

# Assets, Utilities, Affordances: Towards an Ecological Reading of Xenophon

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## **Abstract**

One of the core tenets of Xenophon's economic thought is the doctrine of Proper Use: χρήματα ('wealth', 'assets' or literally 'usables') only really count as χρήματα if one knows how to make use (χρησθαί) of them (*Oeconomicus* 1, 8-10). In developing this idea Xenophon seems to come close to articulating a distinction between use value and exchange value. What tends to be overlooked in discussions of this doctrine is the underlying concept of 'use' itself. Present-day epistemological and ethical assumptions warp our understanding of Xenophon's conception of 'utility' and 'use'. This paper is an exercise in 'unthinking' these assumptions by way of the critical lens offered by ecological economics and ecocriticism. It will be argued that Xenophon's doctrine of Proper Use is 'ecological' in the sense that it espouses a relationality between subject and object that is entangled, reciprocal and interdependent. The ideal *oikonomos* does not perceive his environment as exogenous to himself; rather, his mandate is to participate in the larger order of things.

**Keywords:** Xenophon, Use, Utility, Affordances, Ecocriticism, Ecological economics, Subject-object epistemologies

## **Resumen**

Uno de los principios fundamentales del pensamiento económico de Jenofonte es la doctrina del uso adecuado: los χρήματα ("riquezas", "patrimonio" o, literalmente, "utilidades") solo pueden considerarse como tales si son debidamente utilizados (χρησθαί, *Oeconomicus* 1, 8-10). Al desarrollar esta idea, Jenofonte parece acercarse a articular una distinción entre valor de uso y valor de cambio. Lo que tiende a pasarse por alto en los debates sobre esta doctrina es el propio concepto subyacente de "uso". Los supuestos epistemológicos y éticos actuales deforman nuestra comprensión de la concepción de Jenofonte acerca de "utilidad" y "uso". Este artículo es un ejercicio para "repensar" estos supuestos a través de la lente crítica que ofrecen la economía ecológica y la ecocrítica. Se argumentará que la doctrina de Jenofonte sobre el uso adecuado es "ecológica", en el sentido de que propugna una relacionalidad entrelazada, recíproca e interdependiente entre sujeto y objeto. El *oikonomos* ideal no percibe su entorno como exógeno a él; más bien, su misión es participar en el orden más amplio de las cosas.

**Palabras clave:** Jenofonte, Uso, Utilidad, Prestaciones, Ecocrítica, Economía ecológica, Epistemologías sujeto-objeto

### 1. *Lost in translation?*<sup>1</sup>

In historiographies of economic ideas, Xenophon is often credited with incepting economic insights<sup>2</sup>, such as a basic understanding of supply and demand or of the phenomenon of diminishing utility - and of the discovery of a distinction between ‘use value’ and ‘exchange value’<sup>3</sup>:

τοῦτ' ἄρα φαίνεται ἡμῖν, ἀποδιδόμενοι μὲν οἱ αὐλοὶ χρήματα, μὴ ἀποδιδόμενοι δὲ ἄλλὰ κεκτημένοι οὐ, τοῖς μὴ ἐπισταμένοις αὐτοῖς χρῆσθαι.

“So our impression is that, for those who don’t know how to make use of them, pipes are assets if they sell them, but are not assets if they don’t sell them but hang on to them” (X. *Oec.* 1, 11)<sup>4</sup>.

The distinction seems straightforward. Flutes are musical instruments for some of us; those of us with sufficient musical talent can use the flute *as a flute*, to realize *what it is for*, i.e. to use its physical properties in order to make music. The musically impaired among us are better off selling the flute, thereby not enjoying its physical properties as an object of use, but enjoying its ‘value in exchange’, i.e. its value as an exchange object, by spending the money that can be acquired by letting the object go. This distinction between two kinds of use seems to anticipate the canonical distinction between ‘use value’ and ‘exchange value’ known from John Locke, Adam Smith and Karl Marx<sup>5</sup>. In this intellectual context, ‘use value’ refers to a product’s utility in

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<sup>2</sup> Economic insights attributed to Xenophon include: an understanding of the principle of supply and demand: TREVER (1916), 64 and FIGUEIRA (2020), 264; the relation between the size of markets and the degree of division of labor: FIGUEIRA (2012), 671; diminishing utility: LOWRY (1987); marginal gains: FIGUEIRA (2012), 678; principles of risk sharing to lower risk level: PERROTTA (2004), 19; the importance of stability of currency: FIGUEIRA (2012), LOWRY (1987), TREVER (1916), 64-72, PERROTTA (2004), 19-20. For a harshly dismissive appraisal of Xenophon’s economic ideas, see the judgment of Moses Finley: «In Xenophon [...], there is not one sentence that expresses an economic principle or offers any economic analysis, nothing on efficiency of production, ‘rational’ choice, the marketing of crops» (FINLEY 1973, 19).

<sup>3</sup> SEDLÁČEK (2011), 101; LOWRY (1987), 77.

<sup>4</sup> All translation of the *Oeconomicus* are from TREDENICK-WATERFIELD (1991).

<sup>5</sup> SMITH (1994 [1776]), 31; MARX (1976 [1867]), 126. According to Marx, exchange value is derived from the purely quantitative commensurable side of work that he terms ‘abstract labor’. Closer to Xenophon’s time and intellectual context is Aristotle’s distinction between the use of a shoe as a shoe and the use of a shoe as an exchange object: Arist. *Pol.* 19, 1257a 6-13; MEIKLE (1995).

satisfying needs and wants as afforded by its physical properties; ‘exchange value’ refers to a quantitative relation, namely «the proportion in which use values of one sort are exchanged for those of another sort».<sup>6</sup>

Xenophon’s remark here seems to fit into this great chain of economic thinking and therefore, in the language of the kind of teleological historiography that history of economics is still prone to, *almost* lands him a place as a precursor to Adam Smith and Karl Marx - were it not that in the exchange immediately following this quotation, he effectively collapses the newly made distinction between value in use and value in exchange: selling can only turn a flute into an asset, *if* one knows how to sell, i.e. to acquire something in return for the flute that *is* an asset. Use value is the only true wealth. Albert Augustus Trever, in *A History of Greek Economic Thought*, expresses profound disappointment with the theoretical potential of Xenophon’s ‘idea of value’, pointing out that it:

[...] is true enough from the ethical standpoint, and should not be left out of account, as is being recognized by modern economists. But to attempt to build a theory of economic value on such a basis [...] would result in hopeless confusion. Value is not merely an individual and moral, but also a social and economic, fact<sup>7</sup>.

What tends to be overlooked in discussions of Xenophon’s value theory and in the historiographical excitement, or disappointment, over the incepting distinction between use value and exchange value is the simple given that it is not so evident what ‘use’ means in this context. To make palpable why this is a pertinent question, let us look briefly at a series of Xenophontic statements:

1. A horse is not wealth if you don’t know how to *use* it.
2. Friends are more *useful* than cattle provided they are more beneficial than cattle.
3. A *useful* friend is someone who reciprocates a good turn.
4. You can turn someone from a liability into an asset if you know how to *use* him.

To a 21<sup>st</sup>-century mind, these quotations may have a certain provocative quality. It is instructive to explore this quality for diagnostic purposes, as a pointer for fundamental breaks in worldviews. Some readers may object to the instrumental take on friendship as exhibited in quotation 3, a take that collides with our post-Enlightenment conceptions of friendship as something that resists means-ends reasoning<sup>8</sup>. More fundamentally, these quotations display an instrumental approach

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<sup>6</sup> Paraphrase of MARX 1996, 46.

<sup>7</sup> TREVER (1916), 64; quoted and discussed in HINSCH (2021), 225.

<sup>8</sup> SILVER (1990); VAN BERKEL (2020), 283-308.

to other people, suggesting that persons and non-persons are interchangeable, or at least commensurable, to be valued with the same measure of value (e.g. in quotation 2) - a direct breach of the Kantian imperative that our fellow human beings ought to be treated as ends in themselves, not as a means to an ulterior end (e.g. quotation 4 seems a clear violation)<sup>9</sup>.

These *prima facie* readings all depend on the assumption that ‘knowing how to use’ implies ‘knowing how to use *for our ulterior ends*’. Are we justified in making this assumption? Or is something getting lost in translation: does Xenophon have a conception of ‘use’, ‘usefulness’ and ‘utility’ that is radically distinct from our post-Enlightenment concept of use?

In the following I will argue that this is indeed the case: our own present-day epistemological and ethical assumptions warp our understanding of Xenophon’s conception of ‘use’ and ‘utility’. In order to ‘unthink’ such modernist assumptions about utility and use and to carve the Xenophontic notions closer at their conceptual joints I will use the frameworks of ecological economics and ecocriticism as a critical lens that allows us to deconstruct our own divisive subject-object epistemologies and to appreciate the implications of Xenophon’s more holistic worldview. I will make the case that Xenophon’s concept of ‘proper use’ is ‘ecological’ in the sense that, in its proper form, *oikonomia*, the art of estate management, is to be subsumed into a larger long-term transactional order. The ideal estate-manager does not perceive his environment as exogenous to himself, to be converted into objects of consumption or exploitation; rather, his mandate is to participate in the larger order of things.

## 2. *The ecological turn*

Ecological economics has its roots in 1960s and 1970s discussions on the environmental impact of economic growth and the interactions between energy entropy and human society<sup>10</sup>. The field is best understood as a heterodox approach to economics, i.e. an approach that does not share neoclassical (or ‘orthodox’, or ‘mainstream’) assumptions of, amongst other things, individual self-interest, market equilibrium, and independence of economic behavior<sup>11</sup>. Specifically, ecological economics understands the economy «as both a social system, and as one constrained

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<sup>9</sup> VAN BERKEL (2020), 283-308.

<sup>10</sup> Foundational works are: BOULDING (1966), ODUM (1971), GEORGESCU-ROEGEN (1971) and MEADOWS-MEADOWS-RANDERS-BEHRENS III (1972). See MORAN-BARUAH (2010).

<sup>11</sup> VAN STAVEREN (2014), 6.

by the biophysical world»<sup>12</sup>. Whereas neoclassical or mainstream approaches conceptualize economics in terms of exchange value in abstraction from the biophysical world, ecological economics emphatically considers biophysical elements foundational. The environment is not exogenous to economics, nor are environmental costs merely ‘externalities’ (i.e. effects external to the economic system), as, for instance, neoclassical environmental economics has it<sup>13</sup>; rather ecological economics subsumes the economy in an encompassing ecological whole<sup>14</sup>.

This has implications for the underlying anthropology, *das Menschenbild*, the implicit or explicit theory of human nature at the center of economic theory. The anthropology of neoclassical economics is that of the *Homo Economicus*, Rational Economic Man, who is «assumed to follow his self-interest», setting out to realize «his strictly individual and subjective preferences straightforwardly» and to achieve «utility maximization»<sup>15</sup>. This *Homo Economicus* perceives the environment as something exogenous to themselves, approaching it with the logic of consumption, that turns everything into utility value, and the logic of production, that converts everything into an object of exploitation<sup>16</sup>. In contrast, ecological economics calls into question the presumed universality of this «radical dissociation between individuals and environment», historicizing it rather as a product of Western capitalist societies<sup>17</sup>. What emerges is a more holistic account of human nature, that includes the biophysical and neurological aspects of our make-up and that takes seriously the evolutionary given that as human beings we have feelings of protection or esteem not only for ourselves or other humans but also towards our non-human environment<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> GOWDY-ERICKSON (2005), 208.

<sup>13</sup> Environmental economics is a branch of neoclassical economics, sharing the basic neoclassical assumption that only the preferences and well-being of individuals are to be taken in account. To extend economic analysis to environmental issues, environmental economics extrapolates the marginalist logic and welfare economics criteria to the environment, turning environmental costs into market goods.

<sup>14</sup> MALTE-PETERSEN-SCHILLER (2002), 323. This holistic approach has implications for the applicability of marginal decision analysis and the logic of optimization. Both depend on a form of “axiological monism”, i.e. the *ceteris paribus* condition that all objects of utility have some characteristics in common that makes them commensurable. This condition does not apply in ecological or evolutionary systems where it is impossible to change one thing and hold everything else constant. Gowdy and Erickson give the example of removing or adding one species to an ecosystem: this will affect other species *and* the general integrity of the system in ways that are unpredictable and different each time a change is made: GOWDY-ERICKSON (2005), 215; URBINA-RUIZ-VILLAVARDE (2019), 78.

<sup>15</sup> VAN STAVEREN (2001), 12.

<sup>16</sup> URBINA-RUIZ-VILLAVARDE (2019), 77.

<sup>17</sup> URBINA-RUIZ-VILLAVARDE (2019), 77-78; STEINER (2016).

<sup>18</sup> SIEBENHÜNER (2000).

The environment is constitutive of our identity and existence<sup>19</sup>, and our ‘individuality’, the cornerstone of mainstream neoclassical economics and of post-Enlightenment anthropology in general, is therefore far more porous.

An illustrative example of the ways in which the ‘radical dissociation between individuals and environment’ warps our decision-making is the phenomenon of ‘temporal myopia’: *Homo Economicus* is typically affected by the behavioral fallacy of arbitrarily preferring the present over the future and privileging short-term exploitative benefit over securing the availability of resources in the long run<sup>20</sup>. This fallacy can be understood as an epiphenomenon of centering the individual, and individual rationality, and failing to adopt a more holistic outlook on the collective and systemic implications of decisions and behaviors. As the anthropological record shows, alternative (folk) epistemologies, with different understandings of the position of the individual in the larger whole, result in different patterns of behavior.

Here the model of transactional orders, proposed by the economic anthropologists Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, can prove productive<sup>21</sup>. Bloch and Parry observe that many societies distinguish two different spheres of exchange: a short-term order of individual acquisition and competition, and a long-term cycle in which interpersonal transactions are «concerned with the reproduction of the long-term social or cosmic order».<sup>22</sup> Buying and selling produce on a market, catching fish, working as a day-laborer all belong to the short-term transactional order of the transient individual. Taking care of the household and working the land are typical Athenian examples of participation in the intergenerational long-term transactional order. The short-term order of individual acquisition is morally neutral or underdetermined; the long-term cycle is by definition positively valued.<sup>23</sup> The basic assumption of neoclassical economics is that the long-term order can be understood as a derivative (for instance as an aggregate) of the short-term order: there is no relevant moral or cosmic order subsuming the short-term order of the individual. In contrast, ancient *oikonomia*, as we will see, revolves around the reproduction of the long-term good. Taking the *oikos* as primary unit of analysis (instead of the

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<sup>19</sup> URBINA-RUIZ-VILLAYERDE (2019), 77.

<sup>20</sup> GEORGESCU-ROEGER (1976); PRICE (1993).

<sup>21</sup> BLOCH-PARRY (1989). I discuss and paraphrase Parry and Bloch’s model, using roughly the same phrasing, in VAN BERKEL (2024), 268 and VAN BERKEL (2020), 265-267.

<sup>22</sup> BLOCH-PARRY (1989), 24.

<sup>23</sup> Moral problems typically arise when these two basic transactional orders get confused when resources of the long-term order are diverted for short-term individual acquisition. A dramatic Athenian example, popular in court cases, is squandering the family estate on personal indulgences. See VAN BERKEL (2024), 268.

individual), *oikonomia*-literature typically addresses the dialectic between short-term and long-term goods without reducing the systemic or collective to the individual<sup>24</sup>.

The critical project of deconstructing *Homo Economicus* and of decentering human individuality in favor of a more holistic understanding of humans as part of an ecological whole similarly lies at the heart of ‘ecocriticism’, an umbrella terms for those modes of literary and cultural criticism that takes as its subject the interconnectedness between nature and culture<sup>25</sup>, and that problematizes «the divisive epistemologies that create an illusory sense of an ontological dissociation between the human and nonhuman realms»<sup>26</sup>.

In the remainder of this paper I will take as point of departure this foundational premise shared by ecological economy and ecocriticism, i.e. that the ‘radical dissociation between individuals and environment’ is a historically contingent and culturally variable phenomenon not to be taken for granted in pre-modern economic epistemologies. As a case study I will argue how Xenophon’s notions of ‘utility’ and ‘use’ in the opening chapters of his *Oeconomicus* show a pre-capitalist alternative to post-Enlightenment conceptualizations premised on divisive subject-object epistemologies.

This is a conceptual exercise. The claim is emphatically *not* that Xenophon is a prescient harbinger or herald of modern ecocritical or ecological thinking. Rather, the argument cuts two ways. Given that the critical project of both ecocriticism and ecological economics is to ‘unthink’ modernity, its conceptualization of the individual/environment relation and its divisive subject-object epistemologies, it is instructive to close-read the conceptual architecture of a ‘pre-modern’ or ‘pre-capitalist’ holistic worldview that espouses an alternative relationality between subject and object or between individual and environment. Conversely, adopting an ecological perspective may sensitize us to the ways in which modernity and post-Enlightenment epistemologies have led us to misread Xenophon’s doctrine of ‘proper use’ as a utilitarian program.

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<sup>24</sup> VAN BERKEL (2018), 400; VAN BERKEL (2024).

<sup>25</sup> GLOTFELTY-FROMM (1996), xix.

<sup>26</sup> IOVINO-OPPERMANN (2017), 4. The term ‘ecocriticism’ was coined by William Rueckert in his foundational 1978 essay. Ecocriticism typically centers the agency of non-human matter and the ways in which such agency is represented in text or narratives: LATOUR (1999); IOVINO-OPPERMANN (2012), SCHLIEPHAKE (2020). Key examples of engagement with ecocritical frameworks or approaches in classics and ancient philosophy include LANE (2012), ZEKAVAT (2014), SCHLIEPHAKE (2017), CODOVANA-CHIAI (2017), CHEMCHURU (2017), BROCKLISS (2018), MARTELLI (2020).

### 3. *Proper use*

Xenophon's discussion of 'utility' and 'use' is part of his endeavour to define *oikonomía*, the «art of managing one's *oikos*, one's home and property»<sup>27</sup>. In the opening chapters of the *Oeconomicus*, Socrates and his conversation partner, young Critobulus, discuss the constituent concepts of *οικονομία*: *οικονομία* is the management of the *οἶκος*, which contains «everything that you own», and subsequently *κτησίς* (property) and *κτήματα* (possessions)<sup>28</sup>. Not every possession qualifies, only those that are beneficial to their owners are rightfully called 'assets' (*χρήματα*)<sup>29</sup>. A criterion of value is established: wealth, *χρήματα*, is defined in terms of usefulness, or rather: usability, i.e. the owner's ability to use (*χρηθῆναι*) the item in view. Xenophon overtly activates the lexical connection between the noun *τὰ χρήματα* and the verb *χρηθῆναι* in order to defamiliarize the audience with the conventional meaning of *χρήματα* and to reconstruct a normative meaning: *χρήματα properly* refers to things that the owner knows how to *χρηθῆναι*; if wealth is not used correctly, the word 'wealth' does not apply to it, is not used correctly either<sup>30</sup>.

This is the doctrine of Proper Use, one of the core tenets of Socratic economic thought: the value of wealth and assets (*χρήματα*) is relational and contingent on the subject's knowledge of its correct use (*ὀρθῆ χρησις*)<sup>31</sup>. This deceptively simple redefinition of wealth has far-reaching conceptual consequences: it makes *οικονομία* a form of knowledge<sup>32</sup>, it subordinates economics to ethics, it makes wealth inherently subjective (i.e. relative to the subject)<sup>33</sup>, it stipulates an upper limit to wealth (in line with present-day limitarianism)<sup>34</sup>, and it carves out a separate realm of 'use' (*χρησις*) as a distinct domain in *οικονομία*-literature<sup>35</sup>.

The principle of Proper Use is illustrated in a series of stock examples. You can buy a horse, but if you don't know how to ride it, i.e. how to use it (*μὴ ἐπίσθηται αὐτῷ χρηθῆναι*), you fall off and harm yourself - the horse is of no use to you, it is

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<sup>27</sup> JOHNSON (2021), 231.

<sup>28</sup> X. *Oec.* 1, 5-6. GERNET (1986) for the argument that the term *κτήμα*, in contrast to the noun *χρήμα*, always contains reference to the object's mode of acquisition.

<sup>29</sup> *Oec.* 1, 7-8.

<sup>30</sup> On the etymological argument, see BRANCACCI (2005), 68; VAN BERKEL (unpublished),

<sup>31</sup> SCHAPS (2002-2003); BÉNATOUIL (2007), 2-16; VAN BERKEL (2018); VAN BERKEL (2020).

<sup>32</sup> JOHNSON (2021), 231; DANZIG (2003), 59-60.

<sup>33</sup> VAN BERKEL (2018); VAN BERKEL (2024).

<sup>34</sup> ROBEYNS (2023).

<sup>35</sup> HELMER (2021), 161-175.



not an asset to you, not a piece of χρήματα<sup>36</sup>. The same goes for land (traditionally a marker of Athenian citizenship) and livestock (a traditional measure of value): if you don't know how to use them, they do not qualify as χρήματα<sup>37</sup>. The next example is the flute, an asset (a piece of χρήματα) for someone who knows how to play it (τῷ ἐπισταμένῳ), but worthless for someone who does not (τῷ μὴ ἐπισταμένῳ). Χρήματα are fundamentally subjective, i.e. defined relative to the subject's knowledge of their proper use<sup>38</sup>.

At this point Critobulus makes an interesting suggestion: what if you sell the flute (ἀποδίδοναι) and make money out of it? Wouldn't that make the flute an asset after all?<sup>39</sup> A brief flirt with a nascent use value/exchange value-distinction to be immediately nipped in the bud:

πρὸς ταῦτα δ' ὁ Σωκράτης εἶπεν· Ἄν ἐπίστηταί γε πωλεῖν. εἰ δὲ πωλοίῃ αὐτὸ πρὸς τοῦτο ᾧ μὴ ἐπίσταιτο χρῆσθαι, οὐδὲ πωλούμενοί εἰσι χρήματα κατὰ γε τὸν σὸν λόγον.

Λέγειν ἔοικας, ᾧ Σώκρατες, ὅτι οὐδὲ τὸ ἀργύριον ἐστί χρήματα, εἰ μὴ τις ἐπίσταιτο χρῆσθαι αὐτῷ.

Καὶ σὺ δέ μοι δοκεῖς οὕτω συνομολογεῖν, ἀφ' ὧν τις ὠφελεῖσθαι δύναται, χρήματα εἶναι. εἰ γούν τις χρῶτο τῷ ἀργυρίῳ ὥστε πριάμενος οἶον ἑταίραν διὰ ταύτην κάκιον μὲν τὸ σῶμα ἔχοι, κάκιον δὲ τὴν ψυχὴν, κάκιον δὲ τὸν οἶκον, πῶς ἂν ἔτι τὸ ἀργύριον αὐτῷ ὠφέλιμον εἴη;

Οὐδαμῶς, εἰ μὴ πέρ γε καὶ τὸν ὑοσκύαμον καλούμενον χρήματα εἶναι φήσομεν, ὑφ' οὗ οἱ φαγόντες παραπλήγες γίνονται.

Socrates: "Yes, *if* the seller knows how to sell. But if he sells the pipes for something else which he doesn't know how to make use of, then it follows from your argument that pipes are not assets even if they're sold."

"You seem to be implying, Socrates, that not even money is an asset, unless one knows how to make use of it."

"Yes, but you too agree that assets are things which can benefit a person. At any rate, if the use that someone makes of his money is, for example, to buy a concubine and consequently to damage his body, mind and estate, then how can his money benefit him?"

"It cannot - unless we are going to claim that even the plant called henbane, which makes you mad if you eat it, is an asset!" (*Oec.* 1, 12-13).

Selling can only make a flute into an asset, if one «knows how to sell» (ἂν ἐπίστηταί γε πωλεῖν), i.e. to acquire something in return for it that is an asset

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<sup>36</sup> *Oec.* 1, 8.

<sup>37</sup> *Oec.* 1, 9: POMEROY (1994), SEAFORD (2004), 27. A canonical example is the exchange of armor between the Homeric heroes Glaucus and Diomedes, Glaucus' golden armor «a hundred cattle's worth» with Diomedes' bronze armor «nine cattle's worth» (*Il.* VI 235-236).

<sup>38</sup> *Oec.* 1, 10.

<sup>39</sup> *Oec.* 1, 11.

(χρήματα)<sup>40</sup>. Use value is the only true wealth. This has radical consequences: even money (τὸ ἀργύριον), the exchange medium par excellence, the quintessential exchange value, only counts as χρήματα if one knows how to use money. This has a paradoxical ring to it: in Attic Greek, τὰ χρήματα is the most idiomatic term for ‘money’<sup>41</sup>. Even money, the prototypical asset, is not an asset for one who does not know how to use it: if one uses it to buy something that is bad for them, as for instance an escort or hard drugs.

The paradox of money is followed by another paradox:

Τὸ μὲν δὴ ἀργύριον, εἰ μὴ τις ἐπίσταιτο αὐτῷ χρῆσθαι, οὕτω πόρρω ἀπωθείσθω, ὡς Κριτόβουλε, ὥστε μὴδὲ χρήματα εἶναι. οἱ δὲ φίλοι, ἂν τις ἐπίσταιται αὐτοῖς χρῆσθαι ὥστε ὠφελεῖσθαι ἀπ’ αὐτῶν, τί φήσομεν αὐτοὺς εἶναι; Χρήματα νῆ Δί, ἔφη ὁ Κριτόβουλος, καὶ πολὺ γὰρ μᾶλλον ἢ τοὺς βοῦς, ἂν ὠφελιμώτεροί γε ὦσι τῶν βοῶν.

“So if one doesn’t know how to make use of it, Critobulus, then money must be kept at such a distance that it isn’t even included among one’s assets. Now, what about friends: if one knows how to make use of them, so as to derive benefit from them, then how should they be described?”

“Most emphatically as assets,” said Critobulus. “They deserve the description far more than cattle, provided they are more beneficial than cattle” (*Oec.* 1, 14).

The Principle of Proper Use not only applies to property or things, but to friends (φίλοι) as well. If one knows how to ‘use’ them (ἂν τις ἐπίσταιται αὐτοῖς χρῆσθαι), i.e. how to benefit from them (ὠφελεῖσθαι ἀπ’ αὐτῶν), friends are χρήματα too.

Thus, Socrates establishes a concept of χρήματα, ‘usables’, as inherently subject-dependent, in that they are defined with reference to the owner’s ability to put them to good use. Value emerges in the relation between things/persons and the subject’s knowledge of their proper use.

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<sup>40</sup> It is not entirely self-evident what «knowing how to sell» means in this context. JOHNSTONE (2011), 92-93 argues that ‘knowing how to sell’ refers to skill in bargaining. It should be kept in mind that Xenophon thinks of exchange in terms of ‘isolated exchange’, i.e. in terms of individual transactions that bear no reference to a pre-established market price that expresses information on supply and demand: LOWRY (1987), 77-78. The ancient Greeks of the classical period did not have access to the kind of information that could sustain «the mechanisms to abstract and aggregate such prices into what we would consider accurate ‘market values’»: JOHNSTONE (2011), 93; VAN BERKEL (2024), 278-279.

<sup>41</sup> Although the term τὰ χρήματα predates the advent of money in the Greek world and was still used for a variety of things in the Classical Era, it also came to be the most frequent word for the phenomenon of money in Attic Greek: VON REDEN (1995), 174; SEAFORD (2004), 16; VAN BERKEL (2024), 274.

#### 4. Use vs. *χρηῖσθαι*

How is Xenophon's notion of Proper Use related to our 21<sup>st</sup>-century understandings of 'use' and 'utility'? Even in a non-technical and not explicitly economic or financial context, use is considered, in the words of Elizabeth Anderson, a «lower, impersonal, and exclusive mode of valuation» that sees things as fungible and capable of being «traded with equanimity for any other commodity at some price»<sup>42</sup>. In other words, to call something 'useful' is to think of it as a means to our independently defined ends (the realm of value), not so much as an 'end in it self' (the realm of values)<sup>43</sup>. 'Use' belongs to the limbo of the instrumental, not to the Kantian Kingdom of Ends.

This notion of 'use' is a notoriously bad match, and therefore merely a placeholder translation, for the Greek verb *χρηῖσθαι*, a middle verb with a certain Protean quality. In a 1953 study, George Réard lists twenty-three *sens*, 'meanings', for *χρηῖσθαι*, establishing that the verb does not seem to have a 'proper meaning', but to acquire its meaning from its nominal complements<sup>44</sup>. As such, the verb denotes states of affairs ranging from 'being in want of', to 'having', 'using', 'experiencing' and 'dealing with' something. In addition, the verb can be applied to persons, in the sense of 'treating X as', 'being intimate with', 'to have intercourse with X'. The verb can be applied to external circumstances, perceptions and sensations, characteristics, truth, language, pleasures, opinions, knowledge. Some of these uses may have some overlap with our instrumental notion of 'use', but on the whole the range suggests a sense of 'use' that is broader than the purely pragmatic and instrumental sense of 'to make use of' or 'to utilize'.

One tell-tale sign are the morphosyntactical features. The verb *χρηῖσθαι*, as Réard insists, is not a purely transitive verb (going with a direct object in the accusative case) that expresses actions that subjects inflict on objects, but a so-called middle voice verb, a *medium tantum* going with a dative or genitive case, indicating «a process that takes place in the subject», rather than processes that «start from the subject and move beyond him» (so-called 'causative' verbs)<sup>45</sup>.

This has ontological implications. As Giorgio Agamben points out: «It is probable that precisely the subject/object relationship - so marked in the modern conception of

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<sup>42</sup> ANDERSON (1993), 144.

<sup>43</sup> ANDERSON (1993), 144-145; GRAEBER (2005).

<sup>44</sup> RÉARD (1953). The following semantic analysis has been in VAN BERKEL (2024), 284-285, and VAN BERKEL (2020), 286-290.

<sup>45</sup> RÉARD (1953), 41-43; AGAMBEN (2015), 27; BENVENISTE (1950), 172.

the utilization of something on the part of someone - emerges as inadequate to grasp the meaning of the Greek verb»<sup>46</sup>. To Agamben's historico-philosophical project the ancient Greek semantic field of ΧΡΗ-vocabulary is of particular relevance: in the verb χρῆσθαι Agamben identifies a relationality between subject and world that is differently structured than the subject-object relationship that is analytically so prevalent since Kant. To Agamben, the 'crisis of modernity' can be traced back to the Kantian 'split ontology', the *Subjekt-Objekt Spaltung*, the axiomatic and strict separation of a 'subject', standing outside the world, and the 'object' that is part of the world. Within such an ontology, 'use' implies a subject wielding control or agency over objects. Alternatively, the Greek χρῆσθαι points to an original unity of subject and object, an interdependent relation between the act and that on which it relies, an adaptation or accommodation of *both* subject and object to the requirements of a given context<sup>47</sup>. As we will see in the next section, it is this interdependence of subject and object that Xenophon's Principle of Proper Use highlights and foregrounds.

### 5. Using Persons

Xenophon's treatment of χρήματα and χρῆσθαι is generally recognized to be part of a wider debate among the Socratic authors on the issue of Proper Use (ὀρθή χρῆσις)<sup>48</sup>. As I argue elsewhere, there are some basic common motives in the doctrine of proper use that recur more than once in the corpus, such as the distinction between the possession and the use of a good, the subject-dependent notion that a good can be used in different ways, the concern with centering knowledge, wisdom or moral authority<sup>49</sup>. However, Xenophon's version of the doctrine is the only one that applies *to things and persons alike*. This is the problem that we started with in quotations 2, 3 and 4: Xenophon clearly understand the 'use of' people as analogue to the use of things.

Elsewhere in the Xenophontic oeuvre the analogy is developed further. In the context of a series of conversations on friendship (φιλία) that constitute the second book of the *Memorabilia*, Socrates advises Chaerecrates to make amends with his brother Chaerephon, who is currently a 'liability' (ζημία) to him:

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<sup>46</sup> AGAMBEN (2015), 27.

<sup>47</sup> AGAMBEN (2015), 25.

<sup>48</sup> The usual suspects are Plato's *Euthydemus*, *Meno* and *Lysis*, Aeschines' *Callias* (fr. 36 Dittmar) and the pseudo-Platonic *Eryxias*. See HINSCH (2021), 224-245, VAN BERKEL (2018) and (2020), 303, for some tentative comparative analyses.

<sup>49</sup> VAN BERKEL (2024); VAN BERKEL (unpublished).

Ἄρ' οὖν, ἔφη ὁ Σωκράτης, ὡσπερ ἵππος τῷ ἀνεπιστήμονι μὲν, ἐγχειροῦντι δὲ χρῆσθαι ζημία ἐστίν, οὕτω καὶ ἀδελφός, ὅταν τις αὐτῷ μὴ ἐπιστάμενος ἐγχειρῆ χρῆσθαι, ζημία ἐστὶ;

“Well,” said Socrates, “a horse is a liability to a person who tries to manage it without having enough knowledge. Perhaps in the same way a brother is a liability when one tries to ‘use’ (*chrēsthai*) him without knowledge” (X. *Mem.* II 3, 7).

Horses and brothers are liabilities if one does not know how to ‘use’ them, but with ‘correct use’ one can derive benefit from them and turn them into wealth. With ‘correct use’ we can make both things and people alike ‘more useful’ and enhance their utility. It is hard to suspend Kantian judgment here.

But it all depends on what we take ‘deriving benefit’ and ‘enhancing utility’ to mean in the case of persons. In Xenophontic ethics the ‘proper use’ of friends and other persons in general boils down to one injunction, the principle of Active Partnership<sup>50</sup>. Thus, Socrates urges Chaerecrates to take initiative to restore their *φιλία* turned sour:

Λέγε δὴ μοι, ἔφη, εἴ τινα τῶν γνωρίμων βούλοιο κατεργάσασθαι, ὁπότε θύοι, καλεῖν σε ἐπὶ δεῖπνον, τί ἂν ποιήσῃς;  
Δῆλον ὅτι κατάρχοιμ' ἂν τοῦ αὐτός, ὅτε θύοιμι, καλεῖν ἐκεῖνον.  
Εἰ δὲ βούλοιο τῶν φίλων τινα προτρέψασθαι, ὁπότε ἀποδημοίης, ἐπιμελεῖσθαι τῶν σῶν, τί ἂν ποιήσῃς;  
Δῆλον ὅτι πρότερος ἂν ἐγχειροῖην ἐπιμελεῖσθαι τῶν ἐκείνου, ὁπότε ἀποδημοίη.  
Εἰ δὲ βούλοιο ξένον ποιῆσαι ὑποδέχεσθαι σεαυτόν, ὁπότε ἔλθοις εἰς τὴν ἐκείνου, τί ἂν ποιήσῃς;  
Δῆλον ὅτι καὶ τοῦτον πρότερος ὑποδεχοίμην ἂν, ὁπότε ἔλθοι Ἀθήναζε· καὶ εἴ γε βουλοίμην αὐτὸν προθυμεῖσθαι διαπράττειν μοι ἐφ' ἃ ἤκοιμι, δῆλον ὅτι καὶ τοῦτο δέοι ἂν πρότερον αὐτὸν ἐκείνω ποιεῖν.

“Tell me, then,” said Socrates, “if you wanted to prevail upon one your acquaintances to invite you to dinner whenever he was holding a celebration, what would you do?” “Obviously I should begin by inviting him when I was celebrating.” “And if you wanted to induce one of your friends to take care of your property when you were away from home, what would you do?” “Obviously I should first try to take care of his when he was away.” “And if you wanted to make a foreigner give you hospitality when you visited your country, what would you do?” “Obviously I should first give him hospitality when he came to Athens. And if I wanted him to be eager to achieve the object of my visit for me, obviously I should have first to do the same for him” (X. *Mem.* II 3, 11-14).

The common denominator in these situations is that they involve reciprocal relationships with reciprocal obligations, and that in all these cases the injunction is

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<sup>50</sup> VAN BERKEL (2020), 390-395.

that one pay it forward. The ‘proper use’ of friends entails taking the leap of faith, taking the shot in the dark. The economics of friendship is one that glorifies taking risks and making investments without guarantees - it is the lack of guarantee that makes for the quality of the relationship<sup>51</sup>.

But what if the risk does not pay off and if one’s good turn is not reciprocated? What if the ‘proper use’ of one’s friend fails to enhance the friend’s utility?

Ἐὰν οὖν ἐμοῦ ταῦτα ποιούντος ἐκεῖνος μηδὲν βελτίων γίγνηται;  
 Τί γὰρ ἄλλο, ἔφη ὁ Σωκράτης, ἢ κινδυνεύσεις ἐπιδείξειαι σὺ μὲν χρηστός τε καὶ  
 φιλάδελφος εἶναι, ἐκεῖνος δὲ φαῦλός τε καὶ οὐκ ἄξιος εὐεργεσίας; ἀλλ’ οὐδὲν οἶμαι  
 τούτων ἔσεσθαι· νομίζω γὰρ αὐτόν, ἐπειδὴν αἰσθηταί σε προκαλούμενον ἑαυτὸν  
 εἰς τὸν ἀγῶνα τοῦτον, πάνυ φιλονικήσειν ὅπως περιγένηται σου καὶ λόγῳ καὶ  
 ἔργῳ εὖ ποιῶν.

“Supposing that I do what you recommend, and my brother shows no improvement?”  
 “In that case,” said Socrates, “you will simply run the risk of demonstrating that you  
 are a good and affectionate brother, and he is a bad one who doesn’t deserve to be  
 treated kindly. But I don’t want to suppose that anything of the sort will happen. I  
 think that when he once realizes that you are challenging him to this kind of contest,  
 he will be very keen to outdo you in kindness both spoken and practical” (X. *Mem.* II  
 3, 17).

This is the core tenet of virtue ethics and a variant of the Socratic principle that it is always better to be harmed than to harm someone else<sup>52</sup>: Active Partnership, or taking a risk and paying it forward, is never in vain. The worst-case scenario is having shown oneself to be the better friend or brother, the morally superior person. There is no such thing as a waste of generosity. The more likely scenario, according to Socrates, is that treating the other kindly will provoke a *combat de générosité*, a competition between two Active Partners who try to outdo each other in being the better friend. This is what healthy reciprocal relationships come down to across the anthropological record: *both* partners alternately take initiatives in conferring benefits on the other; favors and gifts are never regarded as a mere reaction to antecedent graces. Rather, each event in the never-ending chain of reciprocity is viewed as a *new* manifestation of generosity that strengthens the bond between the partners, that moves up the standards and that amplifies the expectations on both sides<sup>53</sup>.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>52</sup> E.g. Pl. *Grig.* 508e.

<sup>53</sup> I argue this in more detail in VAN BERKEL (2010), 263-265, and VAN BERKEL (2020), 306, 392-393. For a comparable (though not identical) idea, cf. GODELIER (1996), 44 on the implicit logic of gifts «which create debts that are not cancelled by a counter-gift. For the object which returns to its original owner *is not “given back”*, but is *“given again”*. Godelier discusses the fringe case of a (numerically)

This paradoxical notion of competition turns a standard zero-sum competition into one in which higher values and higher goods are at stake, and where there is no conflict between pursuing one's own good and pursuing the good of the other - another core tenet of virtue ethics and the ethical individualism that goes with it: pursuing one's own long-term good automatically entails the care for the good of others.

While this reciprocal interpretation of Proper Use may seem specific to interpersonal relationships, the case of the 'proper use of a friend' helps us to strip the vocabulary of 'use' of any post-Enlightenment assumptions of utilitarianism and to imagine what «an accommodation of a subject to an object» may look like. Moreover, Xenophon generalizes this principle of Active Partnership beyond the human realm<sup>54</sup>. In the parable of Heracles' choice between Virtue and Vice, Virtue proclaims that the gods give nothing without toil and effort: if you want to be appreciated by your friends, you need to benefit and care for them; if you want your land to yield a bounty of fruit, you should cultivate it properly<sup>55</sup>. This moral-philosophical principle of Active Partnership runs through the whole of Xenophon's oeuvre and characterizes behavior and agency that resists the pull of temporal myopia and that is geared towards the reproduction of the long-term transactional order.

So, what *is* use in Xenophon's ethics and economics? We have seen how the semantic possibilities afforded by XPH-vocabulary feed into Xenophon's definitional programme. In ordinary Greek parlance, two features of XPH-vocabulary stand out:

1. The verb χρῆσθαι and its cognates are applicable to people and things alike.
2. The verb χρῆσθαι and its cognates express an interdependence of subject and object.

While the first point may be more striking to a present-day reader, the implications of the second point are more profound. XPH-vocabulary does not tend to express actions that subjects inflict on objects but shapes a more entangled relationality between subject and object, or subject and environment or world. Xenophon's definitional programme develops this relationality that is already given in the Greek vocabulary into a normative notion of Proper Use. He establishes a normative connection between the concept of '(real/proper) wealth' (τὰ χρήματα), '(real/proper) use' (χρῆσθαι), and '(real/proper) utility' (something being

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identical object returning to the initial donor. In an Active Partnership, each participant presents an act as an initiative, an act of *active* χάρις - i.e. as an act of "giving again" instead of "giving back"».

<sup>54</sup> VAN BERKEL (2020), 316-321; HELMER (in preparation).

<sup>55</sup> *Mem.* II 1, 28.

χρήσιμος), by centering the element of knowledge: proper use implies the subject's know-how of using X. In the case of 'using' persons, we see the virtue-ethical twist that the only correct way of 'using' a person is by treating them well and being beneficial to them. This interpersonal scenario is suggestive for what the 'proper use' of things may look like too: as a fundamentally bilateral engagement.

Consequently, Xenophon's notion of 'use' is *not* exclusively instrumental: it does emphatically not reflect an 'empty' valuation of persons or objects as means to independently defined ends. Rather, 'proper use' implies an accommodation of a subject to an object. We do not 'use' a friend for some randomly chosen ulterior end, but we treat them properly by taking care of their needs first. We do not use a horse by eating it when we feel like it, but we use it properly by using it for what is *meant for* (riding it). Proper use means *being attuned to the nature of things* - whatever that may be and by however way we may have epistemic access to this nature. Xenophon's *oikonomos* is not a *Homo Economicus* who perceives the environment as something exogenous to themselves, but a more porous participant capable of seeing themselves as part of a bigger whole.

## 6. Affordances

In emphasizing and restoring the integrity of this bigger whole, Xenophon's normative notion of proper use has some instructive similarities with approaches in present-day ecological thinking. One central concept to be highlighted here is that of 'affordances', a term coined by the ecological psychologist James Gibson. The central tenet of ecological psychology is that «perception is for doing», a radical reconceptualization of the relationality of mind and matter, subject and environment<sup>56</sup>. We do not live in an ontology of substances and qualities; as living organisms, we see *affordances*, i.e. 'possibilities of acting', «the perceived and actual properties of the thing, those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used»<sup>57</sup>. When we see a door, we actually see something with a handle that fits into our hand and that *affords* manual manipulation and pushing and pulling. The affordances of an object are the first thing that we notice about it. This implies a form of 'direct perception'. Orthodox perceptual theories hold that humans understand the function or meaning of an object indirectly, i.e. through internal representations<sup>58</sup>: we first perceive the physical structure and qualities of an

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<sup>56</sup> GIBSON (1979).

<sup>57</sup> NORMAN (1988), 9. Cf. NORMAN (2013), 10-13.

<sup>58</sup> KNAPPETT (2004), 44.



object, then categorize it as a ‘door’, and only then retrieve its potential function (‘for opening’). To Gibson, the potential of an object for opening manually resides not merely in mental representations but rather in the relation between subject and environment: «An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer»<sup>59</sup>.

Similarly, Xenophon’s *χρήματα*, ‘usables’, are things and persons understood in terms of their possibilities of acting, their affordances. Things and persons only manifest themselves as *χρήματα*, objects of use, to someone who knows how to use them. They refer to environment and subject at once: the affordances of *χρήματα*, i.e. their function, meaning and value, inhere in the *relation* between the properties of the object or the environment and the subject’s ability to act on these aspects<sup>60</sup>.

Xenophon fundamentally understands this relation as a reciprocal endeavor, shaped according to the injunction of Active Partnership. This has implications for the anthropology of Xenophon’s economic works. Being a good *oikonomos* revolves around using one’s resources properly, avoiding the pitfalls of temporal myopia. This does potentially *not* mean maximizing one’s yield and making one’s estate grow at all costs. It means being attuned to the world around us: to the nature of the soil and the livestock that we work with, the characters and needs of the people we are surrounded with.

It could be argued that to Xenophon, agriculture is the paradigm case of Active Partnership: we take a risk, we pay it forward, we sow the land, till the soil, take care of the crops and the trees, we give and we give and we give - and we wait for things to eventually yield fruit<sup>61</sup>. This is an economics of cultivation and care. Proper use, the right way of dealing with the people who matter and the world around us, means participating in the larger, supra-individual, long-term order of things. It implies a form of rationality that is relational and that transcends the purely instrumental cleverness of the dead horse named *Homo Economicus*. It implies understanding our place in the larger order of things.

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<sup>59</sup> GIBSON (1979), 129.

<sup>60</sup> CHEMERO (2009) gives the example of ‘stairclimbability’, that *is* the relation between riser height and the climbing ability of the observer. Cf. CHEMERO (2003).

<sup>61</sup> HELMER (2022).

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