

## ANCIENT DEBATES ON *AUTARKEIA* AND OUR GLOBAL *IMPASSE*

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### Key concepts

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### ABSTRACT

Probably the most glaring geo-political contradiction today consists between economic inequality on the one hand and the over-exploitation of the planet's resources on the other. Global prosperity is held up as the economic ideal to be striven for, but environmentalists warn of the impossibility to spread the consumerism, on which developed economies rest, to the majority of the world's population. The elements of the conundrum – stimulating needs versus curbing needs – are present in the debates around the notion of self-sufficiency in Classical Greece. *Autarkeia* as philosophical ideal is present in radical form in ancient Cynicism: Diogenes of Sinope interpreted the term as a state of virtual complete lack of need except for the most basic to sustain life. In Cynicism, *autarkeia* became a goal in itself, but the impossibility of its consistent implementation found expression in the tradition of Diogenes living in cities and begging for subsistence. The notion, however, found various definitions during the 5<sup>th</sup> century already. Hippias of Elis (as from Plato's *Protagoras* and *Hippias Major*) was probably the first to promote it to the status of moral *telos*, but Thucydides' Pericles also boasted of Athens' *autarkeia* (as the ability to provide in its own needs) which somehow translated into self-sufficient citizens (Thuc. 2.36.3; 41.2). As was recently argued (Moles 1996; Irwin 2012), Herodotus' dialogue between Solon and Croesus (Hdt.1.30-33) should be read against the background of Athenian politics under Pericles and was meant as a warning against a particular definition of happiness (as wealth) and a concomitant view of self-sufficiency reliant on the city's empire. At the heart of the debate lie two opposing views of self-sufficiency: the ability to satisfy all possible needs, or the ability to be content with catering for the fewest possible needs. In between these radical definitions were others, more moderate, to be found: Socrates, for instance, as well as his pupil Antisthenes, endeavoured to limit need in order to obtain freedom from daily drudgery and practise philosophy (cf. Xen. *Mem.* 1.2, 6); Aristotle defines the life of the gods as one of *autarkeia* in order to promote

contemplation as the highest moral goal (*EN* 10.7-8). The various positions invariably associated their definitions of *autarkeia* with a particular idea of happiness. This paper suggests that the ancient debate on self-sufficiency should be brought closer to the centre of current moral discourse. In particular, since the dominating view of happiness in popular conceptions equates to “the ability to satisfy all possible needs”, it is asked whether the ideals on the other side of the spectrum (Socrates, Antisthenes, Diogenes) are not deserving of serious consideration in order to escape from the current *impasse* which not only causes social and political tension, but can only lead to disaster.

The notion of self-sufficiency (Greek *autarkeia*) is gaining prominence in the context of probably the most pressing dilemma of our times, namely that of the conflicting demands of economic growth and ecological sustainability. Within this controversy, self-sufficiency is promoted as a viable counter-ideal to rampant consumerism. This article presents a survey of the use of the notion in ancient Greek literature of the classical era, in order to show that, by itself, *autarkeia* does not present a simple solution due to the variety in its ancient usage. While the Greeks of archaic and classical times widely agreed on the desirability of the condition, some interpreted it as being able to fulfil any need that might arise and others as restricting need to the bare minimum. The notion was furthermore applied to both individual and state. There was no consensus that the individual could in fact reach a state of complete self-sufficiency: the radical but experimental *autarkeia* of the Cynic sage was admired but nonetheless generally rejected as incompatible to civil society. Consequently, authors of the fourth century transposed *autarkeia* to the social units of household and city-state, although even here its attainability remained dubious. The notion lived on in the restricted form of the self-sufficiency of virtue in the Stoic pursuit of happiness.

The article focuses on the point of intersection between two global moral issues besetting our current era: between the quest for economic equality and global prosperity on the one hand, and, on the other, the growing awareness of our planet’s limited resources and tolerance of exploitation. There is little need to argue for the importance of either of these. The world is still reeling – on economic, political and personal levels – in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis and the sudden drop in economic activity it caused. South Africa continues sharing the difficulties of developing economies in particular with poverty and huge income disparity. While advances in the eradication of abject poverty across the globe are encouraging, the number of sub-Saharan

people living in extreme poverty increases steadily (World Bank Report, April 2013). Economic inequality is an issue within developing economies, but also between north and south and increasingly within developed economies. Its most vocal South African presence, the populist Economic Freedom Fighters, is making some impression on the local political scene. Indications of inequality's global purchase are the recent Occupy movement and resistance to the so-called 1%, and the success of popular press publications by Stiglitz (2012) and Piketty (2013; transl. 2014). Opinion diverges along traditional political lines on how capital should be distributed (either state intervention or progressive taxation) but economists and monetary institutions like the World Bank overwhelmingly prefer global economic growth as the silver bullet for most economic woes.

This preference, however, presses against the other global awareness drive coming from the environmentalist-ecological side. Neglect and destruction of the natural environment, overexploitation of the earth's resources, and climate change are among the topics in the public consciousness. Ecologists warn that indiscriminate economic growth of the kind since the industrial revolution is not sustainable. They also point to the fact that prosperity and energy consumption are inseparable: the wealthier we get, the larger our ecological footprint; the more we consume, the more energy we burn. The world faces a double bind from which there is no clear way out (Garrett 2012). We simply cannot continue like we used to, and not all inhabitants of the planet can simultaneously live as expansively as the industrialised countries have been accustomed to. It has become evident that countries higher on the human development index, more than the poor majority, are responsible for the ecology deficit (cf. Global Footprint Network). Does an escape from the *impasse* exist? Finding an answer to this question should occupy the best minds on the planet in years to come: re-imagining a world in which both conditions – a prosperous, economically just world *and* a sustainable natural environment – can be met. The conundrum is not one to be faced through guarding factional interests and should not be left to the economists to solve on their own.

In contrast to the enormity of the problem, this article has a modest scope, namely to consider one partial solution which has been raised from the environmentalist side. Ecology-minded movements tend to promote personal behaviour and moral ideals that would break the patterns of consumption in the developed world and temper the ambitions for material accumulation of the developing world. These are typically found in greater balance between

humans and their environment, that is, in a simple life apprehensive of excess and in closer harmony to nature. That such personal aspirations have political potential, is indicated by the influential Deep Ecology view that reduced consumption by way of greater simplicity and self-sufficiency is best achieved through decentralising autonomy (Naess 1973: 98).

Self-sufficiency thus acquires a significance that makes it worthy of further consideration. Modern champions may be unaware that the ancients already employed the notion with considerable sophistication. The term was coined in ancient Greece as *autarkeia*, and the aim of this article is to gain more clarity on the range of its use in antiquity. The current scope does not allow the treatment of ancient *autarkeia* at any great depth (for which, cf. Krischer 2000; Most 1989; Wheeler 1955, Wilpert 1950), hence the following delimitations apply: first, I consider selected views from the classical period (fifth and fourth centuries BC); secondly, I will deal with how the notion relates to two opposing views on need, that is, either to satisfy any possible need, or to curb need to the minimum so that *autarkeia* becomes easier to attain. For the sake of convenience, the former will be referred to as “*autarkeia*-by-affluence” and the latter as “frugal *autarkeia*”. These two views correlate broadly to the two sides of the global *impasse* identified above, namely stimulating demand *versus* controlling consumption. Finally, I will focus on *autarkeia* as a personal quality, only briefly considering it as a quality of the state. I conclude with a few observations on how the ancient debates on *autarkeia* may apply to the conundrum facing us.

### **Cultural significance and origins of the notion**

In modern discourse, self-sufficiency is a vaguely familiar notion but neither a sought-after ideal nor seen as of any central concern. It is often associated with individuals and communities on the fringes of society, and only occasionally elevated into mainstream economy with reference to food security or indispensable commodities. In antiquity, however, things were different: almost without exception, the Greeks thought self-sufficiency to be a good, in fact, one of the very best of qualities an individual (and a city) can aspire to. This is not difficult to prove. First, in ancient Greek philosophy self-sufficiency came to be an essential feature of the gods, that is, they valued the quality so highly that they projected it onto the nature of the gods. To mention but one example: when Plato’s Socrates in the *Timaeus* 68e postulates that the demiurge created the

supreme god, he is described as the “*autarke te kai teleotaton theon*”, the “self-sufficing and most perfect god” (see also Plato *Def.* 411a3). The gods became self-sufficient in obvious contradiction to traditional religious practices (e.g., sacrifice, prayer) and conceptions of the gods in traditional myth (e.g., that they are sensitive to honour). Secondly, also the supreme good (*to agathon*) has this quality: in Plato’s *Philebus* 67a, the good is self-sufficient, adequate and perfect/final (*autarkeias kai tēs tou hikanou kai teleou dynameos*); and in the *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b Aristotle establishes happiness (*eudaimonia*) to be the supreme good because of two qualities: it is more complete (*teleion*) than contending goods (i.e., pursued for its own sake, without having a further goal), and it is also *autarkes*. Thirdly, the contemplative life is the most sought-after manner of living, again because it is self-sufficient: the contemplating man needs nothing external to himself to perform the action (*EN* 1177a). By linking the notion to the gods, the highest good, and the most perfect way of conducting one’s life, the great philosophers of the fourth century BC express an extraordinary and even surprising high regard for the condition of self-sufficiency. Since the same high regard is shared by less theoretically minded authors like Xenophon (cf. *Mem.* 1.2.14), it appears that its esteem did not arise from any philosophical necessity, but from it being an established cultural ideal.

The term’s origins are to be found not in theology or ethics, but in the physical hardship and scarcity of Greece in the pre-classical era (Krischer 2000: 260-61). Life in archaic Greece was tough, and it was an accomplishment for the majority of the population to simply make ends meet and so to maintain one’s independence. The shared aspiration of the majority of the population was to be able to care and fend for yourself and those around you with adequate sustenance and protection. This was to be achieved by harnessing an acknowledged set of qualities and skills, including hard work, intelligence, foresight and moderation. More often than not it meant being content with what was at hand, and so *autarkeia* was transferred from being externally conditioned to the required mental attitude for dealing with scarcity. On occasion, the necessity to get by with as little as possible even transformed into a positive ideal, recently referred to by Desmond (2012: 1-6) as a “cult of voluntary self-deprivation”.

The notion’s evolution is mirrored in the linguistic development of the term *autarkeia* and its cognates. The compound consists of the reflexive prefix attached to the stem *ark-*. In Homer, the verb *arkeo* has the more limited meaning of “to keep/ward off” and “to protect” (Autenrieth 1931: 54; Mehler 1962: 125; see Latin *arceo*, “to shut up, enclose” and “prevent,

hinder, protect, guard”, Lewis & Short 1980: 153.). After Homer, it gradually attained the further connotations of “to be strong enough”, “to suffice”, and “to be satisfied or content with” (Liddell, Scott & Jones 1953: 242). The composite form *aut+arkeia* appears only some 250 years later: in Democritus, it has the meaning of “dependent upon your own resources” and “sufficing with what is at your disposal” (Democr. D111 in Taylor 1999: “Foreign travel teaches self-sufficiency; barley-bread and straw are the pleasantest remedies for hunger and weariness”). Aristotle’s fourth century technical definition of *autarkes* contains two elements: it is “choice-worthy” (*haireton*) and it “lacks nothing” (*mēdenos endea*; *EN* 1097b), that is, describing a desirable condition that does not exist for the sake of a further, higher goal. Something that possesses this quality is self-contained, independent, not needing anything from outside itself to be complete.

On close analysis, one may discern two meanings combined in the concept: (1) the ability to defend oneself (i.e., having no deficiency against external threat) and (2) having no unfulfilled need (i.e., having no internal deficiency; cf. also Warnach 1971: 685). The term had come to denote a mix of invulnerability and independence, which could be understood in a physical or a mental sense (or both), and intellectuals promoting the ideal tended to emphasise a particular combination of these ingredients.

Retrospectively, the most striking embodiment of self-sufficiency in antiquity was by the Cynic philosophers. The figure that vividly comes to mind is Diogenes of Sinope who in legend had no permanent dwelling, carried his meagre belongings with him in a knapsack, and wore the same folded cloak whatever the season. At some stage, so the tradition goes, he threw away even his wooden cup when he saw a boy drinking from his hands. “That child”, he said, “has beaten me in simplicity (*euteleia*)” (DL 6.37). When once his slave deserted him, Diogenes declared that “it would be absurd if Manes can do without Diogenes, but Diogenes not without Manes” (DL 6.55).

Desmond (2012) argues that the Cynics emerged from a hallowed Greek tradition praising the condition of poverty and the virtues it produced. Whether Cynic poverty led to Cynic philosophy or *vice versa* is a moot point, but they were not the only intellectuals drawing from the well of *autarkeia*. Ancient evidence suggests that their uncompromising practical austerity, which drew attention for its radicalism, was but one manifestation in the market-place of ideas on self-sufficiency at the time. Though no evidence exists for an ancient debate

specifically on the term's meaning, it is clear that various definitions and interpretations of the concept were current among Greek intellectuals of the fifth and fourth centuries BC. Since the differences in point of view were closely tied to the advantages and disadvantages of wealth, Aristotle may well include differences on the interpretation of *autarkeia* when he mentions in the *Politics* 1326b that “there are many controversies on this issue, due to those drawing us into either extreme of life, the one group towards parsimony (*glischrotēs*) and the other towards luxury (*tryphē*)”. The two sides differed on how to deal with human need: on the (imagined) right were those who understood self-sufficiency as being able to cater for any personal need that might arise, and on the left those who believed that self-sufficiency is about restricting need to what is truly necessary.

### **Two opposing views on need**

For the sake of argument, we may call Diogenes' version the radical left of frugal *autarkeia*. The Cynic definition of *autarkeia* entailed an austere, ascetic lifestyle that limited need to what was essential for sustaining life. Diogenes earned himself the nickname “the Dog” for his radical adherence to a life *kata physin*. Rich (1991: 233) argues that also the Cynic mental attitude derives from their position on self-sufficiency: they advocated both *physical* contentment with the bare necessities, and “detachment from the world and worldly values” on the spiritual plane: “the *autarkēs* was the man who had dispensed with the superfluous in every department of life and reduced his needs to the minimum”.

To the right of the debate we may situate the fifth century sophist Hippias of Elis who was said to have made *autarkeia* his philosophical goal (cf. Węcowski 2009 T1, who refers to Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 2.127.1-131.1 on the same *telos* in the Abderites, in particular Hecataeus). Most of what we know about Hippias comes from Plato, who named two dialogues after him (*Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*) and also featured him prominently in the *Protagoras*. The finer detail an ironic Plato pencils into these portrayals are perhaps not directly relevant, but the general picture, of a somewhat superficial polymath with total recall and an impressive arsenal of intellectual skills, probably is. Equally significant, in my view, is Socrates' recollection of him appearing at the Olympics with luxurious clothes and apparel all made by himself, including a ring, lavish cloak, tunic and sandals (Pl. *Hip. Min.* 368a). If this may indeed be linked to his *telos*

(Węcowski 2009 T2 is skeptical), Hippias probably considered *autarkeia* as a comprehensive set of personal skills, and the *autarkēs* as something of a savant able to satisfy all his needs – intellectual and material - by his own means. The difference between him and Diogenes thus lies in the issue of needs: Diogenes wished to curb need, and Hippias to satisfy all needs from his own resources.

We find other differences in understanding, and perhaps traces of a debate, in Herodotus and Xenophon as part of discussions on whether wealth equates to happiness (cf. Irwin 2012). In Herodotus, the fictional discourse between the wise Athenian Solon and the super-rich Croesus includes an unexpected turn to *autarkeia*. On Croesus' question, why Solon does not consider him exceptionally fortunate, Solon replies, among others, that no man can be *autarkēs* (1.32.8):

It is impossible for one who is only human to obtain all these things at the same time, just as no land is self-sufficient in what it produces. Each country has one thing but lacks another; whichever has the most is the best. Just so no human being is self-sufficient; each person has one thing but lacks another. Whoever passes through life with the most and then dies agreeably is the one who, in my opinion, O King, deserves to bear this name (transl. Godley 1920).

The passage and its context suggest a close interplay between the notion of *autarkeia* and being prosperous or fortunate (*olbios*) versus being lucky (*eutychea*). Wealth is the means by which to attain *autarkeia*, presumably by making a person less vulnerable and more autonomous. Herodotus' definition of *autarkeia* thus seems to correlate with that of Hippias, namely the ability to satisfy all needs, "to be in the possession of all these things". Crucially, however, he differs from Hippias on the attainability of the ideal, both for a single mortal and for a single land. Herodotus adds a further ingredient to the mix, namely that of "looking to the end", that is, of factoring in fortune's vicissitude over time: even if you do possess great fortune now, you might lose it at any moment (as subsequently happened to Croesus). The person who manages to retain a consistently high level of *autarkeia* throughout his life can be considered the most fortunate, and for that great wealth is no guarantee; on the contrary, the person of moderate means has a better chance if he does not put all his happiness eggs in the one basket of wealth, so to speak.



It has been argued that Herodotus here warns against and criticises the view prevalent in Periclean Athens that wealth equates to happiness (Irwin 2012; Moles 1996). Some scholars have seen this view reflected in the famous funeral oration Thucydides put in the mouth of Pericles himself. The oration has two references to *autarkeia*, the first pertaining to the city and its empire:

We ourselves...have strengthened this empire yet further in most areas and furnished the city with every possible resource for self-sufficiency in war and peace (2.36; transl. Hammond 2009).

And the second to the individual citizens of the city:

...each man among us seems to me to apply himself self-sufficiently and with particular dexterity and grace to the greatest variety of circumstances (2.41).

If the speech may be read as an attempt by the historian to reflect the views of the historical Pericles, the famous statesman's definition leans towards the *autarkeia*-by-affluence position, akin to that of Hippias in apparently being attainable not only by the city as a whole (including its vast empire or *archē*), but also by its citizens individually. But the political *autarkeia* differs from that of the citizen. For the city, *autarkeia* means the satisfaction of all needs in favourable as well as adverse conditions, while for individuals it refers to the competence to deal with whatever eventualities might come across their way. Athens' *autarkeia* is material; that of her citizens is mental.

The second clash of views I would like to mention is from Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 1.6.1-10, between Socrates and the sophist Antiphon. In this recollection, Antiphon, on the prowl for students, accosts Socrates for apparently deserting the philosophical aim of greater happiness (*tous philosophountas eudaimonesterous chrēnai gignesthai*); instead, he looks like a "teacher of misfortune" (*kakodaimonias didaskalos*). In a description remarkably reminiscent of Cynic austerity, Antiphon accuses Socrates of such a substandard existence that even a slave treated in such a manner would rather desert his master: his food and drink are the worst, and he goes barefoot wearing the same wretched cloak all year around. This is not by necessity but by choice, since Socrates refuses to accept fees for his teaching. In Antiphon's own, contrary view, the

pursuit of money itself is a joy (*euphranei*), but once acquired, money makes your life “freer and sweeter” (*eleutherioteron te kai hedion*). Antiphon thus represents the position that wealth leads to happiness due to the freedom and enjoyment it affords.

In his answering speech, Socrates outlines his own project of self-sufficiency by means of austerity: his freedom is of a more fundamental kind than that claimed by Antiphon, since he is free to have discussions of his own choosing, and not constrained to converse with those who pay him. Secondly, Socrates draws the sharp distinction, better known from later Epicureanism, between conventional needs and those needs which are natural and necessary: his humble food and drink are no less wholesome, satisfying, or flavoursome than Antiphon’s more expensive variety. On top of that, it is more readily available and Socrates appreciates it more. Clothing he reduces to function alone, for which the simplest garments suffice as much as anything else. His need for elaborate protection of his body is further reduced because he “cares for”/“trains” (the verb used is *melētan*) his body to endure any hardship that might come his way. This puts his way of life above that advocated by Antiphon both on a personal and on a social level: personally, he experiences the joy of continuously “becoming better and making better friends” (*beltiō gignesthai kai philous ameinous ktasthai*); on a social level, he is much more useful to the common cause. For, Socrates asks, who will cope best in a crisis (war or siege): the man of elaborate wants, or the man to whom whatever comes to hand suffices? Socrates ends his speech by stating explicitly that the difference between him and Antiphon is precisely in how they define happiness and *autarkeia*:

You, Antiphon, seem to think that happiness consists of luxury (*tryphē*) and extravagance (*polyteleia*), while I reckon that to need nothing (*to men mēdenos deisthai*) is divine and to need the least is closest to the divine; and since the divine is most powerful (*kratiston*), that which is closest to the divine is the most powerful (Xen. *Mem.* 1.6.10).

The expression “to need nothing” is, as we have seen, the equivalent of *autarkeia*. Socrates also seems to redefine happiness from the perspective of the gods, and relating his aim for *autarkeia* not simply to happiness, but to a position of power and to what I attempted to describe in terms of invulnerability and independence. From the context of the debate, Socrates’ *autarkeia*, as restricting want, is beneficial in various ways; among others, it is a condition for intellectual freedom, integrity and the search for truth.

Socrates is not the only figure that Xenophon describes along these lines. Dorion and Menn (2005) list a wide spectrum of others (Cyrus, Simonides, Agesilaus, Lycurgus) to ask whether this is due to the imprint of Socrates on his view of admirable people, or rather to a pre-existing ideal reproduced in virtually all his characters. In Xenophon's *Symposium* 4.34-44, the proto-Cynic Antisthenes emerges as another of these "avatars", when he claims paradoxically to be rich while in fact dirt poor, because true wealth consists of being inwardly (*en tais psychais*) content with what you have. It is unclear if Antisthenes can be said to consider *autarkeia* an end in itself (cf. Prince 2012), because he lists a number of benefits from his "wealth" that has close parallels to Socrates' arguments for "needing as little as possible": it makes him appreciative of the little he has, it makes him generous, his greatest enjoyment is of the wealth in his soul, and he has the leisure to do what he likes best, namely to converse with Socrates (cf. Socrates' "converse with whom you like to" and "becoming better and making better friends"). If *autarkeia* is desirable for its spin-offs, it does not fulfil the condition of a philosophical *telos* to be desirable for its own sake. But in the particular case of the portrayal of Socrates, Xenophon appears to have had a further, polemical agenda, in that he systematically replaced the Platonic emphasis on wisdom (*sophia*) as the defining quality of Socrates, with *enkrateia* (self-mastery) and *karteria* (hardiness, endurance of physical pain; Dorion & Menn 2005). These two aspects together serve and lead to *autarkeia*, which he here in the *Memorabilia* 1.6.10 claims to be the life that closest resembles that of the gods.

We saw that Herodotus rejected the attainability of *autarkeia*-by-affluence both for cities and for individuals. But how did the ancients view the attainability of frugal *autarkeia*? Xenophon's Socrates puts its full realisation out of reach for mere mortals: it remains a quality reserved for the gods. The same applies, ultimately, to the Cynic tradition. Plato, as one anecdote relates, referred to Diogenes as Socrates-gone-mad, probably because he pushed the milder form of austerity of Socrates and Antisthenes to a new extreme. But even such extremity could not reach complete *autarkeia*, as is evidenced by the Cynic tradition itself which, in depicting Diogenes as a beggar, shows him to remain parasitic on society. Diogenes' pupil Onesicritus, of course, presented Diogenes' asceticism as mild compared to the Indian gymnosophists (cf. Strabo 15.1.61-66). The point of the unattainability of individual self-sufficiency is picked up in a late Cynic, Perigrinus, who noted that even the follower of Diogenes needs a leather-cutter, wood-cutter and weaver for his poor man's outfit (Tatian, *Orationes ad Graecos* 25; cf. Dudley

2003: 178; Rich 1991: 234-239). The Stoics, though retaining admiration for austerity, preferred *autarkeia* as a moral descriptor, while later ancient tradition in general tended to present the Cynics either as misanthropic misfits or as having a special status in probing the limits of a life “according to nature” (*kata physin*).

Like Herodotus, Plato and Aristotle are doubtful that an individual can reach complete self-sufficiency, whether of the frugal or of the affluent variety. In the *Republic* (369b), Plato argues that precisely their inability to cater for all wants on their own was the reason why people decided to gather in cities. Aristotle is critical of employing *autarkeia* for individuals “living a life of isolation” (*tō zōnti bion monōtēn*) because man is by a nature a “political thing” (*EN* 1097b; cf. also *Pol.* 1253a). This means that the level of self-sufficiency attainable is relative to the size of the social unit. In the *Pol.* 1261b he states, cryptically but in line with the thinking of Plato, that “the family is more self-sufficient than the individual and the city than the family, and a city only professes to exist when it establishes its community of numbers to be self-sufficient” (cf. also *Pol.* 1281a).

Thus both Plato and Aristotle are more comfortable with the notion when applied to the political arena. Aristotle in the *Pol.* 1326b goes so far as to assert that “a city is *autarke*”, presumably meaning that this is an essential feature of a city in order to be called a city. It is doubtful that Aristotle would have claimed absolute self-sufficiency to be a condition for a city. Plato was well aware of the necessity of trade in the world he lived in (cf. *Resp.* 2.370e), hence one must take into account the idealising mode of their theorising (Wheeler 1955: 418-420). Both would certainly have been critical of the Periclean notion of the successful city becoming self-sufficing through the possession of an empire (which Wheeler 1995: 420 regards as referring to “our system of interdependent cities”; cf. criticism of Pericles in Pl. *Gorg.* 515d-516d). Isocrates also rejects the idea of a self-sufficing Greek city, an argument he uses to advocate pan-Hellenic unity (*Panegyricus* 42), thus pointing to the idea of self-sufficiency for an even larger unit, the nation-state. It seems, then, that to the great thinkers of the fourth century (as to Xenophon’s Socrates), self-sufficiency remained a non-absolute ideal, and much less realistic to accomplish for an individual than for a city-state, an empire or a confederate state.

### ***Autarkeia* as a personal quality**

Before wrapping up the argument, the issue of how *autarkeia* relates to the philosophical *telos* warrants a brief observation. Apart from what the Suda says about Hippias, the philosophical line running from the Xenophontic Socrates through Antisthenes to the Cynics, comes closest to state *autarkeia* as the *telos*. But in both the cases of Socrates and Antisthenes, it appears as if self-sufficiency is a good not for itself, but for its desirable consequences like freedom and leisure. The early Cynic self-sufficiency is even closer to an ideal state, but here too *autarkeia* is not a goal in itself, but serves, among other things, as a defence against the vicissitudes of life and the fickleness of fate. Early Cynicism does put great emphasis on practical implementation, but remains within the post-Socratic philosophical programme. *Autarkeia* thus appears not to have been in competition to happiness as an end pursued for its own sake, hence Aristotle's preference to employ it as a quality of the *telos* rather than as the *telos* itself.

The notion of self-sufficiency has been introduced into reflection on how to counter consumerism with a view to sustainable existence on the planet. While the ideal to reduce consumption is laudable as a long-term goal, self-sufficiency emerges as a complex notion, as the above survey of its use by ancient intellectuals has aimed to show. In contemporary thought, the notion entails - rather vaguely - that we should strive to get by with less. The ancient Cynic philosophers and Diogenes of Sinope in particular, serve as an ancient example within a tradition of admiration for austerity and asceticism. Closer scrutiny of the concept of *autarkeia* reveals a wide range of meanings and nuances attached to the term. The concept arose as a cultural ideal in response to a context of hardship and scarcity, and aimed at coping with what was at hand in order to achieve or maintain invulnerability and independence. It meant providing in one's own needs from one's own resources, which could be interpreted as increasing one's own resources (Hippias, Thucydides/Pericles) or reducing one's needs (Diogenes). For some the emphasis lay on the material provision in need, for others on the mental detachment from superfluous need. Some attempted to accomplish *autarkeia* on an individual basis (Hippias, Socrates, Diogenes) and others as a political condition (Pericles, Aristotle). But the ancients seem to have been sceptical about whether it could be accomplished at all in an absolute sense, whether as an individual (Herodotus, Aristotle) or as a city (Herodotus, Plato, Isocrates). Attempts at individual *autarkeia* through austerity were admired as aspiring to the divine condition (Xenophon's Socrates), but never managed any wide-spread following for its experimental and unsocial

character. The evidence suggests that self-sufficiency was in general thought of as an ideal, the attainability of which was relative to the size of the socio-political unit.

## Conclusion

This article is not the proper platform for a detailed comparison of the ancient and modern notions of self-sufficiency, hence only a few general observations have to suffice. It should be noted that the ancient and modern notions share the aspect of scarcity: the ancient notion has physical scarcity as its context of origin, and the modern term has the awareness of limited planetary resources as its *raison d'être*. The ancient concept evolved over time into an ideal largely divorced from its origins, to be aspired for voluntarily and not out of necessity. This voluntary aspect the classical ideal again shares with its modern counterpart, but an important difference comes into play in terms of the kind of ethics in which it operates. The ancient *autarkeia* functioned in a largely teleological ethical system, where it was aspired to for the benefits it could bring, such as autonomy and freedom, leisure and – ultimately – happiness. The modern concept, on the other hand, operates in a deontological ethics, where moral duty is stressed for the higher purpose of reducing consumption, exploitation and unsustainability. Finally, whereas the ancients focused on the individual, the family and the *polis* as the arenas for its implementation, modern advocates have to contend with a globalised economy with huge challenges of its own, poverty and inequality being among the most pressing. Within this world, where both the wealthy and the needy stand to gain from growth through spending, those wishing to sell self-sufficiency as an ideal face an uphill battle. On the other hand, if the battle is postponed until the ideal has again become a necessity, it might be too late.

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