

# *Socrates on food and eating*

Freya Möbus

Loyola University Chicago

fmobus@luc.edu

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## *Historical Context*

In the second half of the fifth century BC,

- Professional cookery became a thing; the first Greek cookbook by Mithaikos (which is mentioned in Plato's *Gorgias* 518b among other sources).
- Medical dietetics, i.e., eating to preserve or reestablish health, became “one of the most relevant branches in ancient Greek medicine.”<sup>1</sup>

## *FM Theses*

A common theme in Socrates'<sup>2</sup> comments on food and eating is a suspicion, warning, and criticism of one type of food in particular: *opson* (ὄψον). I will here take a closer look at two such passages:

- a) Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 3.14.2-3: Socrates calls out a fellow dinner guest for eating *opson* without bread, calling him someone who “feeds on *opson*” (*opsophagos*, ὀψοφάγος).
- b) The second passage comes from Plato's *Gorgias* 462b-466a where Socrates attacks professional *opson*-making (ὄψοποιία, *Gorg.* 462d).

I argue that Socrates' comments on food and eating are philosophically relevant:

1. Socrates thinks that we should consume *opson* very carefully because
  - a. Indulging in *opson* promotes psychological and physiological disorder in the individual
  - b. As well as disorder in the *polis* and even in the cosmos.
2. Maintaining good eating practices—eating the right kind of food, in the right quantity, at the right time—is an important part of the good, i.e., orderly life.

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<sup>1</sup> Notario (2015: 123-4); see also Jouanna (2012), Bartos (2015).

<sup>2</sup> By “Socrates” I here mean the literary character. I take it that the historical Socrates inspired the literary character named “Socrates”, but I will not speculate about the historical accuracy of the portrayals. I am not so much interested in the historical Socrates as in the myth of Socrates, that is, the “Socrates” as others saw and remembered him. I will here focus on Plato and Xenophon—two of Socrates' admirers. I take it that the “Socrates” in Plato's earlier dialogues is closer to the myth of Socrates than the character we encounter in the middle and late dialogues.

### *What is opson?*

The typical ancient Greek meal had three parts: *sitos* (σίτος), *opson* (ᾠψον), and *potos* (drink, πότος).<sup>3</sup> *Sitos* refers to “staple foods,” which were usually made from wheat or barley (like barley bread and cakes).<sup>4</sup> *Opsa* are “add-on foods”, that is, **any food added to the staple food bread**, such as salt, olives, and cheese, but also fancier foods like fish, meat, or vegetables. Ancient Greeks would take a piece of *sitos* and eat it together with some *opson*.



### *The Socratic Diet*

(T1) Socrates “schooled his body and soul by following a regimen which, under ordinary circumstances, would afford anyone a life of confidence and security and make it **easy to meet the required expenses**. For he was so **frugal** that it is hardly possible to imagine a man doing so little work as not to earn enough to satisfy the needs of Socrates. He ate just enough food to make eating a pleasure, **and he was so ready for his food that his desire for staples (σίτος) was his add-on food (ᾠψον)**. Any kind of drink was pleasant to him, because he drank only when he was thirsty.” (Xen. *Mem.* I 3.5)<sup>5</sup>

Socrates eats mostly staple foods (like barley bread and cakes) and simple, easy to come by *opsa* (like salt, olives, cheese, boiled roots and vegetables, *Rep.* II 372c), and he eats only when he is hungry and only as much as necessary.

(T2) Socrates “**eats to live, not lives to eat**” (Diogenes Laertius 2.34).

(T3) Antiphon: “**Your food and drink are the poorest**, you are living a life that not even a slave would put up with. ... Consider yourself a teacher of unhappiness” (Xen. *Mem.* I 6.2-3). Callicles in the *Gorgias* compares the life that Socrates aspires to live to the lives of **stones and corpses** (*Gorg.*492d-e), and when in the *Republic*, Socrates makes the citizens of their fictitious city live on *sitos* and only the most basic *opson* (salt, oil, cheese, herbs, beans, and nuts like acorns), Glaucon complains that the Socratic diet is unsufferable for humans and **only appropriate for pigs** (*Rep.* II 372d).

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<sup>3</sup> Davidson (1995: 205).

<sup>4</sup> Braun (1995: 25).

<sup>5</sup> Translation by Todd (*Loeb Classical Library* 168) with slight variations by me.

## *Socrates against opsophagia in Xenophon's Memorabilia*

(T4) When Socrates observed on one occasion that someone at dinner had ceased to take *sitos* and ate the *opson* by itself. Socrates said: “Can we say, gentlemen, for what kind of action a man is called an *opsophagos*? For, in fact, everyone eats *opson* on the *sitos*, whenever it is available; but I don’t think they are called *opsophagos* for this reason.” “No, certainly not” said one of those present. “What, then, **if someone eats the *opson* itself, without the *sitos***, not because he is in training, but **for the sake of pleasure** (ἡδονῆς ἔνεκα), does he seem to be an *opsophagos* or not?” “If not, it’s hard to say who does”, replied the other. Someone else said “What about the **man who eats a large amount of *opson* on a bit of *sitos***?” “He too seems to me to deserve the name,” said Socrates. The young man, guessing that these remarks of Socrates applied to him, did not stop eating his *opson*, but took some bread with it. When Socrates observed this, he said: “Watch the fellow, you who are near him, and see whether he treats the *sitos* as his *opson* or the *opson* as his *sitos*.” (Xen. Mem. 3.14.2-3)

*Opsophagos* is someone who eats *opson* without *sitos* or a lot of *opson* on a little bit of *sitos*, not because he is an athlete who requires an *opson*-heavy diet, but simply because ***opson* is pleasant**. *Sitos* is not pleasant; barley bread was known to be “poor stuff”. It was so poor that the Romans “mostly fed it to animals”.<sup>6</sup>

(T5) “Whenever [Socrates] accepted an invitation to dinner, he guarded himself without difficulty against filling oneself up beyond the limit of satiety (τὸ ὑπὲρ τὸν κόρον ἐμπίμπλασθαι); and he advised those who could not do likewise to **watch out for those foods that persuade one** (τὰ πείθοντα) to eat when one is not hungry and to drink when one is not thirsty.” (Xen. Mem. 1.3.6)

### **The ambivalent status of *opson*:**<sup>7</sup>

<i>Opson</i> is one of the standard parts of a typical Greek meal; “everyone eats <i>opson</i> ” (Xen. Mem. 3.14.2-3)	<i>Opson</i> is a dietary accessory, garnish, that is pleasant and persuasive, and thus the possible object of overindulgence, threatening to take over the meal.
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<sup>6</sup> Braun (1995: 27).

<sup>7</sup> Davidson (1995: 206-7, and 1997: 24).

## *Socrates against opsopoia in Plato's Gorgias*

In Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Socrates calls out the consumer of *opson*, the *opsophagos*. In Plato's *Gorgias*, he attacks the producer of *opson*, the *opson*-chef (ὄψοποιός).

**(T6)** *Opson*-chefs are merely “servants and satisfiers of appetites” (διακόνους καὶ ἐπιθυμιῶν παρασκευαστὰς, *Gorg.*518c); they aim to produce only gratification and pleasure (χάριτος καὶ ἡδονῆς, *Gorg.*462c) by making pleasant meals. They don't know what food is best and healthy for the body (*Gorg.*517d-e). Thus, *opson*-chefs are bad “caretakers of the body” (σωμάτων θεραπευταί, *Gorg.* 518b5-8). It's an entirely “shameful” profession (*Gorg.*462b-466a).

Note: in the *Gorgias*, ὄψοποιία has often been translated incorrectly as “pastry-baking”.<sup>8</sup>

By catering to our appetites, *opson*-chefs (and rhetoricians) promote a certain kind of life, namely the life of pleasure-seeking.

Socrates: The life of pleasure-seekers is “terrible (δεινός), shameful (αἰσχρὸς), and miserable (ἄθλιος)” (*Gorg.* 494e). See the *kinaidos* (ὁ τῶν κιναιδῶν βίος, *Gorg.*494e4)—the “male nymphomaniac”.<sup>9</sup> **I propose that Socrates' criticism applies to the life of the *opsophagos*.**

Life of pleasure-seekers	Life of the <i>opsophagos</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life is centered around satisfying appetites; takes “much toil and trouble” (<i>Gorg.</i>493e)</li> <li>• Appetites are a “leaky jar”; takes pleasure in constantly filling and emptying his jars (not in the state of being full)</li> <li>• Violating social order to “get a greater share” (πλεονεκτεῖν); the <i>kinaidos</i>, e.g., was known for adultery and prostitution.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>opson</i> is the first and last thing on his mind: he is “in the habit of taking a walk, first thing in the morning, in the fish-market” (<i>Ath.</i> 8.27) and on his deathbed, his last wish is to finish his meal (<i>Ath.</i> 8.26). Professionally prepared <i>opson</i> is expensive and difficult to come by.</li> <li>• Eats <i>opson</i> quickly, and hastily by, for example, eating <i>opson</i> without bread or, as popular opinion has it, by gulping down a hot piece of fish, thereby burning himself (<i>Ath.</i> 8.32) and even dying from it (<i>Ath.</i> 8.35; see also <i>Ath.</i> 8.26).</li> <li>• violate eating order (eating <i>opson</i> without bread), sometimes in extreme ways, e.g., by spitting on the food to make it inedible for anyone else (<i>Ath.</i> 8.35).</li> </ul>

<sup>8</sup> See e.g., Zeyl (1997), Moss (2007), Irani (2021).

<sup>9</sup> Davidson 1997; see also Sissa (2008: 53).

It is this disorder and lawlessness that is at the heart of Socrates' attack.

**I will propose that Socrates calls out the *opsophagos* and attacks the *opson*-chef because indulging in *opson* promotes disorder—not only in the individual, but also in the *polis*, and even the cosmos.**

### *Psychological Disorder*

- (i) Each thing—body, soul, animals, artifacts—is good if it realizes its excellence (ἀρετή), and it realizes its excellence if it is brought into its “own order” or “the order that belongs to it” (οἰκεῖος κόσμος). (*Gorg.* 506d5-e5)
- (ii) The soul realizes its excellence—justice and self-control—if it is brought into its “own order,” that is, “law” and “lawful” (νόμιμόν τε καὶ νόμος). (*Gorg.*504d)
- (iii) Thus, the soul that is not self-controlled but undisciplined and that has insatiable appetites [like the soul of the *opsophagos*] is lawless and disorderly. (*Gorg.*507a-e)

### *Physiological Disorder*

(T7) *Opson*-makers “fill and fatten (ἐμπλήσαντες καὶ παχύναντες) people’s bodies ... and destroy (προσαπολοῦσιν) their original flesh...bringing sickness (νόσον).” (*Gorg.*518c-d)

(T8) Socrates advised everyone to avoid “those foods that persuade one (τὰ πείθοντα) to eat when one is not hungry ... because they **ruin stomach, heads, and souls** (γὰρ τὰ λυμαινόμενα γαστέρας καὶ κεφαλᾶς καὶ ψυχᾶς). (*Xen. Mem.* 1.3.6)

### *Disorder in Polis and Cosmos*

From the life of pleasure-seekers like the *opsophagos* to the life of the robber (ληστής); from disorder in the individual to disorder in the *polis*:

(T9) “Each of us must flee away from lack of discipline as quickly as his feet will carry him.... He should not allow his appetites to be undisciplined or undertake to fill them up...and live the **life of a robber** (ληστοῦ βίον). **Such a man could not be dear to another man or to a god**, for he is unable to do anything in common (κοινωνεῖν γὰρ ἀδύνατος), and where there’s no sense of community (κοινωνία) there’s no friendship (φιλία)...

The robber (ληστής) takes a greater share by force (“βίαιος,” *Soph.222c5*) through raiding and plundering on land and sea; thus, ‘ληστής’ is sometimes translated as ‘pirate.’ The rober differs from the thief (κλέπτης). His crimes lead to fight and war (*Pol.298d*). The robber is thus a threat to the social order in a more substantial, political sense: robbers/pirates live outside the law.

*Opsophagia* is commonly associated with criminals & political disruptors.<sup>10</sup>

The most serious crime and political disruption is tyranny. Tyrants famously feast and indulge in *opson*.

**(T10)** Plato describes the tyrant as follows: “[they] **are always occupied with feasts** ... and **wander** in this way throughout their lives (πλανῶνται διὰ βίου), ... look[ing] down at the ground like cattle, and, **with their heads bent over the dinner table, they feed, fatten, and fornicate** (εἰς τραπέζας βόσκονται χορταζόμενοι καὶ ὀχεύοντες). **To get a greater share** (πλεονεξίας) in these things, they kick and butt them with iron horns and hooves, killing each other, because their **desires are insatiable**. For the part that they’re trying to fill is like **a vessel full of holes.**” (*Rep. IX 585e-586b*).

From political to cosmic disorder:

**(T11)** ... Wise men claim that partnership and friendship, orderliness (κοσμιότητα), self-control, and justice **hold together heaven and earth**, and gods and men, and that is why they call this universe (τὸ ὅλον) a **world order** (κόσμον), my friend, and not an undisciplined world-disorder (οὐκ ἀκοσμίαν οὐδὲ ἀκολασίαν). ... You’ve failed to notice that **proportionate equality has great power** among both gods and men (ἡ ἰσότης ἡ γεωμετρικὴ καὶ ἐν θεοῖς καὶ ἐν ἀνθρώποις μέγα δύναται), and you suppose that you ought to practice getting the greater share (πλεονεξίαν δεῖν ἀσκεῖν). That’s because you do not care about geometry (γεωμετρίας ἀμελεῖς).” (*Gorg.507c-508a*)

So, I suggest that Socrates warns against *opson*, calls out the *opsophagos*, and attacks *opson*-chefs because...

- *Opson* persuades us to eat more and more, that is, to take a greater share, which promotes individual, political, and even cosmic disorder.
- *Opson*-chefs make *opson* even more tempting; they nourish their consumer’s appetites and thereby promote disorder.
- The *opsophagos* has a lawless soul, and he resorts to lawless behavior—from eating *opson* without bread to crimes like theft, bribery, and even revolution—to get “a greater share” for himself, not only at the dinner table but also in politics.

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<sup>10</sup> Davidson (1995, 1997). See e.g., Diphilus *Merchant* Fr.31 and Wilkins (2000: 297); *Aeschin.1.189-1.191* and Davidson (1995: 210-213).

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