Mechanisms of Pleasure according to Xenophon's Socrates*

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Happiness and Material Wealth

Xenophon mentions happiness almost exclusively in a political context, in the wider sense of that word, i.e., when speculating on a good ruler or military commander or householder. From this it may seem that happiness for Xenophon and his Socrates is merely material and is generated simply via the acquisition of material wealth. This may be true, I believe, in the case of collective happiness, i.e., the happiness of a state or an army or a household (see, e.g., Dorion 2013: 147–169), but it would be wrong to automatically attribute that same kind of happiness to an individual belonging to any of these social groups. To cast doubt on the established opinion that happiness and the mechanisms generating it are, in Xenophon, of a purely material kind, it will suffice to recall the story of Pheraulas, whose riches not only failed to make him happy but, on the contrary, kept him from happiness, so that he was able to feel happy only after he had given away his fortune.¹ This example alone must persuade us that in at

* I am greatly indebted to Gabriel Danzig and David M. Johnson for their critical comments on the original draft of my paper, which I tried to meet the best I was able (not to mention how much I owe to the latter for greatly improving my diction). Though I feel there still remains much uncertainty as far as the proof for some of my arguments is concerned, rethinking them along the lines suggested by the criticism from these two scholars proved extremely stimulating and helpful.

¹ Cyrr. 8.3.48: ‘[…] while the other [Pheraulas] considered himself most blessed (μακαριώτατος) because he was to have a steward who would give him leisure to do only whatever was pleasant (ἡδύ) to him’ (trans. Miller). Though the story of Pheraulas must not, of course, necessarily reflect the views attributed by Xenophon to Socrates, it has been noticed that there is generally a clear similarity between the teachings of Xenophon's Socrates and the wisdom of the “wise” personages in the Cyropaedia. In this particular case, two details will suffice to illustrate the point. The plot of the story of Pheraulas, who entrusts the management of his household to the Sacian, inevitably brings to mind the opening lines of the conversation in which Socrates and Critobulus discuss the question whether someone who is an expert in the art of management would be capable, despite not being himself wealthy, of managing another's estate well (Oec. 1.3–4). Another important parallel is found in the following phrase put into Pheraulas’ mouth: “it gives me not one whit more pleasure (οὐδ’ ὡτιοῦν ἥδιον) to eat
least some cases material wealth is not sufficient for happiness, which means that individual happiness cannot be reduced to materiality. And if one considers Xenophon’s Socrates from this point of view, one will be tempted to go to the extreme, for his happiness seems to be almost completely nonmaterial:

Don’t you see that to this day I never would acknowledge that any man had lived a better or a pleasanter life than I (οὔτε βέλτιον οὔθ ἥδιον ἔμαυτον βεβιωκέναι)? For they live best, I think, who strive best to become as good as possible: and the pleasantest life (ἡδιστα [ζῆν]) is theirs who are conscious that they are growing in goodness. And to this day that has been my experience.

Mem. 4.8.6, trans. Marchant

The Nature of Pleasure

In Xenophon, Socrates distinguishes between three kinds of human pleasure: bodily pleasures (the pleasures arising from eating, drinking, sleep, and sex); the “common” pleasures (arising from doing one’s job well); and the “Socratic” pleasure (arising from acquiring knowledge and from self-perfecting; see Chernyakhovskaya 2013: 292 f.). The mechanism of generating the state of pleasure/satisfaction is the same for all three kinds of pleasure. I conceive the nature of happiness in Xenophon to be similar to the nature of bodily pleasures; it is noteworthy that in both passages on happiness quoted above, one speaks about τὸ ἡδύ, “the pleasurable.”

The pleasure from food (one of the four kinds and drink and sleep now than it did when I was poor” (Cyr. 8.3.40, trans. Miller). It is hard to fail to see behind these words one of the most characteristic theses of Xenophon’s Socrates, i.e., that the pleasure gained from eating does not depend on whether the meals consumed are fancy or plain (Mem. 1.6.5; see Chernyakhovskaya 2014: 27). Apart from that, if the happiness even of such a figure as Pheraulas is not entirely material, still more one will expect that the happiness of Socrates, who is a far more “intellectual” protagonist in Xenophon’s writings, cannot be based on material wealth. The text of the Memorabilia gives a good support to this assumption (see below).}

2 See also Mem. 1.6.8–9 and Ap. 5–6.
3 Cf. Cyr. 8.3.48 and Mem. 4.8.6 quoted above; see also Mem. 1.6.8–9 quoted below and then note 30. It is only fair to note that Xenophon’s Socrates never says himself that he is happy; it is Xenophon who does this for him (Mem. 4.8.11: ἄριστος τε ἀνήρ καὶ εὐδαιμονεστάτος; see also Mem. 1.6.14: ἐδόκει αὐτὸς τε μακάριος εἶναι; cf. Pl. Phd. 58e3–4: εὐδαιμον γὰρ μοι ἀνήρ ἑραίνετο), while in the Cyropaedia passage, the connection between the two concepts is quite explicit: cf. 8.3.48 in note 1 with 8.3.46: “In the name of the gods, then, said Pheraulas, please make yourself happy (εὐδαιμῶν) at once and make me happy (εὐδαιμονα), too!” (trans. Miller).