

Oeconomicus

[The Economist]

A Treatise on the Science of the Household in the form of a
Dialogue

Xenophon

Translated by H. G. Dakyns

I

Soc: Tell me, Critobulus, is “economy,” like the words “medicine,” “carpentry,” “building,” “smithying,” “metal-working,” and so forth, the name of a particular kind of knowledge or science?

Crit. Yes, I think so.

Soc. And as, in the case of the arts just named, we can state the proper work or function of each, can we (similarly) state the proper work and function of economy?

Crit. It must, I should think, be the business of the good economist⁵ at any rate to manage his own house or estate well.

Soc. And supposing another man’s house to be entrusted to him, he would be able, if he chose, to manage it as skilfully as his own, would he not? since a man who is skilled in carpentry can work as well for another as for himself: and this ought to be equally true of the good economist?

Crit. Yes, I think so, Socrates.

Soc. Then there is no reason why a proficient in this art, even if he does not happen to possess wealth of his own, should not be paid a salary for managing a house, just as he might be paid for building one?

Crit. None at all: and a large salary he would be entitled to earn if, after paying the necessary expenses of the estate entrusted to him, he can create a surplus and improve the property.

Soc. Well! and this word “house,” what are we to understand by it? the domicile merely? or are we to include all a man’s possessions outside the actual dwelling-place?⁶

Crit. Certainly, in my opinion at any rate, everything which a man has got, even though some portion of it may lie in another part of the world from that in which he lives,⁷ forms part of his estate.

Soc. “Has got”? but he may have got enemies?

Crit. Yes, I am afraid some people have got a great many.

Soc. Then shall we say that a man’s enemies form part of his possessions?

Crit. A comic notion indeed! that some one should be good enough to add to my stock of enemies, and that in addition he should be paid for his kind services.

Soc. Because, you know, we agreed that a man’s estate was identical with his possessions?

Crit. Yes, certainly! the good part of his possessions; but the evil portion! no, I thank you, that I do not call part of a man’s possessions.

Soc. As I understand, you would limit the term to what we may call a man's useful or advantageous possessions?

Crit. Precisely; if he has things that injure him, I should regard these rather as a loss than as wealth.

Soc. It follows apparently that if a man purchases a horse and does not know how to handle him, but each time he mounts he is thrown and sustains injuries, the horse is not part of his wealth?

Crit. Not, if wealth implies weal, certainly.

Soc. And by the same token land itself is no wealth to a man who so works it that his tillage only brings him loss?

Crit. True; mother earth herself is not a source of wealth to us if, instead of helping us to live, she helps us to starve.

Soc. And by a parity of reasoning, sheep and cattle may fail of being wealth if, through want of knowledge how to treat them, their owner loses by them; to him at any rate the sheep and the cattle are not wealth?

Crit. That is the conclusion I draw.

Soc. It appears, you hold to the position that wealth consists of things which benefit, while things which injure are not wealth?

Crit. Just so.

Soc. The same things, in fact, are wealth or not wealth, according as a man knows or does not know the use to make of them? To take an instance, a flute may be wealth to him who is sufficiently skilled to play upon it, but the same instrument is no better than the stones we tread under our feet to him who is not so skilled . . . unless indeed he chose to sell it?

Crit. That is precisely the conclusion we should come to.⁸ To persons ignorant of their use⁹ flutes are wealth as saleable, but as possessions not for sale they are no wealth at all; and see, Socrates, how smoothly and consistently the argument proceeds,¹⁰ since it is admitted that things which benefit are wealth. The flutes in question unsold are not wealth, being good for nothing: to become wealth they must be sold.

Yes! (rejoined Socrates), presuming the owner knows how to sell them; since, supposing again he were to sell them for something which he does not know how to use,¹¹ the mere selling will not transform them into wealth, according to your argument.

Crit. You seem to say, Socrates, that money itself in the pockets of a man who does not know how to use it is not wealth?

Soc. And I understand you to concur in the truth of our proposition so far: wealth is that, and that only, whereby a man may be benefited. Obviously, if a man used his money to

buy himself a mistress, to the grave detriment of his body and soul and whole estate, how is that particular money going to benefit him now? What good will he extract from it?

Crit. None whatever, unless we are prepared to admit that hyoscyamus,¹² as they call it, is wealth, a poison the property of which is to drive those who take it mad.

Soc. Let money then, Critobulus, if a man does not know how to use it aright — let money, I say, be banished to the remote corners of the earth rather than be reckoned as wealth.¹³ But now, what shall we say of friends? If a man knows how to use his friends so as to be benefited by them, what of these?

Crit. They are wealth indisputably, and in a deeper sense than cattle are, if, as may be supposed, they are likely to prove of more benefit to a man than wealth of cattle.

Soc. It would seem, according to your argument, that the foes of a man's own household after all may be wealth to him, if he knows how to turn them to good account?¹⁴

Crit. That is my opinion, at any rate.

Soc. It would seem, it is the part of a good economist¹⁵ to know how to deal with his own or his employer's foes so as to get profit out of them?

Crit. Most emphatically so.

II

Crit. Come, do not hesitate; only tender me what good advice you can, and trust me I will follow it. But perhaps, Socrates, you have already passed sentence on us — we are rich enough already, and not in need of any further wealth?

Soc. It is to myself rather, if I may be included in your plural "we," that I should apply the remark. I am not in need of any further wealth, if you like. I am rich enough already, to be sure. But you, Critobulus, I look upon as singularly poor, and at times, upon my soul, I feel a downright compassion for you.

Critobulus (*laughing outright, retorting*) And pray, Socrates, what in the name of fortune do you suppose our respective properties would fetch in the market, yours and mine?

If I could find a good purchaser (he answered), I suppose the whole of my effects, including the house in which I live, might very fairly realise five minae²³ (say twenty guineas). Yours, I am positively certain, would fetch at the lowest more than a hundred times that sum.

Crit. And with this estimate of our respective fortunes, can you still maintain that you have no need of further wealth, but it is I who am to be pitied for my poverty?

Soc. Yes, for my property is amply sufficient to meet my wants, whereas you, considering the parade you are fenced about with, and the reputation you must needs live up to, would be barely well off, I take it, if what you have already were multiplied by three.

Pray, how may that be? Critobulus asked.

Soc. ... worse than all, I see you fondling the notion that you are rich. Without a thought or care how to increase your revenue, your fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love,²⁹ as if you had some special license to amuse yourself. . . . That is why I pity and compassionate you, fearing lest some irremediable mischief overtake you, and you find yourself in desperate straits. As for me, if I ever stood in need of anything, I am sure you know I have friends who would assist me. They would make some trifling contribution — trifling to themselves, I mean — and deluge my humble living with a flood of plenty. But your friends, albeit far better off than yourself, considering your respective styles of living, persist in looking to you for assistance.

Then Critobulus: I cannot gainsay what you have spoken, Socrates, it is indeed high time that you were constituted my patronus, or I shall become in very truth a pitiable object.

To which appeal Socrates made answer: Why, you yourself must surely be astonished at the part you are now playing. Just now, when I said that I was rich, you laughed at me as if I had no idea what riches were, and you were not happy till you had cross-examined me and forced me to confess that I do not possess the hundredth part of what you have; and now you are imploring me to be your patron, and to stint no pains to save you from becoming absolutely and in very truth a pauper.³⁰

Crit. Yes, Socrates, for I see that you are skilled in one lucrative operation at all events — the art of creating a surplus. I hope, therefore, that a man who can make so much out of so little will not have the slightest difficulty in creating an ample surplus out of an abundance.

Soc. But do not you recollect how just now in the discussion you would hardly let me utter a syllable³¹ while you laid down the law: if a man did not know how to handle horses, horses were not wealth to him at any rate; nor land, nor sheep, nor money, nor anything else, if he did not know how to use them? And yet these are the very sources of revenue from which incomes are derived; and how do you expect me to know the use of any of them who never possessed a single one of them since I was born?

Crit. Yes, but we agreed that, however little a man may be blest with wealth himself, a science of economy exists; and that being so, what hinders you from being its professor?

Soc. Nothing, to be sure,³² except what would hinder a man from knowing how to play the flute, supposing he had never had a flute of his own and no one had supplied the defect by lending him one to practise on: which is just my case with regard to economy,³³ seeing I never myself possessed the instrument of the science which is wealth, so as to go through the pupil stage, nor hitherto has any one proposed to hand me over his to manage. You, in fact, are the first person to make so generous an offer. You will bear in mind, I hope, that a learner of the harp is apt to break and spoil the instrument; it is therefore probable, if I take in hand to learn the art of economy on your estate, I shall ruin it outright.

III

Soc. ... But now let me point out to you another contrast: between certain people whose dealing with horses has brought them to the brink of poverty, and certain others who have found in the same pursuit the road to affluence,⁴⁶ and have a right besides to plume themselves upon their gains.⁴⁷

Crit. Well, then, I may tell you, I see and know both characters as well as you do; but I do not find myself a whit the more included among those who gain.

Soc. Because you look at them just as you might at the actors in a tragedy or comedy, and with the same intent — your object being to delight the ear and charm the eye, but not, I take it, to become yourself a poet. And there you are right enough, no doubt, since you have no desire to become a playwright. But, when circumstances compel you to concern yourself with horsemanship, does it not seem to you a little foolish not to consider how you are to escape being a mere amateur in the matter, especially as the same creatures which are good for use are profitable for sale?

Crit. So you wish me to set up as a breeder of young horses,⁴⁸ do you, Socrates?

Soc. Not so, no more than I would recommend you to purchase lads and train them up from boyhood as farm-labourers. But in my opinion there is a certain happy moment of growth which must be seized, alike in man and horse, rich in present service and in future promise. In further illustration, I can show you how some men treat their wedded wives in such a way that they find in them true helpmates to the joint increase of their estate, while others treat them in a way to bring upon themselves wholesale disaster.⁴⁹

Crit. Ought the husband or the wife to bear the blame of that?

Soc. If it goes ill with the sheep we blame the shepherd, as a rule, or if a horse shows vice we throw the blame in general upon the rider. But in the case of women, supposing the wife to have received instruction from her husband and yet she delights in wrong-doing,⁵⁰ it may be that the wife is justly held to blame; but supposing he has never tried to teach her the first principles of “fair and noble” conduct,⁵¹ and finds her quite an ignoramus⁵² in these matters, surely the husband will be justly held to blame. But come now (he added), we are all friends here; make a clean breast of it, and tell us, Critobulus, the plain unvarnished truth: Is there an one to whom you are more in the habit of entrusting matters of importance than to your wife?

Crit. There is no one.

Soc. And is there any one with whom you are less in the habit of conversing than with your wife?

Crit. Not many, I am forced to admit.

Soc. And when you married her she was quite young, a mere girl — at an age when, as far as seeing and hearing go, she had the smallest acquaintance with the outer world?

Crit. Certainly.

Soc. Then would it not be more astonishing that she should have real knowledge how to speak and act than that she should go altogether astray?

Crit. But let me ask you a question, Socrates: have those happy husbands, you tell us of, who are blessed with good wives educated them themselves?

Soc. There is nothing like investigation. I will introduce you to Aspasia,⁵³ who will explain these matters to you in a far more scientific way than I can. My belief is that a good wife, being as she is the partner in a common estate, must needs be her husband's counterpoise and counterpart for good; since, if it is through the transactions of the husband, as a rule, that goods of all sorts find their way into the house, yet it is by means of the wife's economy and thrift that the greater part of the expenditure is checked, and on the successful issue or the mishandling of the same depends the increase or impoverishment of a whole estate.

Notes:

- ² "The master."
- ³ Lit. "the management of a household and estate." See Plat. "Rep." 407 B; Aristot. "Eth. N." v. 6; "Pol." i. 3.
- ⁴ See "Mem." I. iii. 8; "Symp." p. 292.
- ⁵ Or, "manager of a house or estate."
- ⁶ Lit. "is it synonymous with dwelling-place, or is all that a man possesses outside his dwelling-place part of his house or estate?"
- ⁷ Lit. "not even in the same state or city."
- ⁸ Reading tout auto, or if tout au with Sauppe, transl. "Yes, that is another position we may fairly subscribe to."
- ⁹ i.e. "without knowledge of how to use them."
- ¹⁰ Or, "our discussion marches on all-fours, as it were."
- ¹¹ Reading pros touto o, or if pros touton, os, transl. "to a man who did not know how to use them."
- ¹² "A dose of henbane, 'hogs'-bean,' so called." Diosc. 4. 69; 6. 15; Plut. "Demetr." xx. (Clough, v. 114).
- ¹³ Or, "then let it be relegated . . . and there let it lie in the category of non-wealth."
- ¹⁴ Vide supra.
- ¹⁵ "A good administrator of an estate."
- ¹⁶ Or, "Thanks, Socrates. Thus far the statement of the case would seem to be conclusive — but what are we to make of this? Some people . . ."
- ¹⁷ Lit. "the right kinds of knowledge and the right starting-points."
- ¹⁸ "Eupatrids."
- ¹⁹ Or, "frivolous society."
- ²⁰ Or, "become involved for want of means."
- ²¹ "To use others as their slaves."
- ²² Lit. "Enemies for the matter of that, when, being beautiful and good, they chance to have enslaved some other, have ere now in many an instance chastened and compelled the vanquished to be better and to live more easily for the rest of time."
- ²³ 5 x L4:1:3. See Boeckh, "P. E. A." [Bk. i. ch. xx.], p. 109 f. (Eng. ed.)
- ²⁴ See Dr. Holden ad loc., Boeckh [Bk. iii. ch. xxiii.], p. 465 f.
- ²⁵ Cf. Lycurg. "c. Leocr." 139.
- ²⁶ Al. "presidential duties."
- ²⁷ trierarkhias [misthous]. The commentators in general "suspect" misthous. See Boeckh, "P. E. A." p. 579.
- ²⁸ See Boeckh, p. 470 f.; "Revenues," iii. 9, iv. 40.
- ²⁹ Or, "to childish matters," "frivolous affairs"; but for the full import of the phrase paidikois pragmasi see "Ages." viii. 2.
- ³⁰ Or, "literally beggared."
- ³¹ Cf. Aristoph. "Clouds," 945; "Plut." 17; Dem. 353; and Holden ad loc.
- ³² Lit. "The very thing, God help me! which would hinder . . ."
- ³³ Lit. "the art of administering an estate."
- ³⁴ Or, "to play the part of exegetes, 'legal adviser,' or 'spiritual director,' to be in fact your 'guide, philosopher, and friend.'"
- ³⁵ Al. "to show you that there are others."
- ³⁶ Or, "who are gifted with the highest knowledge in their respective concerns." Cf. "Mem." IV. vii. 1.
- ³⁷ Lit. "got on quicker, easier, and more profitably."
- ³⁸ Or, "short of some divine interposition."
- ³⁹ Lincke [brackets as an editorial interpolation iii. 1, ti oun, ephe — vi. 11, poiomen]. See his edition "Xenophons Dialog. peri oikonomias in seiner ursprunglichen Gestalt"; and for a criticism of his views, an article by Charles D. Morris, "Xenophon's Oeconomicus," in the "American Journal of Philology," vol. i. p. 169 foll.
- ⁴⁰ As a demonstrator.
- ⁴¹ "As in a mirror, or a picture."
- ⁴² Or, "economical result."
- ⁴³ georgias. See Hartman, "An. Xen." p. 193. Hold. cf. Plat. "Laws," 806 E. Isocr. "Areop." 32.
- ⁴⁴ Or, "like enough in the one case the money and pains are spent," etc.
- ⁴⁵ Or, "a comic character in the performance." Soc. "Not so comic as you must appear to yourself (i.e. with your keen sense of the ludicrous)."
- ⁴⁶ Or, "who have not only attained to affluence by the same pursuit, but can hold their heads high, and may well pride themselves on their thrift."
- ⁴⁷ Cf. Hom. "Il." xii. 114, ippoisin kai okhesphin agallomenos, et passim; "Hiero," viii. 5; "Anab." II. vi. 26.
- ⁴⁸ See "Horsemanship," ii. 1.
- ⁴⁹ Reading e os pleista, al. e oi pleistoi = "to bring about disaster in most cases."
- ⁵⁰ Cf. "Horsemanship," vi. 5, of a horse "to show vice."
- ⁵¹ Or, "things beautiful and of good report."
- ⁵² Al. "has treated her as a dunce, devoid of this high knowledge."
- ⁵³ Aspasia. See "Mem." II. vi. 36.