Conversations of Socrates Study Guide

Conversations of Socrates by Xenophon

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Xenophon of Athens (430-354 BC) was an ancient Greek associate of Socrates, the great philosopher. Socrates wrote none of his own thoughts and activities down, leaving that to his associates. Plato is Socrates's most famous chronicler. Xenophon is another great chronicler of the life and ideas of Socrates, though his history of Socrates' activities is widely considered less reliable, poorly written and overall less interesting. Xenophon was, however, considered a great historian and wrote on a wide number of topics. The 'Conversations of Socrates' is a compilation of Xenophon's most important Socratic writings, including four of his five Socratic works: Socrates' Defense, Memoirs of Socrates, The Dinner-Party and the Estate-Manager.

The editor of the texts, Robin Waterfield, argues that Xenophon's works are historically significant because it is a perspective other than Plato's on Socrates. Xenophon's Socratic writings show a Socrates from a different perspective and help scholars of ancient Greece have a better impression of who Socrates was. Xenophon's Socrates also has different philosophical positions from Plato's Socrates, such as his interpretations of Socrates' belief that virtue is knowledge: Xenophon's Socrates is more practical and defends his own views more often than Plato's Socrates. But by and large, both Plato and Xenophon characterize Socrates as the great mind who criticized the Athenian social and political system.

The first of the four Socratic works contained in the book is Socrates' Defense, Xenophon's account of Socrates' trial (similar to Plato's Apology). Xenophon primarily covers Socrates' thoughts just prior to his trial, his speeches at trial and his behavior afterward. The work is not a philosophical tract; instead, it is short and feels poorly composed. In fact, it may never have been intended for publication. In the Defense, Xenophon discusses and answers the three major charges against Socrates: not recognizing the gods, introducing new deities and corrupting the young.

The second piece is the Memoirs of Socrates, Xenophon's great Socratic work. It is composed of four books that show Socrates talking with one person after another and sometimes giving speeches. Some of the material in the Memoirs is organized, though much is disjointed and uneven. The major point of the work is to rebut the charges against Socrates. Xenophon uses examples of Socrates' behavior and teachings to show that the charges against Socrates were false. Many consider the book largely fictionalized, as some of its historical errors can be clearly proven. In the work, Xenophon advances what he sees as the Socratic ideal of "true goodness".

The third piece is The Dinner-Party, a dialogue between Socrates and a group of his friends at a dinner party. Much of the conversation is mere small talk made among the men, but the discussion turns to philosophical matters when Socrates asks his friends what they are most proud of about themselves and when Socrates argues that love of someone for his mind is better than loving someone for his body.

The final piece is the Estate-Manager. The piece is a book on both economics and agriculture. Socrates argues that the virtues of the good-estate manager are similar to those of the truly good person. He analyzes the nature of assets with his friend Critobulus and has an extensive conversation with Ischomachus about how to properly run an estate and whether knowledge of how to be a good estate-manager is innate or learned.

Chapter 1, Socrates' Defense

Chapter 1, Socrates' Defense Summary and Analysis

The editor presents Socrates' Defense first because he thinks it is Xenophon's earliest Socratic dialogue and permits the author to make comparisons between Xenophon's account of Socrates' trial and Plato's. The author also points out that his Socratic writings were done with the express purpose of defending Socrates. Plato's equivalent work, the Apology, is superior in many respects. Plato is more eloquent and funnier; he is also a much better philosopher. But Xenophon's piece covers more historical ground, including Socrates' thoughts prior to the trial, some of Socrates' speeches at the trial and Socrates' behavior afterward. The piece is ultimately a pamphlet.

It should also be said at the outset that it is not clear whether Socrates said both of what Xenophon and Plato claim that he said. However, Xenophon's report of Socrates' speech seems heavily colored by his own themes. Yet the main charges are the same: not recognizing the gods recognized by the State, introducing new deities and corrupting the young.

Xenophon opens Socrates' Defense by noting that it is worth recording what Socrates thought about his defense once summoned to trial. He agrees with Plato that Socrates had an arrogant tone, but Xenophon emphasizes that Socrates spoke this way because he had already decided that death was better than life. He then notes that Hermogenes, the son of Hipponicus, a friend of Socrates, was an important source of information.

Before the trial, Hermogenes saw that Socrates was not talking about his trial and asks him why he isn't preparing for his defense. Socrates says that he has done nothing wrong, which was the best preparation. When Hermogenes points out that he could be convicted anyway, Socrates thought that if this was so, then God ('God' is often used to denote the common element among the gods) preferred it. Dying right after the trial avoids frailty and loss of integrity. He will be no trouble to his friends. The gods opposed Socrates from working on his speech for this reason, in his view. Xenophon then notes the charges against Socrates.

Socrates begins his defense pointing out that Meletus, his prosecutor, saw him sacrifice to the gods and that by claiming a god spoke to him, he is not introducing new deities. He then notes that when Chaerephon asked the Oracle of Delphi about him that she said he was the freest, most upright and prudent of all people. Socrates then cites his virtues, such as being not being a slave to his bodily desires and is not in debt.

Socrates then argues that his practice of virtue does not corrupt the young and that no one stopped worshipping the gods because of him. But Meletus responds that he has convinced many of the youth to listen to him rather than their parents. Socrates admits this but compares it to having youth listen to a doctor rather than parents when one is sick. Later in the speech, he points out that he could not deserve death for his actions.

He claims that he bears no shame but that his opponents do. Afterwards he was led away.

Socrates was cheerful and was mystified that his friends were crying. Socrates emphasizes that everyone dies eventually. Socrates then responds to his friends 'concerns. Socrates prophesied about Anytus's future and Xenophon notes that he was right. Xenophon then notes that due to Socrates' arrogance he forced the jurors to condemn him. Xenophon thinks his fate was proper for one loved by the gods.

Chapter 2, Memoirs of Socrates, Book I

Chapter 2, Memoirs of Socrates, Book I Summary and Analysis

The Memoirs of Socrates is Xenophon's most significant Socratic work; it is divided into four books of largely similar length. The books show Socrates talking with others and sometimes delivering a homily. The conversations are often poorly organized, though. For this reason, the work is hard to date. The pieces were probably written late in Xenophon's life. The editor thinks the piece is quasi-fictional, despite Xenophon's emphasis that the pieces are reliable.

Xenophon's main theme in the Memoirs is the ideal of the 'true good' which seems to reflect Xenophon's view, not Socrates. Xenophon's conception of the truly good is tied to both external and internal qualities, almost like the ideal of being a gentleman. A truly good person is (i) free by means of self-discipline, i.e., internally free from desire, (ii) has certain knowledge and is well educated, (iii) can make good friends and get along with others, (iv) can do good to friends and harm to enemies, (v) can manage one's estate and if required one's country, (vi) can do good for one's country, and (vii) possess the standard virtues of wisdom, justice, self-control and piety. Socrates is said to have an additional virtue, that of having the power to teach others and make them truly good. The editor emphasizes in the introduction that having self-discipline does not mean not enjoying worldly goods. Free action is action in accord with choosing good and not being hampered by vice, but this alone will not lead to the rejection of worldly goods.

Book I is divided into seven subsections. In the first subsection, Xenophon expresses confusion over the accusation that Socrates could have been guilty of the charges brought against him by Meletus and the Athenian people. He argues that there was no reason to think that Socrates' claim to speak with a god was tantamount to introducing new deities. Xenophon argues that Socrates in fact recognized the gods of the city and never uttered a heretical word. Instead, he encouraged people to follow what they thought was right, to develop their talents and so on. In fact, Socrates even believed that the gods were omniscient and so had an even greater respect for them.

In subsection two, Xenophon denies that Socrates could be said to have a bad effect on the youth. In fact, Socrates was self-disciplined, though he was not an ascetic. While he did believe democracy was silly, he did not encourage his students to become tyrants. Two of his students, Critias and Alcibiades did great damage to Athens as oligarchs. However, Xenophon argues that when they were under Socrates' tutelage, they controlled their natural vices. He taught them virtue, but they became corrupt when they were away from him, failing to exercise their own virtue. What's more, Socrates did not approve of their behavior, such as when they were responsible for a number of executions.

The subsection then transitions into a misplaced discussion between Pericles and Alcibiades on the nature of law, where Pericles argues that not all dictates of the states are properly laws. When Xenophon returns to his main dialogue, he points out that many of Socrates' students were good men, like Crito and Cebes. Socrates always taught them to speak up for right action. While this turned some of Socrates' students against their parents, this was the parents' faults for bad conduct. Finally, Socrates was accused of misquoting authoritative texts, but Xenophon denies this. Instead, Xenophon maintains, Socrates should have been praised by Athens.

In subsection three, Xenophon recalls a number of instances where Socrates actually benefited his associates and friends through both his example and conversation. First, Socrates acted out of public piety and prayed to the gods. He disciplined his body and mind and showed his students that any who followed these practices could live good lives. He resisted lust, as Socrates once discussed with Xenophon.

In subsection four, Xenophon addresses the charge that while Socrates could motivate people to start trying to be good, he could not lead them all the way towards being good. Yet Socrates often corrected the self-righteous and confounded those who believed themselves wise. Further, he helped little Aristodemus recover his piety; Xenophon then recounts the brief dialogue where Socrates convinces Aristodemus that the gods were worthy of esteem because they had given men great innate knowledge and a mind.

In subsection five, Xenophon recounts a brief homily of Socrates', where Socrates praises the value of self-discipline in order to show that he loved virtue. In subsection six, Xenophon demonstrates Socrates' virtue by recounting Socrates' discussion with the great sophist, Antiphon, who wanted to transfer his students to Socrates. Antiphon wonders why Socrates lived so modestly and Socrates argued that he was in fact rich due to his philosophical pursuits. In subsection seven, Xenophon argues that Socrates both discourages his friends from pretense but also encourages them to develop real goodness.

Chapter 2, Memoirs of Socrates, Book II

Chapter 2, Memoirs of Socrates, Book II Summary and Analysis

Book II is composed of ten subsections. Xenophon opens by maintaining the Socrates always encouraged his friends and associates to be self-disciplined with respect to food, drink, sex, sleep, heat and the like. Xenophon then recounts a dialogue Socrates had with Aristippus to illustrate. Socrates maintains that the path of liberty means being neither the slave of the passions nor one who avoids them entirely. Socrates further argues that suffering caused through free action is more bearable than involuntary suffering and then recounts a story from Heracles to illustrate.

In the second subsection, Xenophon recounts a discussion between Socrates and his oldest son Lamprocles. The boy was getting angry with his mother, Xanthippe. They then have a philosophical dialogue about the nature of gratitude. Socrates maintains that Lamprocles has ample reason to be grateful to his mother.

In subsection three, Xenophon relates a discussion Socrates had with two brothers, Chaerephon and Chaerecrates. The two brothers were fighting and Socrates encouraged them to see each other as valuable to the other rather than as burdens. But Chaerecrates believed that his brother was more disagreeable than agreeable to him. Socrates disputes this by arguing that he can modify his brother's behavior by giving him behavioral incentives.

Subsection four begins with Xenophon explaining Socrates' expressed views about friendship. Socrates notes that friends seem consistently undervalued by many and that people rarely knew how good their friends were to them. Friends are in fact among the greatest of possessions, if not the greatest. Subsection five has Xenophon tell about a time when he overheard Socrates encouraging a friend to not be distressed by his poverty through a conversation with Antisthenes.

In subsection six, Xenophon again focuses on the value of friends and the sorts of friends it is best to acquire. He first discusses with Critobulus how one should set about to find friends. They decide they should avoid those governed by their desires and those who are resentful and not generous. They also run through a number of other bad qualities. Critobulus expresses the worry that honorable and good men often quarrel with friends and treat each other poorly. Socrates thinks that this quality comes from men's hostile tendencies. He then encourages Critobulus to make himself a good man in order to deserve good friends that are also good people. Socrates also argues that Critobulus should value good friends above all other things.

Subsection seven discusses how Socrates helped those of his friends who had difficulties. Socrates helped his friends sort through ignorance and deficiencies. Xenophon narrates a dialogue between Socrates and Aristarchus that illustrates this

point. Aristarchus is housing a number of refugees who are high-quality individuals but do not work. He is suffering from financial difficulties as well. Socrates encourages him to get them to work.

Subsection eight addresses another of Socrates' encounters with his friend, Eutherus. Subsection nine shows Socrates interacting with Crito showing how Crito can find refuge in Athens from too much social interaction. Crito was able to use a friendship with Archedemus to his advantage in the story as well. In subsection ten, Xenophon ends with a record of a brief discussion between Socrates and his friend Diodorus. The general point of the second book is to show that Socrates not only did not corrupt his associates, but also encouraged them to be good.

Chapter 2, Memoirs of Socrates, Book Three

Chapter 2, Memoirs of Socrates, Book Three Summary and Analysis

In Book Three, Xenophon focuses on how Socrates helped those with good ambitious through teaching them to apply themselves. The first story concerns Dionysodorus, who came to Athens to teach the art of military command. Socrates tries to convince Dionysodorus that he should have a more expansive conception of the jobs of a general, including providing supplies to his men, being attentive and acquiring virtue generally. In subsection two, Xenophon shows Socrates emphasizing that being a good general requires being a good leader and securing the happiness of his followers.

Subsection three contains a conversation Socrates had with a young man about why he was focused on becoming a cavalry officer. Socrates mentions some potential explanations and the man says he wanted to serve his country. Socrates then asks the man about the various details of what is involved in being a good cavalry officer, such as tending to horse and horseman quality. Subsection four shows Socrates talking to Nicomachides about who the people appointed to be the new general. Nicomachides notes that the people chose Antisthenes, who Nicomachides thinks is not qualified for the job. Socrates then tries to convince him that Antisthenes' focus on winning will cause him to acquire the needed capacities; Socrates also argues that Antisthenes has skills that can be transferred to being a good general.

In subsection five, Socrates is talking to Pericles, son of the famous Pericles. Socrates says he has high hopes for Pericles (the younger's) generalship. Socrates then discusses the subject with him, probing him on important details, such as about how physically perfect the soldiers of Athens are. They discuss how Athens has undergone a decline in some of these respects. Socrates thinks it has to do with negligence; in his view, the Athenians should recover their ancestral forms of life. Pericles has little hope for this. Socrates then provides Pericles some encouraging advice.

In subsection six, Glaucon, son of Ariston, was trying to become a famous orator to later become a head of State. But he was young and was often laughed at. Socrates, however, helped him due to his friends Charmides and Plato. Socrates then asks Glaucon how, should he become head of State, he would benefit his country. Glaucon had not thought through the details; Socrates encourages him to become wise.

In subsection seven, Socrates discusses how to win athletic competitions with Charmides. Socrates mentions that those who do not use their talents to serve their country are soft, and Charmides agrees. But then Socrates points out that Charmides is not using his administrative abilities well because he is too shy of the silliest and weakest people. He encourages Charmides to attend to his responsibility to them.

In subsection eight, Socrates has another discussion with Aristippus. Here Socrates wants to help those listening to the conversation. Aristippus tries to trap Socrates into claiming that something conditionally good is an unqualified good, so as to refute him. But Socrates refuses to give him a direct answer about what is good generally, focusing instead on what things are good for what purposes.

Subsection nine contains Socrates' thoughts about whether courage was inborn or learned. Socrates thinks that it is largely innate but that the disposition can be developed through instruction and application. Xenophon discusses how Socrates thought that all the virtues were the same.

Subsection ten has Socrates talk to craftsmen to show that Socrates even cared for their interests. He talks to them about how they represent things in the world, such as virtue and more abstract matters. In subsection eleven, Xenophon tells the story of a beautiful woman named Theodote who consorts with anyone persuasive. Socrates went to see her and flattered her initially. He then proceeded to question her about how she finds friends. She responds that she lures them and then Socrates helps her to figure out that friends should be acquired in a better way.

Subsection twelve has Socrates talk with Epigenes about how he is in poor physical condition for a young man. Socrates encourages him to consider the penalties of not being physically fit, such as that fit men can fight well in war and protect their country. Subsection thirteen has Socrates chide someone for being upset that another did not return his greeting. The same subsection discusses how Socrates responded to a man who was angry with his servant and thrashed him.

Subsection fourteen discusses Socrates presence at a communal dinner. Socrates wanted the smaller contributions of food to be gathered and distributed equally. He then points out that a man was being a fussy eater despite the imperative to share food and not to be fussy. Socrates thought good eating was part of living a well-ordered life.

Chapter 2, Memoirs of Socrates, Book IV

Chapter 2, Memoirs of Socrates, Book IV Summary and Analysis

Xenophon argues that Socrates was so helpful, and that being associated with Socrates and spending time with him was always of service. He had a great effect on his companions in nearly all cases. Socrates could adjust his aid to the differing needs of individuals as well.

In subsection two, Xenophon develops this theme by explaining Socrates' attitude towards those who thought they were right and were proud as a result. For instance, the handsome Euthydemus had found many writings of the best-known poets and sages and thought himself wise. Socrates began a conversation with him to stir him up and concluded that Euthydemus still needed instruction. In another case, Socrates chided Euthydemus from withdrawing from the group so as to avoid embarrassment and learning. He then praises Euthydemus for being interested in achieving wisdom.

Socrates turns to discuss the division of actions between right and wrong. He confuses Euthydemus and uses his confusion to convince him that he needs to know himself better to be wise. Euthydemus had elsewhere expressed a desire to serve as a democratic administrator, and Socrates argues that to be wise and good at this job, he must know the people.

Xenophon claims in subsection three that Socrates did not push for his friends to be eloquent, capable or inventive. The first thing they needed was responsibility, because otherwise achieving the former virtues would help them do wrong. He helped many think clearly about religion. Xenophon then recounts a discussion Socrates has with Euthydemus to this effect. Socrates argues that reason shows that the world was designed for the good of man and that the gods are concerned for human welfare.

In subsection four, Xenophon demonstrates that Socrates not only displayed his conception of morality and piety by teaching it, but also by following it. Socrates was law-abiding and helpful, always obeying authority. He served in the military and was obedient. He barred illegal motions as president in the Assembly. Xenophon then illustrates by recounting Socrates' discussion of right conduct with Hippias of Elis. Socrates remarks that it is unclear where learning to do the right thing can be found. Socrates and Hippias conclude that one way to learn what is right is to obey the laws of the state. They also conclude that what is right is what is made lawful by the gods and so "right" and "lawful" had the same meaning.

In subsection five, Xenophon demonstrates how Socrates made his friends more efficient through urging them to self-discipline. Socrates once had a discussion with Euthydemus to this effect, arguing that without self-discipline, one cannot be free. In other words, slavery not only comes from outside of the person but from inside as well.

Socrates convinces Euthydemus that those without self-discipline are no better than beasts.

In subsection six, Xenophon explains how Socrates improves his associates through philosophical discussion. Helping others understand the nature of things allows them to avoid mistakes and to teach others to do the same. Xenophon, to illustrate, reproduces a conversation that Socrates has with Euthydemus about the nature of religiosity. Religion, it turns out, is connected to obeying the moral law, which requires knowing what the law is. Being religious, then, requires knowledge of the laws. The two agree that being religious requires knowledge, and thus wisdom. They also discuss the nature of being a good citizen. Xenophon briefly covers some of Socrates' political philosophy and concludes the subsection by explaining how effective Socrates reasoned and how he nearly always won his arguments.

Xenophon opens subsection seven pointing out that due to stories like the previous one, Socrates revealed his true opinions to his companions. Xenophon next shows that he also tried to help them be self-sufficient in their activities. Socrates thought it was important to know the degree of his associates' special knowledge and wanted his friends to be informed about many subjects.

In subsection eight, Xenophon claims that no one should believe that Socrates made false claims about the divine just because he was sentenced to death for this reason and because he claimed a god spoke to him about what he ought to do. Xenophon maintains that Socrates led his life nobly and that no one had ever met his death more nobly. Xenophon then covers Socrates' discussion with Hermogenes before he gives his trial speech where Socrates claims that the gods did not want him to resist his sentence and that they were wise to do so. In Xenophon's view, Socrates was so devout that he did nothing without divine sanction.

Chapter 3, The Dinner-Party

Chapter 3, The Dinner-Party Summary and Analysis

The Dinner-Party takes place at a dinner party, which was a regular event for upper-class Athenians. Mostly men would attend perfumed and meet for dinner. They would drink religious libations and sing a paean and then drink more. While drinking, the host would provide entertainment. Xenophon's dinner party was held due to Autolycus' victory in the pancration at a Great Panathenaea festival. The Dinner-Party is Xenophon's best Socratic work. The chief themes are the nature of love and Socrates' ideal true goodness.

The main contrast of love is between pure and impure (physical) homosexuality. Socrates says that the latter is debauchery. But Socrates' homosexual attractions are on display, though he does not consummate them. Socrates' ability to resist temptation is extolled. Socrates argues that wise men should rank love of mind over physical love. When we love someone for their mind, we love features of the person that do not fade. By arguing thusly, Xenophon claims, Socrates demonstrates his true goodness.

Xenophon begins the story by describing the great horse-race at the Great Panathenaic festival, an annual festival held in honor of Athena. Every fourth year the festival would be 'Grand'. Callias, son of Hipponicus, was strongly attracted to a boy called Autolycus and brought him to the horse-race following his victory in a boys' competition known as the pancration. Callias then took Autolycus and his father to his house. Niceratus went with Callias and then they ran across Socrates, Critobulus, Hermogenes, Antisthenes and Charmides. Callias then invited them all to dinner. Initially, Socrates and his friends declined but Callias insisted.

When the men arrive, they ate silently and were drawn to Autolycus' beauty. Philippus, a joker, comes to the house to entertain them. After dinner, libations were poured and a paean sung. Then more entertainment came in and the men began to talk. They admired the dancers, and while they admired the dancers, Charmides noted that the combination of young beauty and music made him think of love. Socrates suggested that the men in attendance still thought themselves better than the entertainers and so they decided to discuss the matter.

Callias begins by arguing that he is great because he can make people better by teaching them true goodness, that is, morality. Niceratus was proud that he could recite all of the Illiad and the Odyssey. Critobulus admires his beauty and Antithenes his wealth. Charmides is proud of his poverty. Lycon is proud of his son and Autolycus of his father. Hermogenes delights in the goodness and influence of his friends.

In subsection four, Socrates remarks that they should all demonstrate the value of what they claim to possess. The men proceed through the claims of Callias, Niceratus, Critobulus, Charmides and Antisthenes. It turns out that none of them can adequately

defend their pride. Hermogenes then explains why he is proud of his friends. Hermogenes says that he keeps his friends by praising them and making returns out of what they give him, among other virtues. Phillipus is asked why he prides himself on his ability to make others laugh.

Finally, Socrates defends his claim that he is proud because he is an excellent pimp. He represents his clients pleasantly, speaks modestly, is conciliatory and has other virtues.

In subsection five, Critobulus and Socrates talk about the nature of beauty. Socrates leads Critobulus to claim that beauty is not to be found only in persons but in many things. Critobulus says that what makes a thing beautiful is how well it measures up to its purpose, how fit it is to fulfill its purposes. Socrates uses Critobulus's claim to argue that he (a notoriously ugly man) is more beautiful than Critobulus because his features are more useful.

In subsection six, Socrates asks Hermogenes what drunkenness is. Hermogenes says it consists in annoying one's companions, but Socrates makes light of the answers and the other men chime in with their own thoughts. The discussion became a bit uproarious but then calmed down. In subsection seven, the men make jokes.

Subsection eight is the central subsection. Socrates introduces the new topic of conversation: love. Socrates wants to speak of love as a deity, since all men worship it. Socrates argues that love for the mind is better than physical love. When we have physical love, we lose that love as the one we love ages; but the mind does not decline in this way. Love of mind is also easier to reciprocate, such as when a person is truly good. But no one can hate someone who thinks they are truly good. Physical beauty does not work this way, as you can easily hate someone who thinks you are beautiful. That you have physical love is also no indication of virtue of any kind. And it indicates a higher degree of servility than love of mind does. Further, if you admire the goodness of another, you yourself feel compelled to act well so as to help preserve the beloved's goodness.

Subsection nine follows after the discussion ends. Autolycus and Lycon leave, but as Lycon leaves he tells Socrates that he is truly a good man. After the boy left, the men watched Ariadne (a woman) and Dionysus (a man) engage in passionate kissing. Their love seemed genuine, and when the guests saw them together, the bachelors vowed to marry and the married men rode home fast to their wives. But Socrates and those left waited to walk with Callias to the home of Lycon.

Chapter 4, The Estate-Manager

Chapter 4, The Estate-Manager Summary and Analysis

The estate-manager concerns economics, though it lacks a deep analysis of economic concepts. However, there are some reflections on the origin of societies and civilization. It is also not an agricultural textbook, though agriculture plays a major part in the book. Instead, it is probably a simple treatise on the estate-owner's activities, about how he should behave and treat others.

However, the book is a Socratic dialogue and so Socratic themes come out. For instance, being a good estate-manager is part of what it is to be truly good, which again involves self-discipline. Farming teaches men self-discipline, the many virtues and trains people to desire to protect their country and do it well. It also teaches men to rule others.

Socrates' analogy between internal and external freedom is developed. Being a good ruler means having knowledge of what is ruled. And those with knowledge simply should be leaders. Socrates also expresses ambivalence about what is innate and what is learned. Xenophon is expressing his view on what sort of knowledge Socrates has in mind when Socrates equates virtue and knowledge. There is also a discussion of what makes an asset an asset, whether wealth is wealth because of its use-value or whether the value is intrinsic to the thing. The editor then speculates that the Estate-Manager may contain passage from the Memoirs, such as a conversation with Critobulus and then discusses dating for the piece.

The piece begins with Socrates talking to Critobulus whether estate-management is a branch of knowledge like medicine. A man can be a good estate-manager even without an estate if he has the disposition. Socrates helps Critobulus hammer out a definition of an estate-manager, at first by discussing what counts as an estate. An estate includes all of one's assets. But what is an asset? Is it merely something one knows how to use? Or sell? Socrates seems to advocate a subjective theory of economic value (perhaps two millennia before it was widely accepted). For assets are only assets if one can turn them to a use that produces value for the individual. An asset is what benefits one.

In the second subsection, Critobulus begins a discussion with Socrates about living in poverty. Socrates thinks there is no problem living in poverty because it is required by virtue, say the virtue of giving the gods large sacrifices and paying taxes. Socrates reiterates that one can still be a good estate-manager without assets. In subsection three, Socrates argues that those with great apparent assets can sometimes do little with them and vice versa. Doing the best with what you have is part of estate-management.

In the fourth section, Critobulus wonders if estate-management has to be learned from experts; he is concerned that if so, one might have to learn any craft from an expert; it

thus looks hard to become an expert. They then discuss who should learn which crafts and how the learning of crafts affects the individual.

In subsection five, Socrates argues that those who are well-off cannot distance themselves from agriculture. Agriculture is the main source of pleasant living and learning virtue. The land provides great abundance but only with effort, which produces virtue. Socrates cites the various virtues listed above. In subsection six, Critobulus agrees with Socrates that farming causes one to rely on the gods and that the gods should be worshipped at the beginning of an agricultural venture. Critobulus is convinced that agriculture is the finest and best life.

Socrates then transitions into telling Critobulus about a man he knew who was truly good, someone by the name of Ischomachus. Socrates had always desired to meet the truly good and heard of Ischomachus' reputation for being such. He asked Ischomachus why he was truly good. Ischomachus first cites having trained his wife to effectively run his household and he describes the stages of training her. He maintains that women are best at inside tasks and men for outside tasks.

In subsection eight, Socrates wonders if Ischomachus' wife was motivated to take responsibility for inside chores as a result of Ischomachus' instruction. Ischomachus is certain that she was and recounts his conversation with her about arranging utensils and making them usable. In subsection nine, Socrates asks Ischomachus if he had any indication that his wife was taking his points seriously. Again, Ischomachus was sure. She promised to give the tasks he assigned her the attention they deserved and was excited to do what he commanded. Socrates then asked how he organized tasks for his wife. Ischomachus explains how he did so.

In subsection ten, Socrates expresses surprise that Ischomachus' wife took to her tasks so well because from what Ischomachus was telling him, his wife's mind was as good as a man's. Ischomachus agrees and tells Socrates about other examples of her conscientiousness and about how he could tell her something only once and she'd stick to it. In subsection eleven, Socrates exclaims that he is impressed by Ischomachus and that his training reflects well on him and his wife. Socrates then asks Ischomachus what his day-to-day activities are and asks him to teach Socrates to be good by following his example. Ischomachus then explains what he does, realizing that Socrates was somewhat joking.

Ischomachus explains that he spends his time managing his prosperity, which he achieved by first worshiping the gods and then finding that they grant his prayers. Ischomachus admits that he likes wealth and looking after large assets. He likes to give generously to the gods, to help friends in need and to beautify his city. Socrates asks him how he learns to take care of his health and how he maintains his finances. Ischomachus describes his tasks during the day, such as overseeing labor and making improvements. He even has his servants question him about the "slanderers" that degrade his reputation so that he can practice responding to them. Ischomachus, Socrates exclaims in subsection twelve, does a lot to maintain a positive reputation. They then discuss how Ischomachus trains his foremen to be loyal and effective. The

discussion extends into subsection thirteen. Socrates focuses on how Ischomachus teaches his foremen to wield authority.

In subsection fourteen, Socrates asks whether a foreman with the virtues Ischomachus has cited is perfect; Ischomachus states he is so. He then explains how he teaches his foremen virtue. Thus the conversation transitions into a discussion about whether one can be a good estate-manager and not have virtue and whether virtue and knowledge can be taught. Subsection fifteen focuses more on teaching the foreman virtue and knowledge.

In subsection sixteen, Ischomachus explains what the foreman must know about to be a good foreman, such as knowledge of the land. Socrates asks Ischomachus to teach him how to effectively work the land and Ischomachus explains. The two agree in subsection seventeen about how to manage fallow ground; then Socrates asks Ischomachus about how and when to seed the ground and how these decisions are combined with proper piety. In subsection eighteen they discuss the harvest and in subsection nineteen they discuss planning and soil.

In subsection twenty, Socrates remarks that Ischomachus has so totally broken down the lessons of farming that it should be easy for others to learn. And yet those with equal knowledge seem to not have equal achievements. He then asks why some farmers prosper and others do not. Ischomachus replies that knowledge and ignorance does not determine the outcome entirely. Some knowledge is not put into practice; mistakes are often made. There are other factors outside of one's control, such as excessive ignorance.

Subsection twenty-one is the last subsection. Socrates reflects on how well Ischomachus's hypothesis has been supported by his argument. Ischomachus has argued that agriculture is very easy to learn and Socrates agrees. But Ischomachus maintains that it relies on effectively wielding authority which is common to all activities. Learning this takes training and requires natural talent and the gods' favor. The gift of wielding authority may not be totally of human origin. In the end, it appears, that being a good estate-manager is both easy to learn but requires effectively wielding authority which cannot be entirely learned. Socrates seems to have left Ischomachus with a contradiction.

Characters

Socrates of Athens

We know little about Socrates. Historians believe he lived between 469 and 399 BC. He lived as an Athenian citizen who wandered around Athens and challenged its most significant citizens on philosophical matters. What is known of Socrates is known second-hand and much of the information is disputed. However, his two main chroniclers, Xenophon and Plato, do agree on a number of matters, especially on the details of his famous trial and death where the Athenians accused him of failing to worship the gods recognized by the state, introducing new deities and corrupting the youth. The trial is perhaps the most significant part of Socrates' life because it shows his willingness to die for what he believed to be right and to become philosophy's first martyr.

Socrates lived the paradigmatic life of the philosopher and is widely believed to have cared for nothing but the truth. He had many famous students, some of whom (like Plato) went on to become great philosophers and others (like Xenophon) who were important writers in other areas.

Xenophon's Socrates is somewhat unique. While he is interested in philosophical issues just as Plato's Socrates is, he is more practical and down to earth and he also advocates more of his own positions. It is hard to know, however, how much of these emphases and elements are true to Socrates and how much are due to Xenophon's own biases and values. Plato and Xenophon are both thought to have often used Socrates as a mouthpiece for their own views.

Xenophon of Athens

Xenophon (430-354 BC) was the son of Gryllus, a soldier and a friend of Socrates'. Xenophon was a great Greek historian who wrote about the history of Athens but also for preserving Socrates' sayings. Xenophon was born into the upper classes and participated in military activities from an early age. At the time, Xenophon was under Socrates' influence. Because Xenophon ended up fighting for the Spartans against Athens, he was exiled. But the historical circumstances were complex; his most likely reason for being exiled was his association with Socrates. His historical works were widely read for many centuries but in various times have fallen out of favor as Xenophon's writings are often considered bias, cobbled-together and poorly written.

Xenophon wrote four works that claimed to contain the real conservations of Socrates. Few appeal to these works as real evidence of Socrates' words, however. The only exception is the Memoirs, which was written to show that Socrates was not impious and that he helped the young. In some later time periods, this Socrates would be preferred to Plato's Socrates.

Xenophon focuses far less on Socrates' philosophical views than does Plato. But he does have Socrates address a number of different matters. Most interesting to Xenophon is the Socratic ideal of the truly good man and about what qualities the truly good man must possess. Much of the conversation in the dialogues has Socrates concerned with how people in various walks of life need the virtues of the truly good man to live well.

Robin Waterfield

The British classical scholar who translated and editor Conversations of Socrates.

Critobulus

A faithful, life-long friend of Socrates. He was a constant interlocutor of Socrates' in the Memoirs, the Dinner-Party and the Estate-Manager.

Ischomachus

One of a very few men that Socrates considers to be good, Ischomachus is a wealthy but virtuous estate-manager who Socrates talks with at length in The Estate-Manager.

Hermogenes

Socrates' main interlocutor in Socrates' Defense and who was present at The Dinner-Party.

Socrates' Dinner Companions

Socrates had a number of companions at the dinner party including Callias, Autolycus, Lycon, Niceratus, Charmides, Hermogenes and Critobulus.

Euthydemus

Socrates' main interlocutor in Book IV of the Memoirs.

Charmides

An Athenian statesman and good friend of Socrates. He is present at the dinner-party.

Callias

The host of the dinner-party and who pursues Autolycus in the Dinner-Party.

Objects/Places

Ancient Greece

Xenophon's works were written in the fourth century BC about events in the late fifth and early fourth centuries BC in Ancient Greece.

Athens

The city where all the dialogues are set.

The Agora

The open market in Athens.

The Forum

The area in Athens where the public could speak to politicians openly.

Callias' House

The setting of the dinner party.

Socrates' Trial

The setting of Socrates' Defense.

The Truly Good Man

Socrates has an ideal of the truly good man that he works out throughout Xenophon's writings.

The Great Panathenaic Festival

The festival celebrating Athena that included a range of athletic events. The Dinner-Party begins as Callias returns to his home with Autolycus, running into Socrates and his friends along the way.

Assets

Critobulus and Socrates have an extended discussion about what makes an asset valuable in The Estate-Manager.

The Estate-Manager

The Estate-Manager has Socrates try to figure out what the ideal estate-manager is like. He discusses the matter at length with Critobulus and then later recounts a conversation he had on similar matters with Ischomachus.

The Accusations against Socrates

Three accusations were made against Socrates at his trial: that he did not worship the gods recognized by the state, that he introduced new gods and that he corrupted the young. The Memoirs are devoted to refuting the charges.

Socrates' Virtue

One way in which Xenophon argues against the charges against Socrates is to recall stories about Socrates that demonstrate his virtue.

Themes

The Defense of Socrates

When Xenophon was a young man, he was an associate of Socrates and his student. Xenophon later became a soldier and looked up to Socrates not only because Socrates was a veteran but because of Socrates' great virtue, wisdom and thoughtfulness. Thus, when Socrates was accused by the Athenians and then put to death, Xenophon was understandably angry and upset. As a result, he wrote a number of works defending Socrates, including a purportedly eyewitness account in Socrates' Defense and the lengthy work, Memoirs of Socrates.

The two pieces defend Socrates in different ways. Socrates' Defense is Xenophon's account of the trial of Socrates, much like Plato's Apology. In it, Xenophon recounts not only Socrates' attitude about the trial but his defense against the charges against him. Briefly, Socrates was charged with rejecting the gods recognized by Athens, introducing new deities and corrupting the youth. Socrates argued in response that first, he acted piously and went to the sacrifices and participated. Second, Socrates argued that the only reason he was accused of introducing new deities is because he believed a god spoke to him about what was good and right, but he said this was not to introduce a new deity but might be related to an old one. Third, Socrates denied corrupting the youth, arguing he made them better.

The Memoirs of Socrates is Xenophon's detailed defense of Socrates from events across Socrates' life, not only the events at the trial. Socrates' Defense gives Socrates' own arguments against his charges, but in the Memoirs, Xenophon answers the charges by responding to the charges with his own accounts of Socrates' life and words that contradicted the charges. The defense is lengthy; Xenophon spends dozens of pages rebutting each charge.

True Goodness

One of Xenophon's primary aims in recounting Socrates' discussions with others and his activities generally is to examine (what appears to be) Socrates' ideal of 'true goodness' and the 'truly good' man. This ideal is primarily examined in the Memoirs, where Xenophon argues that Socrates had precisely these features. Xenophon cities the "truly good" person as having seven qualities: (i) he is free through self-discipline, (ii) he has a high degree of knowledge and education, (iii) he has the ability to make friends and get along with people, (iv) he does good to friends and harm to enemies, (v) he can manage one's estate well and even one's country, if his country needs him, (vi) he has the ability to do good for his country, and (vii) he possesses the traditional virtues, like wisdom, justice and piety.

Xenophon goes about arguing that Socrates has all of these qualities. Xenophon argues, for instance, that Socrates had a high degree of self-discipline and so was free from a compulsion to commit vice. This is seen best in the Dinner-Party where Socrates is clearly tempted by the physical love of Autolycus. Xenophon also argues that Socrates, despite upsetting some, had the ability to make good friends and get along with others. The Estate-Manager concerns being able to manage one's estate well, which Socrates had the ability to do although he had no estate. Socrates was a veteran and so did well for his country and possessed the traditional virtues.

Socratic Dialogue

Xenophon's records of Socrates are in dialogue form, just as Plato's record of Socrates. While Xenophon will often narrate in a way that Plato does not and will explicitly defend Socrates in an open way, unlike Plato, the primary form by which Xenophon relates and explains Socrates to his reader is by recounting Socratic dialogue. Socrates was a master dialectician who was notorious for using his argumentative skill to unravel the positions of his opponent, most often powerful members of Athens. Yet in Conversations of Socrates, many of Socrates' discussions are not meant to provoke or deconstruct, instead, Socrates is often talking with friends, offering his own opinions and in the case of Ischomachus, seems to be almost admiring his interlocutor and learning from him.

Dialogue form is used by Xenophon to demonstrate two major things: that Socrates was not guilty of the charges made against him and the Socratic philosophical ideas to which Xenophon was sympathetic. First, Xenophon spends almost all of Memoirs of Socrates recounts Socrates' dialogues in order to show, say, how pious he was. Mostly Xenophon records dialogues that show how helpful Socrates was to his friends, how he helped them think through issues and challenges in their lives and how he often used argument to help them realize important truths or to help them feel better about themselves.

Socrates is also found discussing a wide range of philosophical issues for their own sake, such as the nature of assets and estate-management in The Estate-Manager, the nature of love and pride in The Dinner-Party and the ideal of True Goodness in Memoirs of Socrates.

Style

Perspective

The Conversations of Socrates has three distinct perspectives and a fourth, composite perspective, each of which contains important subtleties. The first perspective of importance is Robin Waterfield's, the editor. Waterfield spends the introductions explaining the text of the dialogue to the reader and addressing various historical and interpretative puzzles. He also analyzes the philosophical issues at stake in each work. Waterfield's perspective is that of a historian who isn't afraid to share his opinion or to express approval or disapproval of some idea or individual. In general, Waterfield agrees with many of the criticisms of Xenophon made by critics of the centuries, but he is also on the whole more positive about Xenophon's contributions that many have been.

Xenophon's perspective is heavily biased in favor of his friend and teacher Socrates. Socrates was killed because he was convicted of three charges made against him by the Athenians. Xenophon is understandably defensive and upset by the fact that the man he so admired was killed. Thus, much of Xenophon's writing is devoted to defending Socrates, however possible. That said, much of his defense appears to rest on false information and distortion, though of course much of what he says about Socrates is true. One difficulty with Xenophon's perspective is that it is hard to know exactly how much he intended to give a literal history of Socrates' life.

The third major perspective is that of Socrates himself. Socrates was an unusual individual. While he was jovial, kind to his friends and often sociable, he could be a real pain to people, particularly to powerful individuals in the city. Socrates made enemies often by challenging the powerful in public to defend their views on complex topics. Socrates' perspective is one of a man intent on finding the truth in the most abstract sense of the term. The perspective of Socrates' interlocutors varies widely depend on who his interlocutor is.

Tone

The tone among the various Socratic dialogues in The Conversations of Socrates varies in accord with its many perspectives. As stated above, the book has four primary perspectives: the editor, Waterfield, Xenophon, Socrates and Socrates' interlocutors. Waterfield's tone is meant to be completely scholarly. He must make numerous historical arguments based on complex historical and textual details. Thus the tone is scholarly, impartial and focused. However, Waterfield's tone will often change when he expresses his own views. For instance, he often agrees with the standard criticisms of Xenophon's writings, but in other cases he disagrees with the mainstream and his tone becomes more positive.

Xenophon's tone is, of course, defensive. Xenophon's works by and large set out to defend Socrates against accusations and reveal his good character and good deed. Xenophon isn't nasty or bitter, but he is concerned to show Socrates in the best possible light. Thus, his tone is full of love for his teacher and dismissiveness toward Socrates' critics. Xenophon's tone also contains admiration. Because his defense of Socrates involves praising Socrates' qualities and achievements, the tone will obviously come off in this way.

Socrates' tone is the richest and most complex. His mood is different in different pieces, sometimes reflective, other times jovial, still others cutting and witty, particularly when he is trying to dismantle the argument of someone he doesn't like. Socrates' tone will often become ethereal when he focuses on abstract philosophical matters but can quickly become down to earth. Socrates' interlocutors' tones vary depending on the particular character Socrates is interacting with, but generally their tone is one of admiration and confusion that results from Socrates' questioning.

Structure

The Conversations of Socrates contains four Socratic dialogues written by Xenophon of Athens: Socrates' Defense, Memoirs of Socrates, The Dinner-Party and the Estate-Manager. But the structure of the book is not that simple. Xenophon's works are translated from ancient Greek and contain a number of puzzles and mysteries. For instance, it is unclear how to date the texts—which piece was written in what order? It is not clear how much of the text is genuine; how much of the dialogues are historical?

The editor, Robin Waterfield, spreads his writing throughout the book, often commenting on these mysteries and otherwise explaining to the reader how the dialogues will proceed. Waterfield also tries to break down the philosophical issues discussed in the text. Thus, the beginning of the book is an extended introduction. And then each of the dialogues contains a detailed introduction explaining not only the structure of the piece but Waterfield's opinions about the various exegetical mysteries it raises.

The dialogues themselves do not appear in a simple structure. First, they are divided into subsections by Waterfield based on their general subject matter and literary type. Some subsections are entirely Socratic dialogue, others are Socratic homilies, and still others are Xenophon's commentaries. And the Memoirs of Socrates is divided into four books (following Xenophon) each of which contains different parts of Xenophon's lengthy defense against the charges against Socrates.

Quotes

"Because I have consistently done no wrong, and this, I think, is the finest preparation for a defense."
Chap. 1, p. 41

"Once, when Chaerephon made an inquiry about me in Delphi, Apollo replied—and there were many witnesses—that I was the most free, upright and prudent of all people."
Chap1, p. 44

"If anyone in his search for virtue has encountered a more helpful person than Socrates, then he deserves, in my opinion, to be called the most fortunate of all men."
Chap. 1, p. 49

"It seems to me that if one party, instead of persuading another, compels him to do something, whether by enactment or not, this is always violence rather than law."
Chap. 2, Book 1 p. 81

"Which would be the more effective way for me to take part in politics—by doing so alone, or by making it my business to see that as many persons as possible are capable of taking part in it?"
Chap. 2, Book 1, p. 98

"And yet although some people try to cultivate trees for the sake of their frust, most are indolent and negligent in taking care of the most productive of all possessions—what we call a friend."
Chap. 2, Book 2, p. 118

"You will find in every sphere of action that esteem and admiration are reserved for those who are best informed, while ignominy and contempt are the lost of the most ignorant."
Chap. 2, Book 3, p. 156

"Most people, when they are set upon looking into other people's affairs, never turn to examine themselves."
Chap. 2, Book 3, p. 157

"[Socrates] used to say that not only justice, but all the other moral virtues were wisdom."
Chap. 2, Book 3, p. 161

"Thus [Socrates] regarded even good living as the privilege of those whose lives are well ordered."
Chap. 2, Book 3, p. 176

"I could hardly have known anything else if I hadn't even been acquainted with myself."
Chap. 2, Book 4, p. 186

"How can a man without self-discipline be any better than the most ignorant beast?"
Chap. 2, Book 4, p. 205

"Socrates was ... so devout that he never did anything without the sanction of the gods. ... He seemed to me to be the perfect example of goodness and happiness."
Chap. 2, Book 4, pl 216

"I want to show him evidence that love for the mind is much better than physical love."
Chap. 3, p. 259

"I swear, Socrates, it does seem to me that you are a truly good man."
Chap. 3, p. 265

"It follows that the same things are assets if one knows how to make use of them, and are not assets if one doesn't."
Chap. 4, p. 290

"Even those who are very well off cannot distance themselves from agriculture."
Chap. 4, p. 305

"A philosopher's job is above all to learn."
Chap. 4, p. 341

Topics for Discussion

What were the charges against Socrates? Why was Socrates seemingly indifferent to the outcome?

What do you think of Robin Waterfield's interpretative arguments? Evaluate two of his arguments.

What do you think of Xenophon's defense of Socrates in the Memoirs? Is the defense successful? To what extent do Socrates' dialogues show that he is truly good and helpful?

What is Socrates' ideal of true goodness in Xenophon's dialogues? Explain in detail.

What does Socrates argue about the nature of love in The Dinner-Party? Is he right or wrong?

What does it take to be a good estate-manager for Socrates? How is it related to being a good person?

What does Socrates mean when he says that "virtue is knowledge?" What does Xenophon think he means?