Xenophon's Socrates—Who were his informants?

This paper is what James Robert Brown would call a 'thought experiment'. It endeavours to give a reasonable explanation of Xenophon's treatment of Socrates without insisting on its 'truth'. It is a case of applying that narrative form of explanation which Brown finds prevalent in biological and historical exposition. 'From the story we see how the events in question are possible.' Again, 'there are also explanations which are not linked to justification, and that, I think, is what we have here. We show how, given realism, the success of science is possible, why it is not a miracle. But the narrative style of the explanation does not let us infer its correctness—we cannot count on the (approximate) truth of the theories at all'. From this standpoint I shall endeavour to frame a narrative suggesting how and why Xenophon's portrait of Socrates differs from that of Plato.

First, it should be noted that George Grote himself took up a very similar position on this issue, drawing on Xenophon's background.

It will plainly appear that he was quite different in character and habits from Plato and the other Socratic brethren. He was not only a man of the world ... but he was actively engaged in the most responsible and difficult functions of military command; he was moreover a landed proprietor and cultivator, fond of strong exercise with dogs and horses, and an

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2 Brown op. cit.

3 George Grote, *Plato and the other companions of Socrates*, vol. 3 (London, 1865) 568.
intelligent equestrian. His circumstances were sufficiently easy to dispense with the necessity of either composing discourses or taking pupils for money. Being thus enabled to prosecute letters and philosophy in an independent way, he did not, like Plato and Aristotle, open a school. His relations, as active coadjutor and subordinate, with Agesilaus, form a striking contrast to those of Plato with Dionysius, as tutor and pedagogue. In his mind, the Socratic conversations, suggestive and stimulating to everyone, fell upon the dispositions and aptitudes of a citizen soldier, and fructified in a peculiar manner.

Setting aside a few anachronistic nineteenth-century values, this is a good and sympathetic instance of Brown's 'narrative explanation'. Writing a century later, Keith Guthrie again considers the differences between Plato and Xenophon, and vindicates the independence of both.

Again, though there are differences between Plato's and Xenophon's accounts of Socrates and his teaching, at many points they coincide. Some critics, however, will not allow us to regard this as any confirmation of the truth of what they say about him: their conclusion is simply that Xenophon had copied Plato. This is not critical method but uncritical theorizing. No doubt Xenophon read Plato's dialogues and other Socratic writings, but similarity between them is not necessarily evidence that Xenophon was a mere borrower, and it is still less justifiable to extend the argument to the rest of his Socratic writings on the ground that if he sometimes borrowed he did so always: it is more likely that, as Dies put it, 'Xenophon et Platon exploitent un fonds commun de Socratisme'.

Speaking further of Xenophon Guthrie observes most judiciously:

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Much that he saw in Socrates was, I am convinced, characteristic of the real man. When however we find in the Socrates of Plato something far less commonplace, far more paradox, humour and irony and above all a greater profundity of thought, it would be wrong to suppose that these were foreign to Socrates because they do not appear in Xenophon's portrait. The impression of uniqueness, and the powerful impact, favourable or unfavourable, which he made on everyone who met him ... are far more comprehensible if we suppose that he had in him much of what Plato discovered as well as what appealed to the prosaic commonsense of Xenophon.\footnote{Guthrie \textit{op. cit.} 335.}

It is noteworthy that neither Grote nor Guthrie could have felt entirely comfortable with Burnet's introduction to his \textit{Phaedo} edition, where he argues that the Pythagoreanism of Plato's \textit{Phaedo} may be genuinely Socratic. On the other hand, Burnet's dismissal of Xenophon's veracity must demand our attention.

Turning a deaf ear to the warnings of Socrates, young Xenophon left Athen to join the expedition of Cyrus, and he never saw Socrates again. He had, therefore, no first-hand knowledge of his trial and death, while Plato was certainly present at the trial. Further, though it is just possible that Xenophon revisited Athens for a short time in the interval between his return from Asia and his fresh departure with Agesilaus, he spent practically all the rest of his life in exile. He was therefore far less favourably situated than Plato for increasing his knowledge of Socrates by conversation with others who had known him. \textit{Phaedo} indeed was not very far off at Elis, but he never mentions \textit{Phaedo} at all. He might very easily have made enquiries among the Pythagoreans of Phlius; but in spite of the exceptional sympathy he shows for Phlius in the \textit{Hellenica}, he never says a word about Echecrates or any of them. We have seen that he does mention Simmias and Cebes twice (in both cases for a special purpose), but it is very significant that no conversations with them are reported in the
Memorabilia. It seems to follow that Xenophon did not belong
to the same circle as these men did, and we can very well
believe his sympathy with them to have been imperfect. He
does appear to have known Hermogenes son of Hipponicus
(Phaedo 59b7), but that is apparently all.

Where, then, did he get the conversations recorded in the
Memorabilia? To a considerable extent they are discussions at
which he cannot have been present, and which he had no
opportunity of hearing about from oral tradition, as Plato may
easily have done in similar cases. It does not seem probable
that they are pure invention, though he has given them an
unmistakable colouring which is quite his own. In some cases
they seem to be adaptations from Plato. It is difficult to believe
that what he makes Socrates say about Anaxagoras, and the
hazy account he gives of the method of hypothesis, have any
other source than the Phaedo. It is highly probable that some of
the conversations came from Antisthenes, though I think it a
mistake to regard Antisthenes as his main source. We must
bear in mind that there were many 'Socratic discourses', of
which we get a very fair idea from what Wilamowitz calls the
'Socratic Apocrypha'. If we take up the Memorabilia when we
are fresh from the Theages or the Clitopho (to the latter of which
there seems to be an allusion in the Memorabilia) we shall find
the book much easier to understand in many respects. If I
mistake not, we shall have the feeling that Xenophon got the
substance of many of his conversations from sources of this
kind, and fitted them as well as he could into his own
recollections of the brave old man with the gift of second sight,
whose advice he had sought early in life without any particular
intention of taking it.

It is not even necessary for our purpose to discuss the
vexed question of Xenophon's veracity, though it is right to
mention that, when he claims to have been an eye-witness, his
statements are not to be trusted. At the beginning of his
Symposium he states that he was present at the banquet which
he describes, though he must have been a child at the time. He
also claims in the Oeconomicus to have heard the conversation
with Critoboulus in the course of which (4.18 sqq) Socrates
discusses the battle of Cunaxa, though it is certain that
Xenophon saw Socrates for the last time before that battle was fought. These things show clearly that we are not to take his claims to be a first-hand witness seriously, but the misstatements are so glaring that they can hardly have been intended to deceive. Xenophon was eager to defend the memory of Socrates; for that was part of the case against Athenian democracy. He had to eke out his own rather meagre recollections from such sources as appealed to him most, those which made much of the ‘divine sign’ and the hardiness of Socrates, and occasionally he has to invent, as is obviously the case in the passage of the Oeconomicus referred to. When Plato reports conversations at which he cannot have been present, he is apt to insist upon the fact that he is speaking at second- or third-hand with what seems to us unnecessary elaboration, but Xenophon’s manner is different. He says ‘I was there’, or ‘I heard’, but that is only to make the narrative vivid. We are not supposed to believe it.

In view of all this, it is now pretty generally admitted that Xenophon’s Socrates must be distinguished from the historical Socrates quite as carefully as Plato’s.6

Further discussion of Burnet’s thesis becomes topical in the light of the recent publication of a new Penguin version of all Xenophon’s Socratic writings by Robin Waterfield, who has both introduced and annotated them. In this volume, entitled Xenophon: Conversations of Socrates, Waterfield has revised Tredennick’s versions of the Memoirs and Symposium as well as including his own new translations of both Apology and Oeconomicus. His work will not only achieve its aim of making readers innocent of Greek realise that Plato was not the only Socratic writer and authority; it will also stimulate new efforts by some Greekless philosophers to evaluate Xenophon’s contribution to our understanding of Socrates.7 I have consequently thought it not improper to redirect attention to a

6 John Burnet, Plato’s Phaedo (Oxford, 1925) xx-xxiii.
minor paper of my own on Xenophon’s portrait of Socrates, which was written a decade ago.8

In this paper I accepted Cawkwell’s view that there is no compulsion to assign Memorabilia 3.5.1 to the last period of Xenophon’s life, and that Xenophon in his rural retreat at Scillus regarded the vindication of the memory of Socrates as one of his main duties from 386 BC onwards.9 By this date Plato had already produced the so-called ‘Megarian’ dialogues—Apology, Crito, Laches, Lysis, Charmides, Euthyphro, Hippias Minor, Gorgias, Ion and Protagoras—if we accept Cornford’s classification.10 In addition, it is almost certain that works by Antisthenes, Aristippus and Aeschines were in circulation and also available for Xenophon to peruse, and possibly also the lost Zopyrus of Phaedo and, as Burnet himself suggests, the anonymous Theages and Clitopho. There was clearly controversy among the surviving Socratics, particularly between Plato, Aeschines and Aristippus which could have encouraged Xenophon to offer his contribution as well.11

To assess the worth of this contribution, we must first address Burnet’s charge that Xenophon falsely claimed to have attended the symposium which he described. As I suggest elsewhere,12 it may be that he was in frequent contact with one of his Phliasian friends, like the Pythagorean leader Echecrates, who had known an eyewitness from Athens or Thebes. This of course means accepting Burnet’s view that the false first person was a stylistic affectation for the sake of vividness. On the other hand, Gigon13 has also

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9 George Cawkwell, in the introduction to Xenophon, Hellenica: A History of my own Times, translated by Rex Warner (Harmondsworth), 15; cf. 43-4.
10 Guthrie op. cit. vol. 4 (1975) 50-54.
11 Tanner op. cit. 34-5.
12 Tanner op. cit. 35.
13 Olof Gigon, Kommentar zum ersten Buch von Xenophons Memorabilien
revived the old view that our author was born about 440 BC rather than 430 as is now generally held, a position which declares that our author was ten years Plato's senior, and which might justify him all the more in his foray into the Socratic controversy because he had known the master earlier.

Please consider now the first two texts in my Appendix, the translations of Strabo 9.403 (2.7) and of Plato Symposium 220-221. Now the Strabo text supports as it stands the view revived by Gigon: Socrates rescues Xenophon at Delium in 424 BC. The Platonic Symposium would give the lie to Strabo's story: Socrates rescued Alcibiades at Potidaea in 432, but according to the account of a thoroughly favourable eye-witness, at Delium, despite his remarkable behaviour in the retreat, he rescued nobody. But if we accept the rivalry between the Socratics, Plato will have had a strong motive for presenting the facts in a misleading way. Could Socrates have in fact saved Alcibiades when he was an adventurous young knight of twenty, and later done the same service for the young Xenophon at Delium? If the malice between Plato and Xenophon were greater than Favorinus in Gellius will own, then Plato might well have wished to avoid any reference to his older rival's early bond with Socrates by suppressing the second 'rescue' episode. This interpretation would of course vindicate Xenophon's claim to have attended the function in honour of Autolycus, which took place in 422 BC. If Socrates in fact saved him at Delium, much in Xenophon's career and writings makes more sense. Even at the age of forty, he could well have consulted his former rescuer about the plan to serve under Cyrus in Asia. Then in his Anabasis one might claim that he was seeking to show the noble lesson his old friend had taught him, by exemplifying it in rescuing ten thousand Greek mercenaries trapped in Mesopotamia, and leading them to the Black Sea and safety. His work on cavalry tactics could also be a thank offering to the friend who saved his life in his first cavalry adventure. Again, his interest in hunting dogs as examples of discipline and courage could well be Socratic, if Socrates had

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(Basel, 1953) 106.

14 Aulus Gellius, Noctes Atticae 14.3.
himself invented the notion of the Dog as a philosophical animal which Plato attributes to him in the Republic.

We must now return to the possibility of collaboration with Xenophon by his nearby Socratic neighbours, Phaedo and the circle of Echecrates. Diogenes Laertius reports a brush between either Charondas or Phaedo and the hedonistic Socratic Aristippus over the latter’s use of perfume. Aristippus defends himself by the example of the Great King of Persia’s practice, and also curses the cinaedi who attack his fine unguent. Given that the same source maintains that Phaedo had been sold into slavery at Athens and made to work as a boy prostitute (cinaedus) until Socrates had Crito redeem the brilliant youth from his brothel-keeping owner and set him free, Phaedo would appear to be the object of Aristippus’ curse. Now if Phaedo was in the Socratic circle then, this would explain an anomaly in Xenophon’s Oeconomicus 4.17-25. We are told that Lysander the Spartan had been taken aback by the manly vigour and love of manual labour shown by Cyrus the Younger despite his rich clothes and perfumes. It is at the same point that Socrates and Critobulus are made to discuss the battle of Cunaxa. Now two sources, Diogenes Laertius and the Xenophontic text refer to Cyrus’ taste for perfume as being in dispute. If they reflect the same discussion, then Phaedo was certainly present. This may suggest that this part of the Xenophontic text was supplied by Phaedo; and if that were so, it might lead us to explain other portions of his writings in the same way.

On this point Waterfield’s remarks are of considerable interest.

It is tempting to try to find an artistic awareness in the relationship between the two parts of the book [Oeconomicus—the dialogue with Critobulus and the dialogue with Ischomachus] ... There are certainly some overlapping themes ... I think, however, that these echoes can be attributed simply to repetition rather than artistry in the sense of a thematic substructure to a unified work. It is my strong impression that the two parts of the Estate Manager were composed at different
times and then later cobbled together by Xenophon—although it is difficult to prove this conclusively.

The most important factor is that the conversation with Critobulus is obviously part and parcel of the Memoirs, whereas the conversation with Ischomachus is not, since Socrates is there being taught, not teaching.\footnote{Waterfield \textit{op. cit.} 283.}

My answer to these acute observations is that the treatise contains in reality two works, or rather, the works of two different hands. My hypothesis is that Phaedo and Xenophon worked in collaboration, the former being responsible for \textit{Oeconomicus} 1.1 to 6.19 and the latter writing 7.1 to 21.16. I note also that Waterfield sees the part I assign to Phaedo as belonging to the \textit{Memorabilia}. That remark emboldens me to suggest that many of the livelier non-military and non-political parts of that work also came from the hand of Phaedo. For instance, to me \textit{Memorabilia} 3.1-5 is Xenophon’s own work, and probably also most of 6-7. But 2.8 on Aristippus may well draw on Phaedo’s recollections, as may 9-10 on courage and craftsmanship. On the other hand, 3.11 on Theodote and the more down-to-earth problems of Epigenes, ordinary good manners and rules for communal dinners (a very Spartan and Persian matter) seem to me entirely Xenophontic.

Let us now look again at Xenophon’s controversial \textit{Symposium}. Of main interest to my thesis is the 'beauty contest' between Socrates and young Critobulus in section 5. Here I wish to look at Cicero’s references to the apparently genuine lost \textit{Zopyrus} of Phaedo.\footnote{Cicero, \textit{de fato} 5 and \textit{Tusc.} IV.37: the texts are given in the Appendix.} Here that expert on human physiognomy detects marks of innate depraved tendencies in Socrates, which the latter freely confessed, but said that he had conquered by his use of reason. One may therefore regard this part of the \textit{Symposium} as again a possible instance of the hand of Phaedo, and I am inclined to assign to him most of the rest of the dialogue. Plato and Phaedo would both have heard Socrates discoursing on love and beauty; Plato employed some of these discourses in his \textit{Symposium} and \textit{Phaedrus},
whilst Phaedo employed others in sections 5-9 of the Xenophontic Symposium.

Basically, then, I stand to the position I took in Prudentia a decade ago in reference to Aulus Gellius' tradition of the rivalry between Xenophon and Plato. The main modification I might now wish to make results from my participation in the third Symposium Platonicum at Bristol in 1992, in a paper published under the title 'How far was Plato concerned to rebut the claims of Cyrus the Great and Pisistratus to the title of Statesman?'

Deeply convinced by Grote’s support for the centrality and political purpose of the Cyropaedia, I shall still accept Gellius’ claim that it was a riposte to Plato’s Republic. Further, when Gellius’ character Favorinus sees parts of the Laws as expressing corrections Plato felt constrained to make to the Republic in the light of Xenophon’s Cyropaedia I am disposed to assent. However, I now feel in addition that the Platonic Politicus was likewise designed to answer Xenophon, both in preferring the non-regal tyrant Pisistratus to Cyrus the Great, and in laying down duties for rulers applicable to the viewpoints taken by both of them in this Socratic debate. I missed this point in the Bristol paper in Polis 12 (1993), but wish to affirm it now.

To conclude, it appears to me that Xenophon received much collaborative help in his Socratic writings from the circle of Echecrates at Phlius and especially from Phaedo at nearby Elis, during his long sojourn at Scillus. His failure to acknowledge their collaboration was part of their compact of literary partnership to uphold their estimate of Socrates, and should not be seized upon to discredit Xenophon’s veracity. To me it seems that such a rather clandestine literary partnership must largely have been aimed against the undue dominance, in their view, of the Platonic perspective and mode of interpreting their master and friend. It should not be viewed, however, as an outright attack and

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18 Tanner op. cit. 35-6.

confrontation; merely as an effort to balance the picture of a great, lovable, irritating and complex genius. Fortunately all the authors were gentlemen, not scurrilous media columnists.

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APPENDIX

1. Xenophon at Delium?

Strabo, Geog. 9.2.7 Then one comes to Delium, the sanctuary of Apollo, which is a reproduction of that in Delos. It is a small town of the Tanagraeans, thirty stadia distant from Aulis. It was to this place that the Athenians, after their defeat in battle, made their headlong flight; and in the flight Socrates the philosopher, who was serving on foot, since his horse had got away from him, saw Xenophon the son of Gryllus lying on the ground, having fallen from his horse, and took him up on his shoulders and carried him in safety for many stadia, until the flight ceased.

Plato, Symp. 220d-221a [Alcibiades speaks] ‘During that battle [Potidaea], after which the generals decorated me for bravery, it was this man and no other who saved my life, for he would not leave me wounded but rescued both me and my arms. ... Further, my friends, it was well worth seeing Socrates during our army’s headlong retreat from Delium. I happened to be serving with the horse while he was with the infantry. When our troops had already been routed, Laches and he retreated together. I chanced to run into them, and as soon as I saw them I bade them keep courage and said that I would not desert them. There I was able to get a better view of Socrates than at Potidaea, for I was on horseback and consequently less nervous ...’

2. Cicero on the Zopyrus of Phaedo

Cicero, de fato 5 Quid? Socratem nonne legimus quemadmodum notarit Zopyrus physiognomon, qui se profitebatur hominum mores naturasque ex corpore, oculis, vultu, fronte pernoscre? Stupidum esse Socratem dixit et bardum, quod iugula concava non haberet: obstructas eas partes et obturatas esse dicebat. Addidit etiam mulierosum, in quo Alcibiades cachinnum dicitur sustulisse. Sed haec et naturalibus causis vitia nasci possunt: extirpari autem et funditus tolli, ut is ipse, qui ad ea propensus fuerit, a tantis vitii
avocetur, non est id positum in naturalibus causis, sed in voluntate, studio, disciplina.

Cicero, *Tusc.* IV.37 Qui autem natura dicuntur iracundi, aut misericordes, aut invidi, aut tale quid; ii sunt eiusmodi constituti quasi mala valetudine animi; sanabiles tamen, ut de Socrate dicitur. Cum multa in conventu vitia collegisset in eum Zopyrus, qui se naturam cuiusque ex forma perspicere profitebatur, derisus est a ceteris, qui illa in Socrate vitia non agnoscerent: ab ipso autem Socrate sublevatus, cum illa sibi insita, sed ratione a se deiecta diceret.