body and his soul in order to feel confident and secure³³. It seems that the body plays an important role, as its care contributes to quality of life, while Xenophon seems to describe gymnastikè as a way to cope with corporal sufferings³⁴. It is more than certain that physical exercises and gymnastikè are in a way obligatory for those that desire a life of happiness.

In Xenophon's “Symposium”, we find another element concerning gymnastikè, probably the most interesting till now. During a symposium and in a cheerful ambiance, a discussion takes place and Socrates enters the conversation, referring to the qualities of dance. Socrates is trying to explicate why he thinks dance is an incredible form of gymnastikè. He says:

“...no part of his body (a dancer's body) was idle during the dance, but neck, legs, and hands were all active together. And that is the way a person must dance who intends to increase the suppleness of his body...I am eager for such exercises as these, not like the long-distance runners, who develop their legs at the expense of their shoulders, nor like the prize-fighters,

²⁹ Xenophon, *On hunting*, II, 1.

³⁰ P. Hadot, *Exercices spirituels...*, p. 102; P. Waterfield, *Xenophon's Socratic mission, in the collective work « Xenophon and his world, Papers from a conference held in Liverpool in July 1999 », under the direction of Ch. Tuplin*, 2004, p. 95.

³¹ R. Waterfield, *Xenophon's Socratic mission, In: Xenophon and His World: Papers from a Conference Held in Liverpool in July 1999, Franz Steiner Verlag*, 2004, p. 95-96.

³² Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, A, II, 4.

³³ *Ibid.* A, III, 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.* A, VI, 7-8.

*who develop their shoulders but become thin-legged, but rather with a view to giving my body a symmetrical development by exercising it in every part*³⁵?

Dance is not only characterized as a form of gymnastikè, but it has the ability to cultivate symmetrically the human body, while other physical activities don't promote this kind of corporal harmony.

We have indicated quite clearly, that Xenophon's Socrates speaks generally in favor of gymnastikè, suggesting that dance is a fine form of physical exercise, but what about military gymnastikè? It seems that Socrates privileges this specific type of gymnastikè, as we may clearly see in "Oeconomicus":

*"By Hera (I replied), Ischomachus, I cannot say how much your doings take my fancy. How you have contrived, to pack up portably for use — together at the same time — appliances for health and recipes for strength, exercises for war, and pains to promote your wealth"*³⁶!

So, we can suggest that Xenophon doesn't change his mind under the mask of Socrates. Otherwise, we must admit it would be an enormous contradiction, considering the fact that Xenophon is strongly related to the Dorian ideal and the military aristocracy.

To sum up, we may say that a) Xenophon's Socrates is in favor of gymnastikè, b) he considers dance as a form of gymnastikè that is in fact superior to other physical exercises, since it cultivates symmetrically the whole body, and c) he privileges military gymnastikè.

Conclusions

After having examined Aristippus' and Xenophon's positions regarding gymnastikè, we have drawn some important conclusions. Xenophon and Aristippus (as well as Plato) seem to be in favor of gymnastikè. It is quite evident that we can't speak with certainty in Aristippus' case; nevertheless, we may say that the Cyrenaic philosopher demonstrates his interest concerning physical education matters. As we have already underlined a) gymnastikè is a matter that interests Aristippus, b) the philosopher isn't against gymnastikè and physical education, c) there is a possibility of Aristippus being skeptical or even negative over the subject of athletic gymnastikè. On the other hand, we may evoke that a) Xenophon is interested in physical education, b) he speaks in favor of military gymnastikè and c) he presents hunting as a form of physical exercise. It is quite interesting to notice that Xenophon's Socrates a) is also in favor of gymnastikè, b) considering dance as a form of gymnastikè that is in fact superior to other physical exercises, since it cultivates symmetrically the whole body, and of course c) he privileges military gymnastikè.

³⁵ *Ibid.* II, 16-17.

³⁶ *Xenophon, Oeconomicus, XI, 19.*

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