

Summary of *Oikonomika* by Theophrastus

Introduction

This handbook of the successor of Aristotle is the only work on economics that is left from the school that The Philosopher founded, because neither do we know of works from later Aristotelians on this subject nor has he ever written a book about the government of the house himself. I should not put this so bluntly! The first book of the *Politics* of Aristotle exclusively looks into economics. Aristotle had set this first book of his *Politics* even clearly apart from the rest of this work but his intention with *Politics*, I was not to describe attitudes and operations in and around the house or to draft norms for house government or the management of goods.

While Socrates was still playing with the idea that knowledge about the government of the house might be an art and not a science, Theophrastus argues here in his *Oikonomika*, as his work on the government of the house has become titled, that original economics is a science and a separate field of study,ⁱ. He states moreover that this science has two objects: man and goods: *Parts of a house are man and property*. (43a 18) He divides both objects further. 'Man' is split up according to the relationships a governor has in the house. In the house he communicates with his wife, his children and his slaves, each in different way. Economics is supposed to give suggestions for the government of the relationship with successively the wife, the children and the slaves.

Strikingly absent in this booklet of Theophrastus is the subject of self-government of the male adult governor, which had been a central issue in the *Oikonomikos* of Xenophon. In this work Critoboulos had not known how to govern himself, while Ischomachus did. Theophrastus, however, in the *Oikonomika* turns the governor into the only person that is addressed about the government of the family and the management of goods. The position of the governor in this handbook of Theophrastus has become quite different from the one in the investigation of Xenophon, where, as the reader may remember, the husband was shown as governing the house together with his wife and the personal behavior of both was considered crucial for the prosperity of the oikos. It makes one curious which position the Aristotelians are going to adjudge to the wife in the house, the more so while Theophrastus makes the education of children a part of economics, a subject Xenophon had not yet touched. Would education not be a responsibility of the wife?

Maybe I am setting the expectations of the reader too high by suggesting in the first sentence that he or she is going to meet an Aristotelian handbook of original economics. *Oikonomika* reads like a compendium or rather like a collection of notes taken by a student at the course on original economics by Theophrastus in the Lyceum. It not only leaves the impression that Theophrastus gave this course from memory but moreover that he had to leave his class in the middle of his disclosure. Some statements moreover are plainly enigmatic.

Summary

I

Theophrastus first explains that the government of the house is not only different from the government of the city-state because the first one deals with the house and the other one with the city-state but also because the city-state is governed by many and the house by one.

*A few of the arts are subordinated and one and the same (art) does not produce and use the produced, like lyre and flutes (show).*ⁱⁱ (43a 5-6) Under to govern the city-state, however, comes to found it and to use it beautifully, *so that under governing the house comes taking it into possession as well as using it.*ⁱⁱⁱ (43a 8-9).

The state, an amount of houses and land and possessions, is self-sufficient in order to make the good^{iv} life possible. If the people do not achieve this, the association dissolves. Moreover people connect with each other for this purpose (the good life). *The purpose for which everything exists and has become, also happens to be its essence. Therefore it is clear that the government of the house earlier came into being than the government of the city-state. For also her job* ^v *For a house is part of a city state.* (43a 13-16) Theophrastus writes that he is going to look at the government of the house and *what is her job.* (43a 17)

II

Parts of a house are man and property. (43a 18) *Because nature first has to be studied in its smallest parts, this goes for the house too and can Hesiod be followed when he says that primarily a house has a wife and an ox*^{vi}. *For the one comes first for the food, the other for the free.* (43a 22) *And therefore the subject of the beautiful*^{vii} *governing of the association of husband and wife has to be paid attention to, that is to say that it is prepared as should be.* (43a 18-24)

The first care for acquisition is in conformity with nature and in this regard agriculture comes first, followed by mining and so on. Agriculture comes first because *it does not take (anything) from people, neither with their assent, as doing business*^{viii} *and hiring day-labourers, nor against their will, as the warlike occupations.* (43a 27- 30) It is therefore just. It is moreover natural, because feeding is done by the mother and the earth is our mother. Finally agriculture comes first because it enhances the virtue of fortitude. The labour in the open air makes the practitioners of farming physically and mentally strong in opposition to the artisans.

III

Of the care that concerns people the one for the wife comes first. For from nature association between the male and the female is special. (43b 7-9) Nature as well every living creature tries to enforce this bond. The bond of the male and the female is a necessity. *In the other species this happens instinctively, and in as far as they are a part of nature, and only for the sake of fathering children. But it is more subtle in the tames and more with insight equipped (for they seem to come to the rescue of each other, do each other favours and cooperate together), especially in man, because the female and male cooperate with each other not only to accomplish existence but to accomplish good*^{ix} *existence as well.* (43b 13-20)

The acquisition of children is not only an obligation to nature but it is useful too, because at the age that they are strong and healthy the parents care for their children, and once in their old age, the children will take care for them. At the same time, by this periodic movement of the generations, nature manages to continue the species. So by divine power the nature of man and women is organised towards association.

Nature provides for a distribution of labour between man and wife: *For the (divine power) made the one stronger and the other weaker, in order that that the one is more protective because of her fear, and the other more fighting because of his bravery, and the one acquires the necessities from outside and the other puts the things inside in order. And as to the work the one is capable of sitting but for staying under the open sky to weak, and the other for the quiet activities less valuable, but when movements are required well-functioning.* (43b 30 - 44a-6) *As to the children, the engendering is a common matter, the assistance a separate one for they are fed by the ones and educated by the others* (44a 6-10)

IV

Theophrastus presents four action rules for a successful association of the governor of the house and his wife:

- *First then,laws with regard to the wifenot treating unjustly.this way no injustice will not be done to him. This recommends the written and unwritten law, like the Pythagoreans say that one should in no way do injustice to someone who is a suppliant and is lead away from the hearth* (44 a 8-9).

- Wrongful acts of the man are the sexual contacts outside. The couple should sleep with each other sufficiently.
- Hesiod is right when he says: *marry a young maiden, lest you may teach (her) a good way of acting.* (44a 17)
- *As to the dressing and adorning, like one should not approach others boasting about one's character, in the same way one should not do this about one's body.* (44a 18-20)

V

Of the possessions the first and most necessary is the most advantageous and the most capable of leading. And this is man. That is why he [the governor DN] first has to make sure, that he creates dedicated slaves (44a 23-25). There are two categories of slaves: overseers and labourers. The governor of the house should give an education to the young slaves, who later will be entrusted with the more important jobs. *The relation with slaves (should be) such, that there is no brutalizing and (on the other hand) no lessening of pressure and the slaves with responsibility should be given honour and the workmen much food. Because the drinking of wine makes the free ones unmanageable as well, and moreover the wine is kept from the free ones of many classes, like from the Carthaginians in the war, wine should not be given to them, or very seldom.*(44a 29-34)

Three things have to be taken into consideration by the governor of the house: work, punishment and food. When slaves get work or punishment but not food this is violent and creates powerlessness. However to have work and punishment and not food is not just and is the cause of weakness. So work and enough food has to be ensured. (44a 35-44b 3) Slaves are like all other people. When the better ones do not get the better and no awards exist for virtuous behaviour and punishments for misconduct, slaves become less valuable. *That is why one has to take care that everything is spread and distributed (amongst them) according to merit: food, clothing, resting-time and punishment.* (44b7-9) They have to be administered as physician employs medicines, although food is a permanent need.

The best kind of slaves for work are the not weak and on the other hand not rough, because both do damage. For the (slaves that are) too weak do not hold out and the hot-tempered ones are not good leaders. (44b 12-14)

- *Determine a goal for everybody, because they are prepared to work hard when a prize exists and the time period [after which they will be set free DN] is clear.* (44b 15- 17) In this regard it is just and useful to set freedom as a prize.

[Theophrastus still gives a few action rules:]

- *'Take them hostage' by having them raise children,* (44b 17-18)
- *Do not acquire many slaves from the same people (--),* (44b 18)
- *Arrange the sacrificial ceremonies and the enjoyments more because of the slaves than of the free persons* (44b 18-19)

VI

[This last part of Theophrastus *Oikonomika* discusses how the resources should be managed.] *The broad pictures of the governor of the house are four, which he should have with regard to the resources. It is necessary that he is capable of acquiring and preserving. If (he is) not [capable of preserving], the acquiring has nothing useful, because that is to paddle water with a sieve and the proverbial barrel with holes. He has to be skilled in stowing away the goods at his disposal and in making use of them as well. Because for the last two (activities) the first two are necessary.* (44b 22-27)

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[About acquisition DN:] *Each of the possessions has to be distinguished, the fruit bearing possessions have to be larger in amount than the non- fruit bearing ones. The daily tasks have to be distributed in such a way, that all (slaves) will not at the same time be in danger.* (44b 27- 30)

Theophrastus first says about protection that the Persian and Spartan^x ways of doing this may be used. *The Attican way of governing the house is useful as well. They sell buying* [This is selling the whole

harvest on the market and going to the market each day to buy the daily needs, so that a store room is not necessary.], and the building of a storeroom is not necessary in the smaller governments of the house (44 b32-34) The Persian way is to make sure in person that everything is put in its place and that everything becomes watched and what Dion says about Dionysius^{xi} For nobody cares in the same way for the goods of others as for the own (goods), so that the care as far as possible should be taken by oneself^{xii}. The remarks of the Persian and Libyan certainly are very relevant: the one, when asked what makes a horse fattest, said the eye of the master. The Libyan answered on the question which dung is best: de footprints of the master. Some inspection does he, other inspection does the wife, in conformity to how one has divided the jobs of the government of the house over both. (44 b 34- 45 a 5-7) The necessity of supervision by the governors goes for large governments with an overseer as well: it is impossible that those who are made overseers are taking care if masters are not taking care. For who does not give a beautiful^{xiii} example, cannot be imitated beautifully, not in the others nor in the one with an overseer, because it is impossible that if the masters are careless the overseers do take care. (45a 8-11)

While they make virtue beautiful and government of the house advantageous :
masters should rise earlier than their slaves and go to bed later.
a house, just like a city, should never be left unguarded.
what one has to do, should be done, be it at night or during the day. (45 a 11-16.)
Moreover one should stroll (around the premises) in the night, because this is useful for health,
government of the house and philosophy.(45a 16-17)

[Storage is the next subject of this booklet.] In small properties the harvest is immediately brought to the market and the provisions are daily bought. In the large ones (the putting away of the harvest has to be divided) into what will be spent over about a year [= seeds for sowing DN] and what is spent monthly, just like the use of implements is divided in daily and rare use^{xiv}; these things should be trusted to the overseers. They also regularly have to be inspected so that not stays hidden what is kept and what is missing. (45a 19-23).

[He then discusses the lay out of the house.] The house should be equipped with an eye on the possessions and also on health and ease of them [= the people of the house DN]. As to possessions I say (that one has to look at) whatever is beneficial for fruits and clothing, and of fruits what for dried ones and what for succulent ones, and of the other possessions what for animals and what for lifeless things, and for slaves and free people, women and men, foreigners and compatriots. And as to the necessity of favourable weather and health, (one has to ensure) fresh summer wind but winter sun. Such (a house) would face the south and not be square.^{xv}(45a 24- 33)

He suggests for larger house governments to appoint a door-keeper, who is not useful anymore anywhere else and who has to securely guard the ingoing and outgoing stock.
For the good usefulness of the implements the method of the Spartans (is to be employed); for it is necessary that every individual thing is laid on its own place.(45b 1-2) This way one does not need to look for them.^{xvi} (45b 1-3)

[The *Oikonomika* ends here.]

ⁱ This argument can be found in Aristotle's *Politics*, I too.

ⁱⁱ Making flutes and playing flutes are two different arts..

ⁱⁱⁱ Theophrastus here makes the use of the city and that of the house different, without making a point of this difference. The city should be used beautifully, that suggests applying moral correctness (Gr.: καλως), the house just should just be used. The morally good (καλος κ'αγαθος) is however on the back of his mind, as the notes of this Chapter will show.

^{iv} To live well (Gr.:το ευ ζην). Theophrastus does not say 'to live beautifully' here.

^v This short ‘explicative’ sentence is almost incomprehensible, just like the ‘therefore’ in the sentence before it, especially because in the next sentence Theophrastus announces that he is going to look for an answer on the question what is the job of governor of the house, thus way dealing with the very first question of Socrates in the *Oikonomikos* of Xenophon.

^{vi} Hesiod, *Works and days* , 405, cited by Aristotle in his *Politics*, I (1252b 11-12) and Theophrastus repeatedly here in *Oikonomika*. (43a 21) Hesiod’s *Work and days* is a didactic poem of some 800 lines from around 700 BC. It contains quite some agronomy but is not a book on the government of the house.

^{vii} Theophrastus uses beautiful (Gr.: καλῶς) with its moral connotation.

^{viii} This negative remark about doing business (Gr.: καπελεια) is interesting in itself in itself. Aristotle makes in his *Politics I* a distinction between bartering (natural business) and exchanging for money (artificial business)).(1256b 40- 1257a 18)

^{ix} Theophrastus uses good (Gr.: εὖ) here: to be good, prosperous .

^x The Spartan way of protection is not shown by Theophrastus.

^{xi} Dion of Syracuse (c. 410-3543 BC) was brother in law (later son in law) and advisor of Dionysios I (c.430-367 BC), tyrant of Syracuse. When Plato visited Syracuse in 38. Dion becomes impressed and he will still meet the philosopher a few more times.

^{xii} Translation of ‘to make the care’ (Gr.: ποιειν την επιμελειαν).

^{xiii} Theophrastus in this sentence uses ‘beautiful’ (Gr.: καλῶς) with its moral connotation 2 times.

^{xiv} This sentence almost literally can be found in Xenophon’s *Oikonomikos* IX, 7-8.

^{xv} The reader will still often meet this theme of the ideal situation of the farm in the agronomy books, that are going to be mentioned.

^{xvi} This theme was extensively discussed in Xenophon’s *Oikonomikos*, VIII, as we have seen. Ischomachus does not refer to the Spartan method This was a city with common property. Does Theophrastus therefore here refer to the way of stowing away goods in central warehouses?