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PAUPERISM AND THEOLOGY. DIVINE INFLUENCES ON SOCRATES' CHOICE OF POVERTY?

Abstract: The essay argues in favor of the general hypothesis that Socrates believed in the existence of a god, who led him to deliberately embrace poverty and spend his time philosophizing, rather than pursuing financially rewarding activities. Indeed, both Plato's *Apology of Socrates* and Xenophon's first book of the *Memorabilia* report such an idea, although they disagree as to certain details. The former depicts poverty as an evil and Socrates' embrace of it as being due to his decision to obey a providential deity who is interested in morally improving humankind and uses the philosopher to this end. The latter text instead presents a Socrates who becomes poor in order to imitate a self-sufficient divinity that has no needs. According to this perspective, Socrates considers poverty a good which leads to a blessed condition close to that of a god. Since we do not possess enough evidence to decide whether it is the Platonic or the Xenophontean account which represents the true position of the historical Socrates, the essay deliberately leaves the problem unsettled and outlines a second hypothesis, which may further be developed in future studies. These two representations of Socrates may have endured, *mutatis mutandis*, in the doctrines of the philosophers who regarded themselves as "Socratics". This is especially the case with the Stoics, whose theology resembles the perspective of Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, and the Cynics, who are instead closer to Xenophon's position.

Keywords: Socrates, Socratic heritage, Poverty, Theology, Self-sufficiency

It is well known that Socrates chose to live as a poor man. What normally escapes the attention of scholars and general readers is that this decision may have been grounded in theological beliefs. The present essay sets out to defend the hypothesis in the light of some textual evidence. However, it is important to note that this supposition could at best prove true only in a generic sense. Our sources attribute to Socrates different and almost incompatible beliefs on poverty, so that is impossible to decide which one of them is more trustworthy from a historical perspective. A cautious analysis of ancient texts here necessarily leads to historical skepticism.

The first explicit link between Socrates' theological perspective and his poverty is found in passage 23a5-c1 of Plato's *Apology of Socrates*. It will be useful to quote this passage in full:

τὸ δὲ κινδυνεύει, ὧ ἄνδρες, τῷ ὄντι ὁ θεὸς σοφὸς εἶναι, καὶ ἐν τῷ χρησμῷ τούτῳ τοῦτο λέγειν, ὅτι ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία ὀλίγου τινὸς ἀξία ἐστὶν καὶ οὐδενός. καὶ φαίνεται τοῦτον λέγειν τὸν Σωκράτη, προσκεχρησθαι δὲ τῷ ἐμῷ ὀνόματι, ἐμὲ παράδειγμα ποιούμενος, ὥσπερ ἂν <εἰ> εἴποι ὅτι “Οὗτος ὑμῶν, ὧ ἄνθρωποι, σοφώτατός ἐστιν, ὅστις ὥσπερ Σωκράτης ἔγνωκεν ὅτι οὐδενὸς ἀξιός ἐστι τῆ ἀληθείᾳ πρὸς σοφίαν.” ταῦτ' οὖν ἐγὼ μὲν ἔτι καὶ νῦν περιῶν ζητῶ καὶ ἐρευνῶ κατὰ τὸν θεὸν καὶ τῶν ἀστῶν καὶ ξένων ἂν τινα οἴωμαι σοφὸν εἶναι· καὶ ἐπειδάν μοι μὴ δοκῆ, τῷ θεῷ βοηθῶν ἐνδείκνυμαι ὅτι οὐκ ἔστι σοφός. καὶ ὑπὸ ταύτης τῆς ἀσχολίας οὔτε τι τῶν τῆς πόλεως πράξαι μοι σχολῆ γέγονεν ἀξιον λόγου οὔτε τῶν οἰκείων, ἀλλ' ἐν πενίᾳ μυρία εἰμι διὰ τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ λατρείαν.

But the fact is, gentlemen, it is likely that the god is really wise and by his oracle means this: “Human wisdom is of little or no value”. And it appears that he does not really say this of Socrates, but merely uses my name, and makes me an example, as if he were to say: “This one of you, O human beings, is wisest, who, like Socrates, recognizes that he is in truth of no account in respect to wisdom”. Therefore I am still even now going about and searching and investigating at the god's behest anyone, whether citizen or foreigner, who I think is wise; and when he does not seem so to me, I give aid to the god and show that he is not wise. And by reason of this occupation I have no leisure to attend to any of the affairs of the state worth mentioning, or of my own, but I am in vast poverty on account of my service to the god (*Ap.* 23a5-c1; transl. by Fowler 1972: 87-89)

This passage begins with Socrates' interpretation of the meaning of the oracle that Apollo gave to his pupil Chaerephon (see here 20e6-21a8): “nobody is wiser than Socrates”. According to the philosopher, what the god possibly means by these words is that human knowledge has no value and that human beings become wise when they recognize that they know nothing about anything.¹ Socrates then derives a personal command from the oracle. Apollo orders Socrates to help him show others that wisdom lies in acknowledging that human beings know nothing, which amounts to a refutation of the false knowledge that they presume to possess.² Now, this occupation (ἀσχολία) appears to leave Socrates without the leisure time (σχολή) required to accomplish something of value for the city and

¹ See 23a7 (σοφία ὀλίγου τινὸς ἀξία ἐστὶν καὶ οὐδενός) and 23b3 (οὐδενὸς ἀξιός), with Brancacci 1997: 317-324, and Dorion (2010: 41; 2013: 140). On the question of the meaning of the oracle, see Stokes 1992: 33-50, McPherran 2002: 123-141, Doyle 2004.

² In the Platonic dialogues, Socrates is also ordered by a god to exercise the midwife's art (*Theaet.* 150c7-d8).

his relatives, something which would probably bring him wealth and fame.³ Such a service to the god (τοῦ θεοῦ λατρείαν), therefore, has the consequence of forcing Socrates into extreme poverty (πενία μυρία).

Socrates is exaggerating here. The adjective μυρία used to describe his poverty must not be taken at face value. Some sources attest that Socrates had been rich in the past, so he must have owned a house, at least, and enough savings not to have to beg for money. Moreover, Plato's *Apology* alludes to the fact that Socrates fought as a hoplite, which means that he needed to purchase his equipment, while Xenophon reports that he belonged to the economic class of the πένητες (*Mem.* I 2.59; *Oec.* 11.3), i.e. of those men who had to work in order to make a living. Socrates was not a completely indigent man, then.⁴ Nonetheless, even if it was not very extreme, his poverty was real enough, as emerges especially from the depiction that Antiphon makes of Socrates in Xenophon;⁵ and this condition may indeed have derived from his philosophical mission.

The evidence considered so far seems to imply that indigence and piety go hand in hand. Socrates' point of view is that one cannot become rich in order to do something ἄξιον for his πόλις or family and at the same time serve Apollo. If you are pious, you must necessarily become poor. Conversely, if you spend all the day engaging in activities which help your city and relatives and reward you financially, you will have no time to aid Apollo and his oracle.

The above considerations also apply to the wealthiest youths (νέοι ... πλουσιωτάτων) of the city, those who have the most σχολή: Socrates refers to them just after the passage we have examined (23c2-7). These youngsters prefer to imitate Socrates' lifestyle⁶ rather than dedicate themselves to activities which would benefit their city or relatives; and the only reason why they are not poor is that they receive financial support from their family.

We have to make an important distinction here. The meaning of Socrates' claim is not just that his divine service is useless for the city and his family, as might seem to be the case at first sight. Such a conclusion would contradict passage 29c5-30b4, where Socrates affirms that his divinely inspired philosophical mission is useful, since it is an activity that leads people to choose real goods like virtue, wisdom, truth and the good of the soul over the pursuit of apparent goods. As is reported in lines 30a1-2, the objective of Socrates' philosophy is to persuade people to stop thinking that the things which are of most value in themselves (τὰ

³ This perspective would have appeared shocking to his contemporaries (Ioppolo 2006: 80-81, n. 49; *contra* Schaps 2003: 131-140). On the notion of σχολή, see Stocks 1936:177-185, and Anastasiadis 2004.

⁴ See Diog. Laert. II 20, Plutarch (*Arist.* 1.1-2 = SSR I B 53), Libanius (*Ap.* 17-18 and 129 = SSR I E 1). The "SSR" (*Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae*) texts are quoted from Giannantoni 1990. For more references and arguments, see also Burnet 1924: 98, Giannantoni 1971: 83-84, Schaps 2003: 138 (n. 46) and 141, Anderson 2005, Desmond 2006: 156.

⁵ *Mem.* I 6.1-4 and Rossetti 2015: 101-102.

⁶ See μιμοῦνται. Imitation is an important means to knowledge in Socratism. On this topic, see Xenophon, *Mem.* III 8, with Rossetti 2011, 104-119.

πλείστου ἄξια) are only of minimum value, and that the things which in themselves are the worst (φαιλότερα) or are only of minimum value, like wealth and fame, have the highest worth.

This contrast is mentioned again later on in the dialogue (36c5-6). However, it is expressed in the form of an opposition between the care of the self (ἐπιμελεῖσθαι ἑαυτοῦ) and the care of the things related to the self (ἐπιμελεῖσθαι τῶν ἑαυτοῦ), which are the bodily and external goods with no intrinsic value⁷. Socrates, then, tries to restore what we might call a natural hierarchy. A human being must first of all take care of his soul, which is his true self and ensures goods more valuable than those of the body, which one should only care for after having achieved the perfection of the ψυχή (30a8-b2).

The restoration of this right perspective is what the god commands and is the highest benefit that the city would derive from him with Socrates' aid (30a5-7). We may therefore conclude that the divine service of the philosopher is of great value for the πόλις.⁸ Moreover, it could be inferred that, if in passage 23a5-c1 λατρεία is portrayed as an activity which does not give something ἄξιον to the city and one's relatives, it is because Socrates is speaking here according to the incorrect perspective of the Athenians. If we think that wealth has more value than piety, which could be considered a virtue or good of the soul, then of course it would be right to regard Socrates' divine service as useless. But if the reserve is stated (and this is the true and natural perspective), Socrates' mission to philosophize is revealed as the most important benefit that the city could receive from a loyal citizen. Passage 36c7-8 further suggests that the philosopher's behavior consists in taking care of the city (ἐπιμελεῖσθαι τῆς πόλεως) and not of the affairs of the city (ἐπιμελεῖσθαι τῶν τῆς πόλεως),⁹ which are precisely those activities that reward citizens with wealth or fame, but are not enough to morally improve the city.

There is however one claim that has puzzled many commentators. In lines 30b2-4, Socrates declares that his task, which is to persuade his interlocutors to cultivate the soul and not to strive for the goods of the body, is summed up by the following principle: Οὐκ ἐκ χρημάτων ἀρετὴ γίγνεται, ἀλλ' ἐξ ἀρετῆς χρήματα καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ἀγαθὰ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἅπαντα καὶ ἰδία καὶ δημοσίᾳ. The meaning of the first clause is plain. With the words οὐκ ἐκ χρημάτων ἀρετὴ γίγνεται Socrates is saying that virtue does not come from wealth (a partial parallel is to be found in Xenophon, *Mem.* IV 1.5), i.e. that the good of the soul does not arise from the

⁷ For a similar distinction, see Plato, *Alc.* I 131b4-d5. Here, we find once again a contrast between the soul and the body, but also between the self (ἑαυτοῦ) and the things related to the self (τὰ ἑαυτοῦ). On the topic of the "care of the self", see especially Horn 2005. Other useful considerations may be found in Goulet-Cazé 1986: 106-114, Slings 1994: 332-333, Reale 2000: 222-226, Schaps 2003: 143-145, Desmond 2006: 35-37, de Luise 2009, Stavru 2009: 60-81, Palumbo 2010. Finally, on the subordination of wealth to virtue, see Philo, *De provid.* 2.21 (= SSR I C 57) and Libanius, *Ap.* 127-129, 134-135 (= SSR I E 1), with Vlastos 1998: 295, and Reale 2000: 246-251.

⁸ The same observation is made in Centrone-Taglia 2010: 129-131.

⁹ To understand this political commitment, see Reeve 1989: 155-160.

cultivation of things pertaining to the body. The second clause (ἀλλ' ἐξ ἀρετῆς ... καὶ δημοσίᾳ) is instead controversial and has received two interpretations. According to the first, what Socrates means is that money and all other goods for men come from virtue, i.e. that virtue is a sort of money-maker.¹⁰ According to the second interpretation, what the clause means is that money and all other things represent goods for men, a notion which finds parallels in Plato (*Euthyd.* 282a1-7) and Xenophon (e.g. *Mem.* III 8.1-7 and 9.4, IV 5.10; *Oec.* 1.13)¹¹. Those who accept this reading defend the construction of passage 30b2-4 given by Burnet: “the subject is χρήματα καὶ τὰ ἄλλα ἅπαντα and ἀγαθὰ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις is predicate”.¹²

I believe that hypothesis 1 is preferable. It still maintains what 2 states, namely that wealth is a good if and only if it is used well. This is a thesis implicit in the rejection of the first claim, i.e. that the mere possession of wealth is enough to be virtuous. Moreover, hypothesis 1 adds that a virtuous man could amass money and other bodily goods, if he only wanted to.¹³ Socrates may therefore choose between using virtue to benefit his own self more and become rich, or renouncing wealth in order to benefit the community more, by teaching others how to gain the ἀρετή which allows one to amass wealth and use it properly. One may not achieve both outcomes: time does not allow it. Socrates has chosen the second course, thus following the god’s command and embracing poverty.

This observation agrees with what we read in passage 30d5-31c3. Here, Socrates explicitly affirms that his choice to help citizens behave well without asking for anything in return (as his poverty proves) and to forego personal gain is something which seems unhuman (see οὐ γὰρ ἀνθρωπίνῳ ἔοικε in 31b1). Such a statement may be interpreted in the following way. It is natural for humans to do the opposite of what Socrates is doing, namely to benefit oneself or to strive for the goods mentioned in 30b2-4; and to use virtue in order to become rich is precisely an occupation of this kind. Now, since the philosopher completely devotes himself to benefitting his city, we may infer that his foregoing of wealth goes against his own nature¹⁴ and represents an evil which he would sure-

¹⁰ See e.g. Slings 1994: 138-140 and 334. *Contra* Senn 2005: 11-19.

¹¹ E.g. Taylor 1973; Vlastos 1998: 294, n. 73; Burnyeat (1980: 209-211; 2003); Brickhouse-Smith 2000a; Horn 2005: 75 and 126-128.

¹² Burnet 1924: 124.

¹³ Salmieri 2016: 7. Note that Xenophon’s Socrates recognizes that the good use of things enables one to make profit (*Oec.* 2.10). Besides, Socrates could easily have achieved wealth through his art of “pandering”, and he certainly knew how to help friends experiencing financial difficulties (*Symp.* 3.10, 4.56-64; *Mem.* II 7.1-11, 8.2-6, 9.2-3, 10.2-6). These passages may show that Socrates indeed possessed a degree of economic proficiency (Schaps 2003: 142-143; Dorion 2013: 249-255).

¹⁴ This is the same φύσις that probably led Socrates to have children (34d2-7). The philosopher justifies his decision by saying that he is not like a tree or a stone (adapting the Homeric verse of *Od.* 19.163), in other words that he does have a natural need to procreate, unlike the δρῦς and the πέτρα.

ly have avoided,¹⁵ if Apollo had not commanded him to philosophize (cf. 28e4-29e4, 33c4-7) and to act as a living gift sent by the gods for the good of the city (30d7-e1, 31a8-9). Piety leads him to be “unhuman” by choosing the well-being of the community over his own personal well-being.¹⁶ This could also be described as a decision on Socrates’ part to remain ever on duty in order to avoid impious behavior (32d3, 35c7-d2), or to obey a governing authority (28d7-10), i.e. that of a god, who is better than man (29b6-7).

All in all, Plato’s *Apology* describes Socrates as a pious man who obeys a divine command that ultimately requires him to lead the Athenians to reconsider their ordinary notion of “value”. The citizens of Athens are accustomed to think that what matters is the simple possession of wealth and of other bodily goods, which must be sought before the ἀγαθά of the soul. Socrates helps Apollo to demonstrate that the opposite is true. The pursuit of the goods of the soul must be a priority, for they are intrinsically superior and also allow us to amass and use bodily goods in a proper or fruitful way. The price paid by Socrates to cooperate with divine providence is the unhuman foregoing of a personal ἀγαθός (his wealth) and embrace of a personal evil (poverty). We may conclude, then, that Socratic morality – as it is presented in the Platonic *Apology* – involves the choice of pauperism starting from a theology which claims that a god is a good living being,¹⁷ superior in knowledge to all humans, who feels interest toward humankind and may order a human being to serve him, no matter the cost.¹⁸

To what extent can we consider Plato’s representation a historical one? Indeed, what the philosopher might be presenting is his ideal “image” of Socrates. After all, Plato considers πείνια a κακόν or thing which produces κακά in many other dialogues¹⁹ and in the book IV of the *Laws* he posits the principle that god is the measure of everything (716c4-6). Therefore, the image of Socrates as a pious man who has accepted poverty for a greater cause might be an idealistic portrait, developed from Platonic premises.

¹⁵ After all, πείνια prevents the philosopher from helping his fellow-citizens in many cases. Socrates would then avoid poverty if he had the chance, in order to better fulfil his mission. He tries to do so in 36d6-37a1.

¹⁶ So Slings 1998: 148. *Contra* McPherran 1996: 236-240. On the link between Socrates’ activity and the common good, see also Blyth 2000: 13.

¹⁷ See esp. Plato, *Resp.* II 379b1, and Vlastos 1998: 216-220, Gocer 2000: 116-123.

¹⁸ If one accepts that Socrates’ δαίμόνιον is a divine entity, the perspective may be better grounded. Indeed, the demonic voice also commands him to avoid rewarding activities, like political ones (31c4-d6). However, the equating of the δαίμόνιον with divinity is controversial, for some scholars identify it with Socrates’ moral “conscience”. On the demonic voice, see at least Slings 1994: 154-156, the essays collected in Smith-Woodruff 2000 (esp. Brickhouse-Smith 2000b), and the essays published in AA.VV. 2005.

¹⁹ *Gorg.* 467e4-6 and 477b2-c2, *Resp.* IV 421d4-422a3, *Leg.* V 744d3-8 and IX 919b7-c1. A similar observation is to be found in McPherran 1996: 237. But Plato also presents wealth as an evil (see Schaps 2003: 145-147) and in other dialogues depicts poverty as only an “apparent” evil (*Resp.* X 613a4-7), or as the mark of the philosopher, who is guided by Eros son of Πείνια (see *Symp.* myth of 203b3-204a7 and Desmond 2006: 159-164).

But even if this religious attitude may be traced back to the historical Socrates, we cannot be sure whether it is to be taken at face value. On the one hand, the evocation of poverty might be a rhetorical device, used to distinguish his activity from that of the sophists.²⁰ On the other hand, scholars like Giannantoni had already supposed that Socrates' obedience to the oracle could not be the principal cause of the philosopher's choice to practice philosophy, and hence that Socrates' ethics is not simplistically "theonomic" or the outcome of a proto-Christian gift, dispensed by divine grace.²¹ Socrates' compliance with the divine command must be voluntary and also motivated by rational/moral reasons.²² As an explicative example, one might recall that, when Socrates heard from the oracle that nobody was wiser than him, he did not take this claim at face value and accept the revelation as coming from an incontestable authority. Starting from the premise that a god cannot lie,²³ the philosopher began to investigate the true meaning of the χρησμός (21b1-23e5) and even to consider the possibility that its content might simply be wrong, and therefore that it could be disproven by means of ἔλεγχος.²⁴ This means that Socrates would have embraced his mission to philosophize, encouraged others to take care of their soul and embraced poverty even without a divine command. Moral reasons are indeed enough to ground many Socratic choices. For example, Socrates' idea that one must stand firm in one's duty may derive from his conception of what is best for man (28b6-7), while his decision to struggle for virtue is equally motivated by the god's command and his personal conviction that the good of man lies in a life of research, which is the only one that is worthy to be engaged in (37e3-38a6).

Finally, a third reason which should prevent us from hastily granting that Plato's portrait is an historical one consists in the contrasting depiction that we find in Xenophon. Paragraphs 14-18 of his *Apology* do not present any parallel for Socrates' choice of poverty under divine command described in the Platonic text. Indeed, Socrates here does not invoke πενία as the outcome of his philosophical mission. He alludes to his poverty only indirectly, while explaining the meaning of Apollo's oracle. The god said that nobody is wiser than Socrates, because he has a higher degree of self-sufficiency:²⁵ for example, he has always been able to adapt to circumstances, did not become more indigent during the assaults against the

²⁰ Ioppolo 2006: 77, n. 28; Desmond 2006: 156-157.

²¹ Festugière 1936: 93-115 is representative of this tendency to "Christianize" Socrates.

²² Giannantoni (1971: 119-120 and 151-152; 2005: 208-218 e 251-256). See also e.g. Burnyeat 1980: 222-224, Slings 1994: 78-82, Reale 2000: 288-290, Horn 2005: 204-206. *Contra* Mazzara 2007: 121-134, Dodds 2009: 234-235, and partially Vlastos 1998: 229-230. Woodruff 2000: 141-143, suspends judgement, while Reeve 1989: 25-37 and 62-73, assumes an intermediate position, arguing that Socrates' mission is divinely inspired but rationally grounded.

²³ See Vlastos 1998: 231, and McPherran (1996: 216-217; 2002: 123, n. 26).

²⁴ See 21c1-2 and 22a7-8, with Giannantoni 1997: 102, and McPherran 2002: 129. But see too Gadamer 1988: 32-33, for a different interpretation of the episode, and McPherran 1996: 221-226, for another reading of the relationship between Socratic piety and ἔλεγχος.

²⁵ But not a complete and total one: see Dorion 2013: 429-448.

city, and knows how to derive pleasure from the soul without material resources. Between the two “apologies” there exists a great difference, then. Whereas in Plato poverty appears to be the outcome of the obedience to Apollo’s oracle, which implies that Socrates’ history is that of man who turns from wealth to material indigence, in Xenophon *πενία* seems to be a preexistent condition, which the philosopher faced so well as to earn the title of “wise man” from the god.²⁶

A further central difference between the Platonic and the Xenophontean accounts is the following one. Almost none of the reasons given by Xenophon for Socrates’ embrace of poverty are theologically grounded. The philosopher argues that living in *πενία* allows him to be free from the worst masters, those with the power to influence men and drag them away from virtue (*Mem.* I 2.6 and 5.6). We also read that Xenophon’s Socrates defends the thesis that one has to reconsider what “poverty” and “wealth” mean, in order to become happy. The former notion usually indicates the condition of material indigence, while the latter normally describes the opposite state, where a man has plenty of resources or even owns luxuries. Now, Socrates argues that one can distinguish the truly poor man from the truly wealthy man by evaluating their conducts. If a man owns little but is able to satisfy his own personal needs while helping his city, friends etc., we must conclude that he possesses wealth. On the contrary, if a man full of resources is unable to do so and is led by his possessions to endlessly pursue unnecessary desires, it is only logical to consider him a poor and wretched individual.²⁷ What really matters is once again the state of the soul: providing that this is good, material indigence does not damage anyone, as the case of Nikia’s horse confirms (*Oec.* 11.4-5). Neither the argument based on the notion of freedom nor the definition of wealth/poverty brings the god’s authority into play, for the simple fact that there is no need to do so.

There is, however, one notable exception. According to *Mem.* I 6.10, Socrates replies to Antiphon, who considers happiness as being synonymous with a life of luxury and great expense, that it must instead be identified with the poor / ascetic life that he himself is conducting and which satisfies his simple necessities.²⁸ This is a condition which approximates the absence of needs (*τὸ μηδενὸς δεῖσθαι*), which in turn is akin to the excellence of the divine (*τὸ θεῖον κράτιστον*), i.e. divine nature.²⁹ It is true that here *θεῖον* might not necessarily refer to

²⁶ For other differences between the two accounts, see Stokes 1992: 56-58, Slings 1994: 76-77, Vlastos 1998: 382-383, Woodruff 2000: 134-135, Giannantoni 2005: 200-202, Sassi 2005: 52-53, Natali 2005: 688-691, Dorion 2010: 84. It is worth noting that Xenophon never mentions the response of the Delphi oracle in the *Memorabilia* (Natali 2005: 688).

²⁷ The texts on the topic are *Mem.* I 2.59 and IV 2.37-39, *Oec.* 2.2-4. Similarly, in fr. 68 B 283 DK, Democritus considers “poverty” and “wealth” as being respectively synonymous with “want” or *ἔνδεια* and “satiety” or *κόρος* (see Spinelli 1991: 303-311). Similar to Xenophon’s definition of *πενίη* is Plato, *Leg.* V 736e2-4.

²⁸ On Socrates’ self-sufficiency, see also Goulet-Cazé 1986: 134-140.

²⁹ See de Luise-Farinetti 1997: 82-83, and Dorion 2010: 91-92. Other examples of Socrates’ praise of self-sufficiency or freedom from many needs can be found in Cicero (*Tusc. disp.* V 32.91 = SSR I C 163) and Aelianus (*VH IX 29* = SSR I C 172).

the nature of a deity, for it might just be an expression used to refer to a more perfect human condition than the ordinary one.³⁰ However, Diogenes Laertius (II 27.3-5), a pseudo-Socratic epistle (VI 4 = VI A 74) and Stobaeus (III 5.33 = I C 247) all report the same doctrine we read in Xenophon, with the notable exception that the subject here consists in the θεοί and not “the divine” in general. Moreover, the concept that the gods are living beings without any needs is implicitly stated by the Socrates of Plato’s *Euthyphro*, who admits that they do not have any need for our gifts and give us goods without asking for anything in return.³¹ Xenophon reports something similar, when he depicts the philosopher in the act of affirming that the gods do not mind if the sacrifice that they receive is opulent or meager (*Mem.* I 3.2-3), approve of men who live morally (e.g. respect justice and the laws³²), and appreciate being honored in a simple fashion (see Hermogenes’ discourse in *Oec.* 4.47-50).³³ It could be inferred that Xenophon too attributes to Socrates a theologically grounded argument, according to which poverty is desirable because it allows to become like the gods, or rather to imitate their perfection.

This is, after all, what Socrates explicitly tells us in Plato’s *Theaetetus*.³⁴ Moreover, the view just outlined agrees with two passages of Xenophon’s first book of *Memorabilia*. In the first one, 4.14, Socrates claims that humans already live like gods (ὡσπερ θεοὶ ἄνθρωποι βιοτεύουσι), since they have received many abilities from the latter that make them the best-equipped living beings.³⁵ Nothing, then, prevents men from becoming even more godlike, by raising their ψυχή to the divine level. The second passage occurs in Prodicus’ tale of Hercules at the crossroad (1.20-33), which Socrates considers worthy of reflection (1.34) and which presents Virtue as enjoying the company both of good men and of the gods.³⁶ This claim provides further confirmation of the fact that human beings

³⁰ This point has been made, for example, by Eisenberger 1970: 148-150, and Montano 2014: 133, with regard to the interpretation of the meaning of θεῖος in Democritus’ fragment 68 B 37 DK.

³¹ See 14e1-15a4 with Burnet 1924: 61, Giannantoni (1997: 112; 2005: 243-244), Vlastos 1998: 233, Rabbås 2005: 306-314, and de Luise (2011: 215-216; 2013: 168-169). *Contra* McPherran (1996: 53-75; 2000: 95-101), and Dorion 2010: 61-65.

³² *Mem.* IV 6.2-4, on which see Calvo Martínez 2008: 50-54. More generally, see McPherran 1996: 218-221.

³³ It is worth noting that the claim that a deity has no need of anything does necessarily imply that it does not *do* anything (McPherran 1996: 150). Indeed, the Xenophontean Socrates strongly believes in the idea that the gods show interest in humankind. See esp. *Mem.* I 4.5-19, II 1.27-28 and 3.18-19, IV 3.9-18, with McPherran 1996: 272-291, Reale 2000: 274-282, Brancacci 2008: 236-240 and 246-251, Sedley 2011: 92-99 de Luise 2013: 152-166.

³⁴ *Theaet.* 176b1-3. For other references and texts on the topic of the assimilation to god, especially from a Platonic perspective, see at least Sedley 2002: 74-86, Erler 2002: 160-169, Russell 2004: 243-248, Lavecchia 2006.

³⁵ Natali 2005: 686, n. 43; Stavru 2009: 85-87; de Luise 2013: 164.

³⁶ See 1.32: ἐγὼ δὲ σύνεμι μὲν θεοῖς, σύνεμι δὲ ἀνθρώποις τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς. On Prodicus’ fable, see Hoistad 1948: 29-33. Dorion 2013: 246, reports a parallel with Xenophon, *Cyn.* XII 21.

can become similar to the gods by achieving a good condition of the soul, suited to the reception of ἀρετή.

The analysis of Plato's and Xenophon's reports has shown that their Socrates did indeed choose poverty, based on theological and religious considerations. The works of the two ancient writers agree in representing Socrates as a philosopher who believed in the existence of a god of good nature, interested in aiding humankind and free of any needs – a god to whom men can assimilate to a certain degree. It is, however, controversial whether Socrates asserted that poverty is a negative consequence of this belief or whether he envisaged it as a means for achieving godlike perfection. Plato presents the first picture by portraying a philosopher who has fallen into material indigence, in order to aid Apollo and honor his duty to philosophize. Xenophon instead favors the second scenario, by describing Socrates' life of poverty as a sign of his self-sufficiency and godlike condition. Both representations cannot equally be traced back to the historical Socrates, for they do not completely agree with each other. Xenophon's depiction of Socratic poverty indirectly considers πενιή a good thing and a condition which the philosopher experienced even before Apollo's oracle, whereas the Platonic text describes it as an evil and a consequence of the oracle.

We do not have any decisive information which could lead us to favor one of the two pictures. It is more cautious then to claim, on the one hand, that the sources agree on the idea that the original Socrates may have considered his philosophical life of poverty to be religiously inspired – although not *only* religiously inspired, for we have seen that the philosopher also grounded his conduct in rational reasons. On the other hand, it is more prudent to affirm that, setting out from this common basis, Plato and Xenophon developed two different “idealistic” images of their master.

Both representations survived in the Socratic tradition, and in the reflections of those philosophers who claimed to be “Socratics”, like the Stoics and Cynics. It is impossible to adequately illustrate this point in the conclusive remarks of an essay. Therefore, I will just provide a succinct outline of the topic, while pointing out one important difference between Stoicism / Cynicism and the images of Socrates we have just examined.

The Stoics agree with the core of Plato's representation. They believe in a providential deity who orders worldly events and whom the philosopher obeys, in order to contribute to a superior rational purpose, namely the achievement of the good of the universe. This view can be found in the verses of Cleanthes translated by Seneca,³⁷ where it is said that he voluntarily follows Zeus' plans, which will in any case be fulfilled, even if human beings do not want to cooperate with them (a view encapsulated by the famous final verse: *ducunt volentem fata, nolentem trahunt*). But the same notion is also present in Chrysippus, who provides the following example: if it were divinely fated for him to fall ill at a specific time,

³⁷ *Ep. ad Luc.* 107.9-11 = *SVF I* 527. The sources on the doctrines of the ancient Stoics are collected in von Arnim 1979 (*Stoicorum veterum fragmenta*).

he would voluntarily seek that illness.³⁸ Now, among the events ordained by god that the philosopher accepts one also finds the fall into poverty, as is explicitly expressed by Epictetus (*Diatr.* III 5.7-9). It could then be said that, just like the Socrates of Plato's *Apology*, the Stoic embraces material indigence, if it is what the divinity orders him to do and experience. The greatest difference between the two philosophers is that the former considers πενία as an evil, while the latter regards it as something "indifferent", i.e. a thing which is neither an ἀγαθόν nor a κακόν (see e.g. Diog. Laert. VII 107.1-7 = *SVF* III 135).

As regards the Cynics, it might seem strange to claim that they also tried to ground their choice of πενία (see esp. Stobaeus IV 32.11 = *SSR* V B 223) in a theological discourse. Ancient sources usually report the Cynics' fierce criticism of almost all the religious, mystical and superstitious beliefs of their time (see the texts on Diogenes Cynicus collected in *SSR* V B 332-352). So one might feel inclined to regard them as atheists. However, according to Diogenes Laertius (VI 51.1 and 105.3-6 = *SSR* V B 354) Diogenes Cynicus also affirmed that the gods exist and have no need of anything. And the wise Cynics resemble them the most, since they have few needs and desires, which allows them to embrace poverty without trouble and to implicitly become similar to the divine.³⁹ This is exactly the idea that, as we have seen, is presented by Xenophon's Socrates and which occurs even in a late Stoic like Seneca, who claims that the acceptance of poverty leads to assimilation to god, who does not own any material possessions.⁴⁰ But there is another important difference here: the Cynics do not share Socrates' belief that the gods govern reality, which means that they do not believe that the gods are good and providential; rather, they probably envisage the gods as self-sufficient living beings who have no interest in human affairs. In this sense, Cynic philosophers are also close to the perspective of the Epicureans.⁴¹ They are Socratic philosophers who have developed the alternative view that the gods have no need of humans, while humans need the gods, as these provide an ideal of blessedness that one should imitate in order to live well.

³⁸ See Epictetus, *Diatr.* II 6.8-10 (= *SVF* III 191). A great starting point for the study of Stoic theology is the recent work Dienstbeck 2015.

³⁹ On the topic, see Goulet-Cazé 1986: 38-40 e 65-66, de Luise-Farinetti 1997: 98-99, Desmond 2006: 27-29.

⁴⁰ See here *Ep. ad Luc.*, 31.8-11 and Russell 2004: 252-253. Seneca's passage suggests one further observation. In presenting the Stoics as closer to the Platonic representation of Socrates, I do not mean to exclude an influence of the Xenophontean picture. Xenophon's *Memorabilia* were, after all, an important influence for the development of their philosophy (Sedley 2011: chapter 7). What I am arguing is simply that the Platonic picture of Socrates' choice of poverty plays a more prominent and central role in Stoic philosophy than the Xenophontean one.

⁴¹ On Epicurean theology, which also includes the doctrine of the assimilation of the human being to god, see Erler 2002: 169-181, and Essler 2011. On the similarities between the Cynics and the Epicureans as regards religious conceptions, see Gigante 1992: 58-69.

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PAUPERISMO E TEOLOGIA.
 INFLUENZE DIVINE SULLA SCELTA DELLA POVERTÀ DI
 SOCRATE?

Summary

Il saggio si propone di difendere l'ipotesi generale che Socrate credeva nell'esistenza di una divinità, che lo indusse ad abbracciare consapevolmente la povertà e a impiegare il suo tempo a filosofare, piuttosto che a coltivare attività arricchenti sul piano finanziario. Infatti, sia l'*Apologia di Socrate* di Platone e il pri-

mo libro dei *Memorabili* di Senofonte riferiscono questa idea, benché differiscano nel loro contenuto specifico. L'una mostra che la povertà è un male e che Socrate la scelse per aiutare una divinità provvidenziale / attiva, che vuole migliorare l'umanità e usa il filosofo come un mezzo per questo fine. L'altro rappresenta invece un Socrate che diviene povero al fine di imitare una divinità autarchica e priva di bisogni. Egli considera perciò la povertà come un bene che consente di assimilarsi a una condizione beata molto prossima a quella goduta da un dio.

Poiché le testimonianze a noi note non permettono di decidere se è la testimonianza platonica o quella senofontea ad essere più vicina all'autentica posizione del Socrate storico, non si tenterà di risolvere forzatamente il problema, ma ci si limiterà ad abbozzare una seconda ipotesi, che verrà giustificata in studi futuri. Le due rappresentazioni di Socrate potrebbero essere sopravvissute, *mutatis mutandis*, nelle dottrine dei filosofi che si considerarono come "Socratici". È soprattutto il caso degli Stoici, la cui teologia si avvicina alla prospettiva dell'*Apologia di Socrate* di Platone, e dei Cinici, che sono invece più prossimi alla posizione di Senofonte.

Keywords: Socrate, Eredità socratica, Povertà, Teologia, Autarchia