

# Socrates and Leisure

*Christos A. Zafiroopoulos*

In the so-called Socratic dialogues, Socrates introduces the need for σχολή or leisure as the precondition that is necessary for the philosopher to pursue his task. He also makes ideal use of it, contrary to what seems to have been the popular image of the idle philosopher. Thus, a desideratum for academic life was built, on the grounds that philosophers have to reciprocate the gift of leisure by benefiting the whole of community; besides, the idea of intellectual labour was also introduced to balance any negative feelings created in the *demos* against the luxurious leisure of philosophers and their schools. Philosophical leisure and its conditions could well be an issue in modern academic ethics.

In the beginning there was a poor, seemingly jobless, middle aged man, ugly, dirty and almost ragged. His daily routine is both a scandal and a reverie for every scholar and was possibly so for his fellow Athenians. Free of timetables, commitments, classrooms, offices, appointments, he spends the day in endless and untroubled conversations with everybody, friends, familiars, artisans, shopkeepers, passers-by, foreign visitors. He gets invited to rich houses, where he talks out issues and tipples until he puts everyone to bed. And then, instead of going home, where he is awaited by a rightly complaining wife (or wives, according to some malevolent critics) and his sons, he strolls the empty streets of a sleeping city, goes to the Lyceum, washes himself and starts another day of “research”.

Socrates is the model for philosophers and the protomartyr of the academic community; his eulogy in the sources (especially in the Socratic dialogues) portrays a wanderer, a vagabond, a Socrates whose σχολή (leisure) is a sine-qua-non precondition for every scholar.<sup>1</sup> He has plenty of free time, in fact he seems to have

---

<sup>1</sup> By the term σχολή I refer to time that is free from any occupation with professional or survival ends. On σχολή in classical Greece see Anastasiades, Balme, de Ste Croix 116–117, 122–25, Isebaert, Stocks, Toner ch. 2. Greek and particularly philosophical σχολή is an important issue as one can notice from the linguistic debts of our intellectual world, such as scholar, school, academic schools, schools of thought etc. On the historicity of Socrates, the so-called “Socratic problem”, see e.g. Gigon, ch. 1 and W. J. Prior, ed., *Socrates. Critical assessments*, vol. 1, London & New York: Routledge, 1996, esp. pp. 26–73, 136–55, 179–201.

nothing but free time, which he spends as he fancies. “I went down to Piraeus yesterday, together with Glaucon, the son of Ariston...” Thus opens the narration of his whereabouts that will become the *Republic*. “Let us break our meeting for the present. Come to my house tomorrow so that we shall consult on this very matter”, asks Lysimachus in the *Laches*. “Yes, I will do so, Lysimachus, and I will come to you tomorrow, God willing”, replies Socrates (201b–c). These and many more examples of the aforementioned carefree Socrates might be products of Plato’s literary mastery: smoothed in the style of a philosophical text, rendered familiar to the reader to win his sympathy. However, these cannot be simply details of the dialogues’ dramatic scenery and narrative consequences, as they are often thought to be. In almost every dialogue we read where and how Socrates spends his time,

Wall painting at a house depicting Socrates,  
1st–5th century CE. Museum of Ephesus

we would say, where and how he διατρίβει, the philosopher’s διατριβή being a communicating vessel with his σχολή, since it is possession of the latter that guarantees the former.

I argue that in their portrait of Socrates, Plato and Xenophon deliberately used a relaxed tone, in order to emphasize that freedom from all necessities and leisure are integral traits of the contemplative life and the true philosopher, which sharply differentiate him from his fellow-citizens. In the philosopher’s world, from Socrates onwards, fantasies come true and no-one is in a hurry. For example, in *Protagoras*, Hippocrates impatiently urges Socrates to go and listen to the famous sophist who stays at Callias’. Socrates’ answer is juxtaposed with the young man’s haste: “We should not go there yet, my good friend, it’s too early; let us rise and turn into the court here, and spend the time strolling there till daylight comes; after that we can go” (311a). And by the time they reach Callias’ house, Hippocrates is a captive to Socrates’ rhythms. He too differs from the many, as he now stands outside Callias’ front door, only a few meters away from his initial target, but he keeps discussing some new topic with Socrates, absorbed and carefree, for it is a shame to stop such a nice conversation! Only after they reach an agreement do they knock on Callias’ door. The doorman’s answer marks the difference between Socrates’ world and that of Callias: upset by the many visitors who keep him busy, he emphasizes that his master has no leisure, no σχολή (314d). On the other hand, Socrates dedicates his σχολή to everyone, and free of charge.

The meanings of σχολή and its derivatives range from leisure and inaction to opportunity for action, to taking one's time, as well as rest, idleness and laziness.<sup>2</sup> Its opposite, ασχολία, stands for lack of σχολή, for occupation, business. Both terms appear frequently in the Socratic corpus and colour the philosopher's portrait.<sup>3</sup> Usually σχολή signifies the possession of free time and the consequent psychological state that are necessary for the *vita contemplativa*. Thanks to it, Socrates can discuss whenever and wherever he wishes or to transfer his long discourses to another day. Hence, leisure is the precondition for philosophical theory and action, and therefore a precondition for the *eu práttειν*, the well-doing that leads to *αρετή* and to *ευδαιμονία*, to virtue and happiness. Leisure becomes closely connected with the notions of freedom, particularly the freedom to think and act philosophically, and with self-sufficiency in regard to one's material needs.<sup>4</sup>

It is σχολή that enables Socrates in the *Phaedrus* to leave the urban centre and wander in the countryside, driven as usual by the forces of conversation, and to end up listening to the cicadas under the shade of a plane tree, by a spring, in a true *locus amoenus*. The cicadas resemble Plato's Socrates and his leisured life, although in an extreme way. Once they were humans, who got so overcome by the Muses' song that they abandoned their material needs and started singing themselves, until they died from hunger and thirst. From their dead bodies arose the cicadas, who report to the Muses who honours them on earth (259b–c). Likewise, Socrates is kept apart from the pressing necessities of life and his precious σχολή allows him to reach the divine sphere of knowledge, to see the world of Forms, to honour the Delphic god and patron-god of the Muses, by proving him right through his paradigmatic philosophical life. That is why only a few deserve σχολή for only a few would handle it reasonably and successfully, such as the philosopher-rulers in the *Republic* or the lawgivers in the *Laws*.<sup>5</sup> However, in the *Theaetetus* Plato gives the fuller and most extended account of σχολή (172c–175e). There, the philosopher and his way of living are juxtaposed to orators and public speakers in general; he is said to differ precisely because of his possession of σχολή. He is free and self-sufficient, while they are tortured by the constant pressure of the water-clock, slaves to their role and to the needs of their clientele. The philosopher, on the contrary, contemplates at leisure; he is brought up in freedom and σχολή.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See *LSJ*<sup>2</sup> s.v. σχολή.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., *Pl. Ap.* 36d, 39e, *Euthphr.* 6e, *Grg.* 458c, *Hp.Ma.* 281a, *Ion* 530d, *La.* 181e, 186e, *Lg.* 831c–832d, 855d, 961b, *Phd.* 58d, 66d, *Phdr.* 227b, 229e, *Plt.* 272–273, *Prt.* 314d, *R.* 374c, 376d, 406c–d, 500b, *Sph.* 226e, *Tht.* 154e, 172c ff., 187d, *Ti.* 18b, 24a, 38e, 89c; *X. Mem.* 3.9.9.

<sup>4</sup> Only he who truly knows is truly free —i.e. the philosopher— and can therefore reach virtue and happiness (see *Lysis* 208c–e, 210b–c). To this the *excursus* from *Theaetetus* (172c–175e) adds that the acquisition of knowledge presupposes leisure. Those without it are in the state of slaves, incapable of fulfilling their intellectual wishes.

<sup>5</sup> The regulation of one's διατριβή is provisioned in the *Laws* 807d–e.

<sup>6</sup> See Rue. The dialogue's end offers a living and tragic example of philosophic leisure: Socrates leaves

In Athens the φιλιότη σχολή was praised from the second half of the fifth century BC onwards and represented a morality which run parallel and competitively to the work ethic that was characteristic of the polis, for example of its farming population (Anastasiades, 2004:60–62, 66). Although leisure was a differentiating criterion of superiority for the leisured aristocrats and intellectuals, the σχολή that Euripides' *Ion* extols (630–36) was a dream for most Athenians, as far away as the idyllic Delphi described in the play. And he for whom the others' dream is reality will most probably be envied, like this Socrates who has nothing but leisure! Democratic Athens was a city of toil and intense economic activity, a city that had laws against idleness, ἀργία, and in which, quoting Pericles, it is not poverty that brings shame upon man, but inaction to improve one's condition through work.<sup>7</sup> The democratic ethos juxtaposed the working man's moral superiority to the aristocrat's idleness and social inutility. Democracy stood for πολυπραγμοσύνη, meddlesomeness, and against its opposite, ἀπραγμοσύνη, which may also mean minding one's business, which is very close to the Socratic definition of justice in the *Republic* (433a). Democracy stood for toil, even for poverty, instead of idleness and riches (at least against wealth that is accumulated and not socially distributed). If Plato's and Xenophon's portrayal of a leisured Socrates is historically accurate, then he would have seemed audacious and provocative enough to many of his fellow Athenians. Besides, he did not seem to have any profession, to practice any job, therefore questions regarding how he managed to live his family in his proverbial poverty would have been welcomed and legitimate. If one is not born rich, he cannot have leisure without working! If he does, then he is probably an anti-democrat idle, a pro-lacedaemonian maybe, a threat to the city!<sup>8</sup> It is easy to see how Socrates might have looked like a social parasite that lived at his rich and anti-democrat friends' expenses. This might explain the persistence of the "other" sources, the ones that classicists often write off as malevolent, with Socrates' occupational condition. There, Socrates becomes a sophist or a φροντιστής who is paid for his lessons, a stone-mason like his father, a money-lender, or even a freedman.<sup>9</sup>

---

Theaetetus, because he must go to the Porch of the King, to answer to the suit that some Meletus has brought against him. They agree to continue their conversation in the next morning. Facing a fatal, as we know, accusation, Socrates postpones once again his political obligations when, on his way to the porch, he meets Euthyphron and they discuss on holiness (*Euthyphro* reports their conversation), an ironic choice of subject before Socrates' accusation for impiety. Similarly ironic is the discussion of leisure in *Theaetetus* just before the start of the countdown to Socrates' death.

<sup>7</sup> See D. 57.32; D.L. 1.55; Plu. *Sol.* 17.2, 22; Th. 2.40.

<sup>8</sup> Yet, Socrates met perfectly his political obligations whenever he was asked to and stood against the regime of the Thirty. See Vlastos, 98–101. Spartans were famous for their leisured way of living, e.g. Plu. *Lyc.* 24.2, 25.3–4. On a comparison between Socrates' portrait and the Spartan way of living, see Montuori, 286–89.

<sup>9</sup> See Ar. *Nu.* 112f., 636f., 658f.; Aristoxenus frs. 51, 54b W; D.L. 2.19–21; Eupolis frs. 351, 355 CAF; Paus. 1.22.8, 9.35.7; Plu. *Arist.* 1.1–2; Scholia in *Nubes* 723; *SUDA* s.v. "Σωκράτης". Socrates the lazy, the ἀργός, frequents the aristophanic corpus, e.g., *Nu.* 53, 199, 316, 334, *Ra.* 1498. Socrates the antibanauistic, against manual work, thus favouring an aristocratic view: Pl. *R.* 495e; X. *Mem.* 3.7.5–6, *Oec.* 4.2–4. See Giannantoni, 1C.9–10.

It is a small way from the picturesque character of the Athenian streets to the disturbing parasite, from the disturbing idiosyncratic man to the *pharmakos*, the scapegoat to be thrashed or even executed. The way would be even smaller following the fall of the regime of the 30, the τριάκοντα, a few of which belonged to the leisured circle of Socrates' friends. Particularly so, if one was already reputed to be a hater of the people, a μισόδημος, a pro-spartan and an idler who professed to master the field of ethics, a field that the *demos*, the people, often champion as their own field of excellence. The comic exposition of Socrates in the Great Dionysia of 423 BC was no coincidence, considering that he was attacked in two out of the three contesting comedies, Ameipsias' *Connus* and the *Clouds* of Aristophanes. The comic references to Socrates are numerous enough to indicate a popular reaction to this figure which set off such comic attacks, the most renowned of which, of course, is in the *Clouds*.<sup>10</sup> As regards Socrates, in the *Clouds* Aristophanes repeatedly pictures him and his pupils as idle. Socrates the σχολάζων, the αργός, the διατριβών, who wastes time, is also a useless lazy crook who introduces new deities to the city (whether this triggered his future accusation remains a matter of debate among scholars), namely the worship of the Clouds, great goddesses of the idle, των αργών ανδρών (316).<sup>11</sup> The aristophanic passages point at a popular discontent with Socratic σχολή, which possibly sheds some new light on the reasons and the popular sentiments that led to his accusation some 25 years after the play's first performance. Maybe behind Socrates the corruptor of the youth stood his offering them (what seemed to be) flamboyant idleness as the proper way of living.<sup>12</sup>

However, these passages also reveal the comic poet's competitive stance towards the leisured philosopher. Aristophanes often stresses, mainly in his *parabaseis*, the social character and value of his work: his advice protects the city, he unmasks her fake friends and their lies, he fights for justice; he drags his fellow citizens out of their lethargy, his "international" fame benefits the city, yet he is never paid for his services; he always knows and dares to say what the right thing is, even against the *demos*' wish, his critique of the Athenians is severe, but it is for their own good and profit, his advice shows them the way to happiness: that is, he has undertaken a Herculean task and his comedy is by far superior to other comedies and literary genres. Surprisingly enough, all these attributes were repeated in Plato's and Xenophon's portrait of Socrates!

Aristophanes felt Socrates and the philosophers in general, who had crowded the Athenian *áστυ* from Pericles onwards, to be his competitors in his effort to win for himself and his art the first place in the field of social utility, benefit and appreciation. The comic poet and the philosopher were rivals for the same public image, role and acclaim. Aristophanes demanded for himself the precious leisured life that would

<sup>10</sup> See Giannantoni, 1A and Mitscherling for comic attacks to Socrates.

<sup>11</sup> See also 221 (ironically), 332, 334, 1055. Cf. *Ach.* 193, 407–9, *Eq.* 515, 978, *Lys.* 943, *Pl.* 512–16, 921–23, *Ra.* 1491–99, V. 849.

<sup>12</sup> Plato's insistence in the *Apology* on Socrates' lack of leisure (23b, 31b–c, 36d) might be another indication for such a background to Socrates' indictment. See also Libanius *Decl.* 1.127–28.

allow him to continue serving his city with his art. From then on, as long as comedy seeks to validate its autonomy and primacy in the education of the citizens, it will keep on jeering at philosophers as idlers and loafers who waste the social gift of leisure.<sup>13</sup> In fact, in the *Knights* (514–17) Aristophanes anticipates the platonic demand for philosophical σχολή that we found in *Theaetetus* and claims it for himself; yes indeed, he argues, he did spend a lot of time before teaching a new play, but this is so because comedy is the hardest intellectual task. Thus, it is inferred, free time is a necessary precondition for the comedian's art.

Plato, and Xenophon to a lesser extent, undertook the task to restore Socrates' and consequently the philosopher's primacy in leisure, in passing one's time (διατρίβειν) as one wishes. Virtue is hard to achieve, especially since our body fills us with ασχολίες, keeps us busy with its demands and makes us abandon our intellectual quests (*Phd.* 66b–d). Enter Socrates the ascetic, temperate and self-sufficient, who controls and defeats his human needs and becomes a champion of both toil, πόνος, and endurance, which is a common theme in the Socratic portrait.<sup>14</sup> He endures poverty, hardships, campaigns, long and exhausting discussions, even drinking. He has an almost heroic imperturbability against misfortunes.<sup>15</sup> He controls his body and his soul to such a superhuman extent that he is entitled to compare himself to Hercules, the personification of toil who also chose the hard road of virtue.<sup>16</sup> The philosophical myth of Socrates attributed new aspects of πόνος to the philosopher's ideal image. As Nicole Loraux has argued, Socrates' bravery and toil, and consequently the philosopher's, aimed to replace every other field for toil and acclaim. His dialectic method and his devotion to philosophy promoted the bravery of his relentless philosophizing and intellectual research, which run parallel to Hercules' strength and tasks. These amendments in Socrates' image were necessary in order to render him (and consequently the philosopher) champion in the field of male heroic identity and to secure his role as the model for philosophical life (Loraux, 1989:chs.7–9).

Was this also an attempt to purify the philosopher from the stain of idleness and to justify his primacy to leisure, thus preparing the way for the wise man's, the σοφός, future role in the history of mankind, as it would soon be proposed by Aristotle and his definition of philosophical σχολή?<sup>17</sup> It cannot be coincidental that our sources rally to stress Socrates' detestation for money, his rejection of gifts from his rich friends and above all his offering his philosophy to everyone for free.<sup>18</sup> The sophist who corrupted the youth in the *Clouds* was transformed in his hagiography into the

<sup>13</sup> A few indicative titles: Eupolis' *Flatterers*, Ameipsias' *Connus*, Callias' *Sholazontes*, Alexis' *Pythagorean Woman*, Aristophon's *Pythagorean* and Plato, Philemon's *Philosophers*.

<sup>14</sup> E.g., *Pl. La.* 194a, *Smp.* 174e–175b, 219e–221d; *X. Mem.* 1.2.1, 1.3.5, 1.3.8, 2.1.20–21; *D.L.* 2.25.

<sup>15</sup> Socrates' paradigmatic calmness and imperturbability is contrasted to his friends' demoralization in the *Phaedo* and the *Crito* (43b).

<sup>16</sup> E.g., *Crat.* 411a, *Euthd.* 297b–e, *Phd.* 89c, *Th.* 169b–c.

<sup>17</sup> On which see Demont, Solmsen.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., *X. Mem.* 1.2.5–6, 1.6.10–14; *D.L.* 2.24, 2.27.

pious, temperate, self-sufficient and free from wants arch-hero of philosophy, who knows nothing. He now discusses in public, free of charge, with whomever he wants, he has no “classroom” or “pupils” and thus he should not be accounted for the future of his interlocutors.<sup>19</sup> He has no job, that is, he is not bound by any promise to supply a particular “product” in return for his pay, his μισθός. He keeps his independence and freedom compared to the slavery of anyone working for money, a view shared at least by the privileged Athenians (Fisher, 2002).

Furthermore, Socrates was not an idler, because he did practice a profession, an ἔργον, namely to live and practice philosophy.<sup>20</sup> He followed the god-sent dream, the divine voice that ordered him to “make music and work at it”; since philosophy is the greatest art of the Muses, he devoted himself to it (*Phd.* 60e). He is the gifted one who, like the philosophers in the *Republic*, must devote himself to his task, free from every other occupation, σχολήν ἄγων των ἄλλων επιτηδευμάτων (*Ti.* 18b, *R.* 374b–e). And this work involves an *oxymoron*: it looks as if he has nothing but leisure, when in fact he is the busiest Athenian, with no leisure at all! For he must ceaselessly wander the polis and make sure that his fellow citizens care for themselves, because what really matters, that is that they care for their soul and are helped to attain true knowledge in order to act and live rightly.<sup>21</sup> Socrates has no timetable because this task occupies his whole life! Therefore, Socrates is a busy leisured man and his life is a σχολάζουσα ασχολία. So, what does such a poor benefactor of Athens need in order to retain this precious and necessary for his task σχολή? Free meals in the *prytaneum*! (*Ap.* 23b–c, 36d).

Socrates’ “busy leisure” is symbolized through his strange transformations. He is an annoying gadfly (*Ap.* 30e–31a), an insect that is motionless during winter and active during summer, but even this activity passes from prolonged immobility to sudden and persistent action. He is also a stingray, a νάρκη, a fish that seduces its victims by pretending indolence, only to pounce up and paralyze them (*Men.* 80a–c). Or he is paralleled to Eros and to Silenus, creatures of Greek mythology renowned for their ability to move unexpectedly from passivity to activity and vice versa (Hadot, 1998).

It has been wisely pointed out that Socrates’ transformations throughout time, the different portraits of this intellectual hero that every historical period draws, are self-referential (Montuori, 1974:90–92). We read the Socrates we need. Nowadays more and more scholars see time as an oppressive force (trapped in the crossfire of published work and deadlines) and many more seem to have neglected the platonic precondition for philosophic σχολή, namely the obligation to reciprocate it in terms of social utility. Maybe we now need to rediscover the leisured philosopher who stood at the beginning.

<sup>19</sup> X. *Mem.* 1.1.10; Plu. *Mor.* 796d.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., *Grg.* 481d–482a.

<sup>21</sup> E.g., Pl. *Apol.* 30a–b, 31b–c, *Grg.* 517b–c, *Euthd.* 282a.

## Bibliography

Anastasiades, 2004

V. I. Anastasiades, "Idealized σχολή and disdain for work: aspects of philosophy and politics in ancient democracy", *Classical Quarterly* 54:58–79.

Balme, 1984

M. Balme, "Attitudes to work and leisure in ancient Greece", *Greece and Rome* 31:140–52.

de Ste Croix, 1981

G. E. M. de Ste Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*. London: Duckworth.

Demont, 1993

P. Demont, "Le loisir (skholé) dans la *Politique* d'Aristote". In *Aristote Politique: études sur la Politique d'Aristote*, ed. P. Aubenque and A. Tordesillas: 209–30. Paris: P.U.F.

Fisher, 2002

N. Fisher, "Work and Leisure". In *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Ancient Greece*, ed. P. Cartledge: ch. 8. Cambridge: University Press.

Giannantoni, 1990

G. Giannantoni, *Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae*. Vol. 1, Napoli: Bibliopolis.

Gigon, 1979

O. Gigon, *Sokrates. Sein Bild in Dichtung und Geschichte*. Bern: A. Francke AG Verlag.

Hadot, 1998

P. Hadot, *Éloge de Socrate*. Paris: Allia.

Isebaert, 1992

L. Isebaert, "Le loisir selon Platon. Paix, épanouissement et bonheur", *Les Études Classiques* 60:297–311.

Loroux, 1989

N. Loroux, *Les Expériences de Tirésias*. Paris: Gallimard.

Mitscherling, 2003

J. Mitscherling, "Socrates and the comic poets", *Apeiron* 36:67–72.

Montuori, 1974

M. Montuori, *Socrate. Fisiologia di un mito*. Firenze: G. C. Sansoni.

Plato

Plato, *Laches, Protagoras, Meno, Euthydemus*. With an English translation by W. R. M. Lamb. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1924.

Rue, 1993

R. Rue, "The philosopher in flight: the digression (172c–177c) in Plato's *Theaetetus*", *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 11:71–100.

Solmsen, 1964

Fr. Solmsen, "Leisure and play in Aristotle's ideal state", *Rheinisches Museum* 107:193–220.

Stocks, 1936

J. L. Stocks, "SXOLH", *Classical Quarterly* 30:177–87.

Toner, 1995

J. P. Toner, *Leisure and ancient Rome*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Vlastos, 1994

G. Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*. Cambridge: University Press.