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# A Philosopher and a Gentleman: Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*

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## INTRODUCTION

SOCRATES WAS no gentleman, as even his keenest admirers would have to admit. He had unsavory companions, was a notorious mooch, and his wife and children lived in poverty while he indulged his passion for philosophy. In Xenophon's *Symposium*, when asked what skill he takes most pride in, Socrates responds "pimping." Socrates' outrageousness set him at odds with conventional Athenian society and would eventually lead to his being sentenced to death. One could even say that a conspiracy of gentlemen—Athenian fathers—was responsible for Socrates' execution.

And yet Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* makes clear that Socrates had a deep interest in the gentleman as a moral possibility. The term in Greek is *kalos kagathos*, literally "beautiful (*kalos*) and (*kai*) good (*agathos*)." There's no true English equivalent, though 18th century British classicists began the tradition of rendering the term "gentleman," a usefully provocative translation which forces readers to compare how men of wealth and station of the ancient world differed from those of other times. The *Oeconomicus* ranks alongside Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* and Lord Chesterfield's *Letters Written to His Natural Son on Manners & Morals* as among the most probing analyses of what it means to be a gentleman. All are now fairly obscure, thanks mostly to the tension between egalitarian mores and the elitist ideal of the gentleman. That's a shame, because it's impossible to reflect on the nature of moral perfection without exploring gentlemanliness. Dandies are beautiful, saints are good, but a gentleman is the whole package.

## THE DRAMATIC CONTEXT

XENOPHON SETS Socrates' exploration of gentlemanliness in the context of a dialogue about how to manage a household. His interlocutor is a young Athenian named Critobulus. Critobulus comes from a wealthy family, and he's ambitious, like many Socratic interlocutors, but he's no Alcibiades. He wants tips on how to make money quickly, though he recognizes how odd (ridiculous, really) it is to expect such advice from the famously impecunious Socrates. "*Oeconomicus*," from which "economics" descends, means "household manager" in Greek, but the discussion between Socrates and Critobulus collapses the two meanings. For Critobulus especially, one who excels at managing households not only serves as steward of his property, he increases it.

Socrates steers the discussion from the means of gentlemanliness to its ends. He emphasizes to Critobulus, who's apparently unaware of the point, that it takes more than wealth to be a true gentleman. The superficially "*kalos*" are more abundant than the truly "*agathos*." To describe the true gentleman, Socrates relates at length a dialogue he once had with a man named Ischomachus, whom "everyone—men and women, strangers and townsmen—called 'gentleman.'" This dialogue within a dialogue takes up 15 of the *Oeconomicus*'s 21 chapters. Unlike most other writings of Plato and Xenophon, the "Socratic" or "midwife" technique is not in evidence here. Xenophon casts Socrates in the role of the junior interlocutor. Ischomachus takes the lead, with Socrates there mostly to prompt him to say more. This reversal allows gentlemanliness to take shape naturally, as it were, and to display four chief features. The gentleman, as exemplified by Ischomachus, is diligent, unerotic, honest, and moderate.

## DILIGENT

ISCHOMACHUS is a busy man. He speaks frequently of the value he places on "diligence," both for himself and his sub-



ordinates. The source of Ischomachus's wealth is farming, but he claims there's really nothing to it. Anyone can learn the rudiments of sowing, hoeing, reaping, et cetera. What truly sets apart successful farmers is diligence.

In other cultural contexts, the gentleman is distinguished for having a good conscience about his leisure (Oscar Wilde refers in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* to "the great aristocratic art of doing absolutely nothing"). But Ischomachus is most passionate in speaking about his work, not the purposes to which he puts his idle hours, of which he has few. (When Socrates notes that he's never at leisure, Ischomachus takes the remark as a compliment.) The *Oeconomicus* offers a useful corrective to the democratic prejudice against gentlemen as languid and unmanly.

But unlike the young Wall Street go-getter who boasts about his capacity for eighty-hour weeks, Ischomachus does not view hard work as a good in itself. Ischomachus is diligent because he's purposeful. His lack of idleness stems from his conviction that the world has a distinct order which plainly reveals one's duties and rewards virtue. There's no tension between being a good man and a beautiful man because, as Ischomachus elaborates at length, order is the principle of beauty (*kalos*): "There is nothing," he says, "so useful or fine for human beings as order." This moral-aesthetic guideline shapes all Ischomachus's judgments about the world, from armies and battleships, to farms, merchant vessels, and even to his storeroom or shoe closet. "[P]lots," he says with a straight face, "have a graceful look when distinctly arranged." In his most mundane preoccupations, just as much as in his highest ambitions, this gentleman lives a purpose-driven life.

#### UNEROTIC

THE PORTION of the *Oeconomicus* most likely to offend modern sensibilities is chapters 7–10, which concern Ischomachus's education of his wife. Equality is not a particularly

cherished principle *chez* Ischomachus. He married his wife when she was fourteen, so that he could educate her about how to run a household, her final cause in life. As he tells her near the beginning of her education, “O woman, as we know what has been ordered to each of us by the god, we must, separately, do what’s appropriate to each.” Ischomachus emphasizes that he, the man, must attend mostly to “out-door” matters, so he must rely on her, his wife, to keep their “indoor” affairs in order.

But more striking than the lack of equality between Ischomachus and his wife (whom he never names) is the almost unbelievable lack of romance in their marriage. (Men did love their wives in the ancient world: see, for example, Hector and Andromache, or Odysseus and Penelope.) Ischomachus dismisses physical attraction as a reason for their union, instead framing it as strictly a matter of rational choice. Marriage, he claims, is solely for bearing and raising children as “allies” for old age. Ischomachus criticizes his wife’s use of makeup as a foolish deception. If she wants to look good, he says, she should instead give herself some exercise through weaving and kneading bread. Later Ischomachus makes clear that he also disapproves of sexual desire among his servants: it is disorderly. A gentleman governs his household like a constitutional monarch; to be a tyrant—and tyrants are notoriously lustful—is the gravest of offenses.

In suggesting, with the case of Ischomachus, that a gentleman can’t be a lover, Xenophon makes a serious point about the tension between eros and moral wholeness. As readers of Plato’s *Symposium* well know, to love is to feel incomplete. In Ischomachus, the gentleman embodies moral wholeness. He pushes to an extreme the notion embodied in Jane Austen’s Mr. Darcy and Mr. Knightly that a gentleman’s virtue consists in the mastery of his passions. Again, Ischomachus’s “beauty” is order and order lacks nothing.

Of all that Ischomachus relates about his beliefs and deeds, Socrates seems most doubtful about Ischomachus’s mastery of eros, or at least of his wife. Socrates asks him three times

if the instruction (not to say indoctrination) took. Based on these internal signs and external hints, Leo Strauss speculated that Ischomachus's marriage did not end well.

#### HONEST

To ignore, to disdain, to overlook, are the essence of a gentleman. . . . It is not only that the gentleman ignores considerations relative to conduct, sordid suspicions, fears and calculations, which the vulgarian is fated to entertain; it is that he is silent when the vulgarian talks; that he gives nothing but results when the vulgarian is profuse of reasons; that he does not explain or apologize; that he uses one sentence instead of twenty; and that, in a word, there is an amount of interstitial thinking, so to call it, which it is quite impossible to get him to perform, but which is nearly all that the vulgarian performs at all.

—William James

THIS DEFINITION of the gentleman, as somehow above convention and the need to explain himself, is not that of Ischomachus. He couldn't be more pleased when Socrates asks him, "How do you spend your time and what do you do?" It's hard to get Ischomachus to stop explaining himself. Ischomachus's desire to give an account of himself seems to stem from his pride in his good name. Ischomachus is almost never indoors—he is always visible where people can find him even though they're apparently constantly hitting him up for money. "Muttering in corners" was once said to be the characteristic activity of Socrates and his hangers-on, but Ischomachus wants to be in the open, to be seen for what he is.

In other words, Ischomachus considers honesty to be essential to virtue and honor. (French translators typically render *kalos kagathos* as *bonnête homme*.) Merely to be honest is not enough for Ischomachus: he wants to be known as honest. In this regard, the gentleman and Socrates seem like mirror images. For Socrates became well-known for his irony, an exercise in deceit through which he hides his superiority. Irony is an accommodation to conventional opinion

that at the same time conceals a deep break with or even hostility to conventional belief.

#### MODERATE

XENOPHON GIVES Ischomachus the last line of the *Oeconomicus*:

For it seems to me that this good—to rule over willing subjects—is not altogether a human thing but, rather, divine; it is clearly given only to those who have been genuinely initiated into the mysteries of moderation; but tyrannical rule over unwilling subjects, it seems to me, they give to those whom they believe worthy of living like Tantalus in Hades, who is said to spend unending time in fear of a second death.

Ischomachus self-identifies as gentleman because of the moderate nature of his rule, but just as striking to the modern reader is the necessity of exercising rule in the first place. In modern times, we may casually ascribe “gentlemanliness” to any individual with good manners and a certain old world charm. But gentlemanly qualities can only come into relief, according to Xenophon, in the case of men with an extensive household for which they bear responsibility. Poor people may be tyrants without the opportunity to express their wickedness. But we know Ischomachus is moderate because, as Aristotle once expressed it, “rule shows the man.”

Moderation also limits Ischomachus’s commercial endeavors. A full third of the Ischomachus section of the *Oeconomicus* is devoted to a discussion of the business of farming. Ischomachus is a businessman, but less in the model of Gordon Gekko than of Edwin Gay, the first dean of Harvard Business School, who said that the goal of business is to make a profit—“decently.” Ischomachus will increase his fortune only “by fine and just means.” Ischomachus’s attitude towards commerce emphasizes the *kalos* in *kalos kagathos*.

This emphasis helps round out the image of the gentleman in the *Oeconomicus*. Whereas, according to Socrates, it is

easier to find apparently beautiful people than good ones, it may be less than evident to most readers what makes Ischomachus so “beautiful.” He’s beautiful in the sense that he’s noble, that is, he’s moderate towards moneymaking. For this household manager not all forms of commercial activity are equal. His efforts at acquisition are restrained by concerns about what’s noble more than what’s good or just. As the quote above shows, this framework of noble moderation governs not only Ischomachus’s business dealings but also his beliefs about rule, the gods, and the afterlife.

Not that Ischomachus is indifferent towards money. In fact, as Socrates clarifies, it’s hard to distinguish that from his concern for honor. Socrates at one point likens Ischomachus’s father, who seems to have been a bit of a speculator, to merchants, “who, when they need money, don’t just toss their grain away wherever they chance but rather deliver it where they hear that it is most valued . . .” “Most valued” could also be translated as “most honored.” Though Ischomachus claims his father most of all loved farming, Socrates corrects him by saying that, “by nature, all people believe they love that by which they believe they are benefited.” Both Ischomachus and his father love farming because they believe that they are benefited by its products: money and honor. Though Ischomachus limits his pursuit of money to “fair and just means” because doing otherwise would threaten his reputation, he also pursues money for the sake of his reputation. Both money and honor are the coin of the realm, so it’s as essential for a gentleman to be wealthy as it is for him to be a ruler.

#### CONCLUSION

SOCRATES MAKES clear that his interest in gentlemanliness is purely intellectual. Socrates chooses not to live as Ischomachus lives. Socrates was ironic where Ischomachus was earnest. Socrates is always at leisure, minimally concerned for his reputation, less for wealth, and still less for his influ-



ence over his own household. In Xenophon's *Symposium*, he compares his wife to a high-spirited steed. He is erotic (eros is one of only two things he admits having knowledge of, the other being that he knows nothing "noble and good"). Implicit in the contrast between Socrates and Ischomachus, Xenophon seems to be saying, is that a gentleman can't be a philosopher any more than he can be a lover.

But for both those who aspire to philosophy and those who don't, the value of the *Oeconomicus* lies in its moral analysis. The rich are normally thought of as having more freedom than you or I, but Ischomachus's life is defined by its limits, limits he himself gladly embraces. True, he may make somewhat less money than he could if he were an unscrupulous cheat. His love life is unspectacular. But he enjoys a certain moral completeness and a reputation for this completeness. As Ischomachus tells his wife, "the most pleasant thing of all" is to grow old secure in this conviction. And he still enjoys quite a fine material existence.

The most useful treatments of moral life analyze its trade-offs, such as between generosity and justice, piety and ambition, or courage and wisdom. Xenophon sees gentlemanliness as requiring certain sacrifices, to be sure, but it's all for the sake of a higher harmony. If there is such a thing as the gentleman, then one does not need to choose between a beautiful life and a good life.

