V. HISTORY AS MATTER FOR PHILOSOPHY: THE *PARALLEL LIVES*

Reading Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* is a fascinating encounter with the history of the ancient world. It includes witnessing the foundation of Athens (*Thes.* 24.1–3) and Rome (*Rom.* 11.1–12.1); participating in the battles of Salamis (*Arist.* 9.1–4; *Them.* 13.1–15.4), Pharsalus (*Pomp.* 69.1–72.6; *Caes.* 42.1–45.8), Philippi (*Brut.* 49.1–10), and Actium (*Ant.* 65.1–66.8);[1] marvelling at Alexander sitting on Darius' throne (*Alex.* 37.7); being dazzled by the wonderful buildings on the Acropolis (*Per.* 12.1–13.14); watching in dismay as Caesar is killed with twenty-three dagger blows (*Caes.* 66.1–14); sharing Pyrrhus' desperation with one more victory (*Pyrrh.* 21.14); and standing aghast at the rape of the Sabines (*Rom.* 14.1–15.7), the tragic fate of Spartacus (*Crass.* 8.1–11.10), and Hannibal's triumph at Cannae (*Fab.* 16.1–9). It is a rendezvous with so many distinguished figures of Greek and Roman history: the protagonists and antagonists of the *Lives*, of course, but also the many less-known figures behind the scene, like Mnesiphilus, the teacher of Themistocles (*Them.* 2.6–7) or Damon, the brains behind the young Pericles (*Per.* 4.1–4). The decisive moments of history, such as Caesar's famous *alea iacta est* before his crossing of the Rubicon (*Caes.* 32.8; *Pomp.* 60.4), or his *veni vidi vici* at Zela (*Caes.* 50.3), are juxtaposed with 'petite histoire' with all its juicy anecdotes: Demetrius' liaison with Lamia (*Demetr.* 27.1–14), Pericles' relationship with Aspasia (*Per.* 24.2–12), Pompey's fondness for Flora (*Pomp.* 2.5–8), and, of course, Antony's notorious affair with Cleopatra (*Ant.* 36.1–7; 53.5–12; 71.4–86.9).

The *Parallel Lives* are an inexhaustible source of information: we read how Archimedes was killed (*Marc.* 19.8–12) and how the famous sculptor Phidias met his end (*Per.* 31.5), how the opulent Crassus as a young man lived in a cave from fear of Marius (*Crass.* 4.1–6.1), how Agesilaus used a stick as a hobbyhorse when playing with his children (*Ages.* 25.11), and how Demosthenes shaved one side of his head in order to force himself to stay inside and practise his vocal

[1] Quite strikingly, the Battle of Chaeronea, the great disaster where the Greeks lost their freedom, is only alluded to (*Dem.* 20.2–3; *Alex.* 9.2) but never related in detail. On Plutarch's account of other celebrated battles like those of Aegospotami, Leucra, and Sellasia, see Pelling 2019.

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production (*Dem.* 7.6). In many respects, the *Parallel Lives* are the *via regia* to the ancient world, and walking this road is never boring or disappointing, for Plutarch is an extremely talented storyteller. Many of his biographies contain 'great scenes'[2] that are elaborated in lively detail.[3] The *Parallel Lives* are the absolute culmination of his biographical technique.

They were not, however, his first biographical project, for he had already written the *Lives of the Caesars*, a series of connected biographies of Roman emperors from Augustus to Vitellius.[4] Only two of them (*Galba* and *Otho*) are still extant. In both, much attention is given to the Platonic idea of the precarious dependence of a commander on his army (*Galba* 1.3; cf. Plato, *Resp.* 375b4–c6). This is a guiding thought throughout these *Lives*, crystallized in the recurrent motif of severed heads.[5] Plutarch also wrote individual biographies, such as the *Life of Aratus* and the *Life of Artaxerxes*.[6] These, though not conceived as (part of) a pair, have much in common with the *Parallel Lives*.

Of these *Parallel Lives*, twenty-two pairs have come down to us. They consist of one Greek and one Roman.[7] The first pair, which does not survive, probably dealt with the lives of Epameinondas and Scipio.[8] We know that the fifth pair was *Demosthenes–Cicero* (*Dem.* 3.1), the tenth *Pericles–Fabius Maximus* (*Per.* 2.5), and the twelfth *Dion–Brutus* (*Dion* 2.7). However, the relative chronology of the whole series is particularly difficult to reconstruct, especially since the time of composition may often have been different from the time of publication. There are many cross-references between different *Lives*, but their reliability is not always clear and they sometimes even contradict one another. Nikolaidis, the most recent scholar to discuss this *quaestio vexata* in detail, proposes the following order of publication:[9]

[2] Frazier 1992; Duff 2015: 138–48.

[3] On the vividness (*enargeia*) of Plutarch's writing, see, e.g., Mueller 1995; see also Salcedo Parrondo 2005 (on the *Life of Alcibiades*) and Soares 2007 (on the *Life of Artaxerxes*).

[4] On these *Lives*, see C. Jones 1971: 72–80; Georgiadou 1988 and 2014; Stadter 2015b: 56–69.

[5] Ash 1997.

[6] A brief presentation of both *Lives* can be found in Almagor 2014. On *Aratus*, see further Koster 1937; Porter 1937; Stadter 2015a. On *Artaxerxes*, see Binder 2008; Mossman 2010.

[7] With one exception, viz. *Agis/Cleomenes–Gracchi*. On Plutarch's choice of the heroes, see Geiger 1981, 2002, and 2005; on his criteria for juxtaposing two heroes in one pair, see Frazier 1987 and Desideri 1992b.

[8] Unfortunately enough, this pair has been lost. There is much discussion about the identity of the lost Scipio; see on this esp. Herbert 1957 (further bibliography in Duff 2011b: 259 n. 207). The case is still *sub iudice*.

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Epameinondas – Scipio
Pelopidas – Marcellus
Cimon – Lucullus
Philopoemen – Flamininus
Demosthenes – Cicero
Lycurgus – Numa
Theseus – Romulus
Solon – Publicola
Themistocles – Camillus
Pericles – Fabius Maximus
Aemilius – Timoleon
Dion – Brutus
Aristides – Cato Maior
Alexander – Caesar
Agesilaus – Pompey
Phocion – Cato Minor
Demetrius – Antony
Coriolanus – Alcibiades
Nicias – Crassus
Agis / Cleomenes – Gracchi
Lysander – Sulla
Sertorius – Eumenes
Pyrrhus – Marius

Several arguments on which this order is based remain quite hypothetical though, and the absolute chronology is no less uncertain. The most likely guess is that Plutarch began writing the *Parallel Lives* after AD 96 and continued until his death.[10]

Many of the Greek *Lives* deal with famous figures of the classical period (notably from Athens, but also from Sparta and Thebes), but Hellenistic statesmen and generals receive a fair deal of attention too (especially in later *Lives*). The Roman *Lives*, for their part, include several biographies of early kings and generals (going back to Romulus himself) but also focus on the leading figures of the Late Republic from the Gracchi to Antony.

As a rule, each book consists of four components: a proem, the first *Life*, the second *Life*, and a concluding comparison (*synkrisis*) of the two protagonists.[11] Not all books, however, have a proem or *synkrisis*. The

[9] Nikolaidis 2005; earlier attempts include C. Jones 1966 and Delvaux 1995.
[10] Thus C. Jones 1966: 70.
[11] Duff 2011b.

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two *Lives* are nearly always placed in chronological order (which usually implies that the Greek comes first),[12] with the second one often providing an interesting and complicating variation of the first.[13]

1. The purpose of the *Parallel Lives*

Although many different views have been proposed concerning the goal of the *Parallel Lives*, scholars now basically agree about their moral purpose.[14] This scholarly consensus rests on the analysis of several famous proems. In the celebrated proem to the book *Alexander–Caesar*, for instance, Plutarch explains that his heuristic method is conditioned by his moral interest (1.2):

> It is not *Histories* that I am writing, but *Lives*; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice; nay, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities.[15]

The proems to the pairs *Aemilius–Timoleon* and *Pericles–Fabius Maximus* emphasize the moral relevance of the *Parallel Lives* even more. The heroes are presented to the reader as moral examples worthy of imitation (*Aem.* 1.1–2 and *Per.* 1.3–4):

> It befell me to begin the writing of my *Lives* for the sake of others, but to continue the work and delight in it now for my own sake also, using history[16] as a mirror and endeavouring in a manner to fashion and adorn my life in conformity with the virtues therein depicted (ἀφομοιοῦν πρὸς τὰς ἐκείνων ἀρετὰς τὸν βίον). For the result is like nothing else than daily living and associating together, when I receive and welcome each subject of my history in turn as my guest, so to speak, and observe carefully (ἀναθεωρῶμεν)
>
> 'how great he was and what sort of man,' [Homer, *Il.* 24.630]
>
> and select from his career what is most important and most beautiful to know.[17]

[12] On the chronological ordering, see *Dem.* 3.5 (λεκτέον δὲ περὶ τοῦ πρεσβυτέρου πρότερον, 'I must speak of the more ancient first') and *Dion* 2.7 (τὸν τοῦ πρεσβυτέρου προεισαγάγωμεν, 'let us begin with [the life of] the elder man'). There are exceptions, however: *Aemilius–Timoleon* and *Sertorius–Eumenes*. These two, together with *Coriolanus–Alcibiades*, provide the three exceptions to the Greek coming first. In one pair (*Philopoemen–Flamininus*), Plutarch juxtaposes two contemporaries.

[13] Pelling 2002: 357 and 390. See also Duff 1999b: 206 and 250; Verdegem 2010b: 88; Roskam 2011a: 212; Larmour 2014: 410; Stadter 2015b: 126–7 and 244.

[14] See Nikolaidis 1982–4 for a critical overview of the different theories.

[15] Wardman 1971 and Duff 1999b: 14–22 have correctly underlined that this programmatic statement should be understood in the context of the following pair. See also *Nic.* 1.5.

[16] On the meaning of the term ἱστορία in Plutarch, see Gómez and Mestre 1997; Hershbell 1997; Duff 1999b: 17–22 and 33–4.

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Our intellectual vision must be applied to such objects as, by their very charm, invite it onward to its own proper good. Such objects are to be found in virtuous deeds; these implant in those who search them out (τοῖς ἱστορήσασι) a zealous eagerness which leads to imitation (ζῆλόν τινα καὶ προθυμίαν ἀγωγὸν εἰς μίμησιν).[18]

In the proem to *Demetrius–Antony*, Plutarch explains that he also likes to add a few bad figures as *exempla e contrario* of virtuous conduct.[19]

All of these passages clearly show that Plutarch unmistakably saw his *Parallel Lives* as an essentially moral project. Yet a problem remains: there is a certain tension between these straightforward programmatic statements, on the one hand, and the subsequent *Lives*, on the other hand, where such a moral agenda is not always equally clear. In light of this tension, Pelling has argued that the moralism of the *Parallel Lives* is descriptive rather than protreptic.[20] Plutarch is not so much interested in giving direct and unequivocal moral advice as in raising and examining different moral questions, challenging the reader and inviting him to further thinking. Pelling's view has been further developed in the seminal study of Duff.[21] This take on Plutarch's moral agenda in the *Parallel Lives* is indeed confirmed by the emphasis on careful reflection (ἀναθεωρεῖν) in the proem to *Aemilius–Timoleon*.[22] Reading Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* requires serious and painstaking thinking.

Yet even then problems remain: while some *Lives* clearly exhibit a moral interest, others are much more historical,[23] and nearly all *Lives* in fact contain lengthy sections in which historical events are told without apparent interest in the hero's character or in other moral issues. Jacobs therefore proposes regarding the *Parallel Lives* more broadly as 'pragmatic biography', that is, biography that is concerned not only with moral questions but also with teaching efficient leadership.[24] She argues that many passages deal with useful political

[17] The proem is analysed in Duff 1999b: 30–4. On the image of the mirror in this passage, see Stadter 2003–4; Zadorojnyi 2010; Frazier 2011.

[18] See Stadter 1989: 55–6; Duff 1999b: 34–45 and 2001.

[19] *Demetr.* 1.4–6. However, such a clear-cut distinction between good and bad heroes does not really work, for Demetrius and Antony are not presented as completely wicked characters, whereas other heroes are not entirely flawless: see Duff 1999b: 53–65; Pelling 2002: 133; Alexiou 2010.

[20] See Pelling 2002: 239.

[21] Duff 1999b; he expands the argument in Duff 2007–8 and esp. 2011a.

[22] *Aem.* 1.2; cf. *Ca. Mi.* 14.4; Roskam 2014a: 188 and 191.

[23] See Pelling 2002: 102–7 and 2011a: 19–25 (on the *Life of Caesar* and the *Life of Themistocles* as two rather 'historical' biographies).

[24] Jacobs 2018.

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and military conduct that could still be imitated in Plutarch's day, and viewing them from the perspective of 'pragmatical biography' better enables us to reveal their full relevance.[25] Or does it? On closer inspection, such passages do not undermine the traditional, moralizing interpretation either, which can appreciate the lengthy accounts of great military or political achievements as extensive (and often problematizing) descriptions of examples of political and military virtue.[26] In that respect, the many implicit lessons of efficient leadership which Jacobs has collected and analysed so well can also be considered as part and parcel of Plutarch's rich ethical thinking.

Perhaps some progress can be made by turning to the concept of Plutarch's 'zetetic philosophy' as discussed in the previous chapters. The moralism of the *Parallel Lives* is *zetetic moralism*: it is moralism that raises questions and searches for the truth.[27] It takes its point of departure from historical events: the lives of the statesmen and generals of the past, their successes and failings, good and bad decisions. This historical material invites difficult questions and stimulates nuanced philosophical reflection: where in this continuous stream of events can be found traces of moral or immoral behaviour; which fundamental decisions (προαίρεσεις) were taken on the basis of rational considerations; and when did the hero yield instead to his passions? In such an approach, history becomes the matter of philosophy (ἱστορία οἷον ὕλην φιλοσοφίας),[28] not as a source for dogmatic or doxographical constructions but as an incentive to a dynamic investigation that does not smooth over the complexity of moral questions but ponders them from different perspectives in order to come closer to the truth. For, indeed, zetetic moralism is no noncommittal reflection. We have already seen that Plutarch's ethical thinking makes heavy demands on his readers (see above, Chapter IV) and the same holds true for the moral project of the *Parallel Lives*.[29] After all, their heroes are explicitly

[25] See also Stadter 2015b: 241, who argues that the *Parallel Lives* not only contain timeless moral examples, but have a timely relevance as well; see also Stadter 2015b: 10: 'There is every reason to think that Plutarch saw his political essays and especially his *Parallel Lives* as his attempt as philosopher to enter the cave of politics.' The timely resonance and relevance of the *Lives* is further examined in Stadter and Van der Stockt 2002.

[26] See *Comp. Per. et Fab.* 1.1 (πολιτικῆς καὶ πολεμικῆς ἀρετῆς…παραδείγματα, 'examples of political and military virtue'). Also *Comp. Arist. et Ca. Ma.* 3.1 on political virtue as the supreme virtue.

[27] As has been pointed out by Pelling and Duff (see above, nn. 20 and 21).

[28] See Cleombrotus' project as described in *De def. or.* 410B. See also Duff 2007–8: 14–15 and 2011a: 82.

[29] See Duff 2011a; also Duff 1999b, *passim*.

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presented as examples worthy of imitation. We may look into the mirror they present to us and take the time to reflect on their behaviour, but we should not forget to take the consequences, 'both admiring the works of virtue and emulating those who wrought them' (*Per.* 2.2). Such imitation, however, never amounts to slavish and thoughtless copying: zetetic moralism implies careful and considerate looking for the sake of better leaping.[30]

2. The comparative approach

One of the most important characteristics of the *Parallel Lives* is undoubtedly their comparative approach.[31] Every book contains a pair of *Lives*, placing one Greek hero alongside one Roman one. Such juxtaposition yields interesting opportunities, as Plutarch realized very well. In the proem to his *Virtues of women*, a collection of brief stories about virtuous and brave women illustrating the view that man's virtue and woman's virtue are one and the same (242F–243A), he states (243B–C):

> And actually it is not possible to learn better the similarity and difference between the virtues of men and of women from any other source than by putting lives beside lives and actions beside actions, like works of great art, and considering whether the magnificence of Semiramis has the same character and pattern as that of Sesostris, or the cleverness of Tanaquil the same as that of Servius the king, or the high spirit of Porcia the same as that of Brutus, or that of Pelopidas the same as Timocleia's, when compared with due regard to the most important points of identity and influence.

This is the approach that is followed in the *Parallel Lives* as well: the comparison of two heroes enables Plutarch to inquire into different aspects of their virtues. Moreover, the two protagonists of a pair are not only compared to one another but also to other figures, and the comparative reading may be applied to the *Parallel Lives* as a whole: by

[30] Duff 1999b: 39: 'The *Lives* arouse not simply an "eagerness" or "uplift" to imitate the subjects delineated. That could be merely an unreflective aping of the great men of the past, and as such on a much lower plane of moral usefulness and intellectual worth. Imitation is involved, and is indeed central. But there is more. The *Lives*, Plutarch claims, not only instil a desire for imitation but actually change or "mould" character (ἠθοποιοῦν). This is achieved by the observer not simply looking, but also investigating, considering, testing; applying, as Plutarch might have put it, philosophy and reason.'

[31] Much has been written about the importance of the parallelism of the *Parallel Lives*. See Duff 1999b: 250 n. 25 for a convenient list of relevant studies. A recent volume on this topic is Humble 2010.

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reading several pairs of *Lives* together, we come across different perspectives on the same events and persons, and thus acquire an even more nuanced understanding of the moral qualities or shortcomings of the characters.[32]

But why did Plutarch bring together one Greek and one Roman? This has given rise to much speculation. An often-repeated view is that of Ziegler, who sees the rationale behind the comparative approach as an attempt

> to bring the Greeks and the Romans as the bearers of the empire always closer to each other, to make them always better known to each other and to increase their mutual esteem; to show the Romans that the Greeks are not only despicable Graeculi but that they, especially in the past, had produced men of action who were not inferior to the best Romans; to show the Greeks that the Romans are no barbarians.[33]

Yet it is not evident that a need for such a reconciliation project remained in Plutarch's time, as there was no longer a gap between aristocratic Greeks and Romans.[34] Accordingly, his intentions could equally well be understood as a project of resistance, consisting of a Greek appropriation of the Roman tradition.[35] The problem is that Plutarch nowhere explains the motive behind this juxtaposition of Greek and Roman heroes. As a result, all theories about it cannot but remain hypothetical, and yet, frustratingly enough, we cannot simply brush aside the problem. After all, Plutarch deliberately chose and persisted in this peculiar comparative approach. That can only mean that he did not regard it as a by-product.[36]

In my view, the most likely hypothesis is that Plutarch's comparison between Greek and Roman statesmen and generals does not aim at defining and moulding Greek and Roman identity but should primarily be seen in the context of the zetetic moralism of the *Parallel Lives*. Plutarch usually selects two historically unconnected men who

[32] On the comparative reading of different pairs together and even of the collection as a whole, see Mossman 1992; Pelling 2002: 26, 79, and 188, 2005: 339, and 2010; Beneker 2005; Buszard 2008; Duff 2011a: 73–4; Stadter 2015b: 286–302.

[33] Ziegler 1951: 897, my translation ('Griechen und Römer als die Träger des Imperiums einander immer näher zu bringen, sie einander immer besser kennen zu lehren und die gegenseitige Achtung zu erhöhen; den Römern zu zeigen, daß die Griechen nicht nur verächtliche Graeculi seien, sondern, allerdings vor allem in der Vergangenheit, Männer der Tat hervorgebracht hätten, die den besten Römern nicht nachstanden; den Griechen zu zeigen, daß die Römer keine Barbaren seien'). Ziegler's view is accepted, for instance, by Russell 1966: 141; Bucher-Isler 1972: 89; Valgiglio 1992a: 4047–50; and Binder 2008: 14–15.

[34] Thus C. Jones 1971: 103–9; see also Barrow 1967: 57–9; Russell 1972: 109.

[35] Thus Desideri 1992b: 4478–86 and Duff 1999b: 301–9.

[36] *Contra* Geiger 2014: 298: 'the pairing of Greeks and Romans, however innovative, may well have been a by-product conditioned by his times and surroundings without a necessarily well-thought-out purpose'.

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are products of different past histories and cultures. By connecting them in one overarching framework and looking at their careers with the same philosophical questions at the back of his mind, he can explore interesting similarities and differences in their behaviour and fundamental decisions.[37] His parallels are sometimes criticized as quite artificial and unconvincing: what did the historical Lysander and Sulla really have in common, or Agesilaus and Pompey? Yet such objections fail to see the scope and meaning of such parallels. The great differences in historical context precisely fuel the examination of conduct, character, and decisions. Of course Plutarch did not want to suggest that Pompey was a new Agesilaus, or Crassus a Nicias *redivivus*. His real interest was in the similarities and differences between their respective characters, virtues, and shortcomings, in how these influenced their decisions, and in the lessons we can still derive from the comparison.

In several pairs, the main philosophical themes are briefly introduced in the programmatic proem. *Aemilius–Timoleon*, for instance, deals with the relation between the heroes' prudence and their good luck (*Aem.* 1.6); *Dion–Brutus* examines how philosopher-statesmen had to struggle with the unmanageable reality of political life (*Dion* 1.2–2.2); *Pelopidas–Marcellus* explores the tension between courage and recklessness (*Pel.* 2.9–11); and *Pericles–Fabius Maximus* investigates sublime mildness, justice, and imperturbability in the turmoil of political affairs (*Per.* 2.5). Such proems, *mutatis mutandis*, constitute the counterpart of the question raised in a philosophical *zetema*, in that they bring the issue up for discussion. At the same time, they provide the reader with a first, rudimentary answer, since Plutarch here already anticipates a few core results of the elaborate comparison that will follow. This first clue is then problematized at length in the two subsequent *Lives*. Those provide two new perspectives on the issue, the latter usually complicating the former, and in this respect recall the ascending structure of a philosophical *zetema*.[38] This implies that *both* of the *Lives* contain interesting insights and that the second one – while often being more complicated and nuanced – may also obscure issues that are clearer in the first one.

[37] See Duff 1999b: 249–52; Desideri 1992b: 4475–6; Larmour 2014: 409. Philopoemen and Flamininus were contemporaries and even opponents, and it was precisely this opposition that yielded rich opportunities to view the same matters from two different points of view.

[38] See above, n. 13. In the *Lives of Agis, Cleomenes, and the Gracchi*, Plutarch even provides four different perspectives on the same issue: see Roskam 2011a.

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In a formal comparison (*synkrisis*) of the two heroes, Plutarch finally works towards an overall retrospective evaluation. On the basis of a few general criteria (such as military and political qualities, the death of the hero, his power base, and so on), he assesses the similarities and, especially, the differences between the two protagonists, sometimes preferring the Greek, at other times the Roman, and usually ending up with a fair balance between the two. This concluding evaluation, however, often comes as a surprise, shows less nuance, and repeatedly even flatly contradicts what has been said in the previous *Lives*. As a result, these *synkriseis* have often been regarded as mere products of the rhetorical school[39] and have been criticized as unduly trivializing conclusions.[40] Duff has proposed a more generous reading, by relating the *synkriseis* to Plutarch's problematizing moralism. In his view, they raise new questions, destabilize the reader's judgement, and thus invite the reader to further reflection. In that sense, they are part and parcel of the moral programme of the *Parallel Lives*.[41] Such an interpretation does more justice to Plutarch's zetetic moralism. Here as well, a comparison with the *zetemata* of the *Moralia* may help us in understanding the peculiarities and oddities of the *synkriseis*.

To begin with, what Duff calls their 'closural dissonance' should no longer come as a surprise.[42] Most *zetemata* in fact show a similar internal inconsistency, collecting as they do irreconcilable answers that all throw light on a part of the truth. In the same way, the *synkriseis* reveal their part of the truth. Their perspective adds to the previous answers elaborated in the *Lives*, repeating several of their insights but also challenging or questioning them through new observations. Secondly, we have seen that Plutarch usually places the alternative which he prefers at the end of the list. The implication, of course, is that his preference likewise lies with the view presented in the *synkrisis*. This has indeed been argued more than once. Boulogne, for instance, sees the *synkriseis* as Plutarch's attempt to outline an ideal politician by combining the qualities of both heroes.[43] For Nikolaidis, they are, together with the proems and some digressions, 'the parts of the *Lives* where a more authentic Plutarch is revealed; the parts where we

[39] See, e.g., Russell 1966: 150; Tatum 2010: 10–14; Duff 1999b: 286; Larmour 2014: 407–8.
[40] E.g. Barrow 1967: 59; Lamberton 2001: 65 and 115; Pelling 2002: 360.
[41] Duff 1999b: 243–86.
[42] Duff 1999b: 261, 263, and 257–86 *passim*, and 2011a: 74–5.
[43] Boulogne 2000.

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can be almost sure that Plutarch speaks for himself and not through his sources'.[44] Verdegem correctly objects that Plutarch was no slave of his sources in the *Lives*.[45] And, indeed, we have seen that the last alternative in a philosophical *zetema* should not be considered as Plutarch's own final word on the issue. Similarly, the truth of the *synkriseis* is only a partial truth, to be supplemented with the equally partial truths presented in the two *Lives* and even in the proem. Nevertheless, this partial truth should be taken seriously.[46]

There still remains a further problem. Pelling observes that some of the *synkriseis* are 'thought-diminishing rather than thought-provoking',[47] and even Duff agrees that Plutarch is prepared in these *synkriseis* to 'speak much more in the black-and-white terms of virtue and vice'.[48] These are interesting observations: they suggest that, in such cases, the last perspective is not the most nuanced one. Should we, then, retrace our steps and regard the *synkriseis* as uncritical addenda after all? Not necessarily. We should rather appreciate them as products of a different thinking process. Reading the *Lives* requires a process of ἀναθεωρεῖν: it involves careful reflection while *going through* the events (*Aem.* 1.2; cf. *Reg. et imp. apophth.* 172E). The *synkriseis*, on the other hand, are the fruit of ἀποθεωρεῖν:[49] at this stage, the reader has finished reading the detailed accounts and is now able to look back *from a distance* at what they have read. They can ponder anew over the two men's lives and weigh their decisions against one another by means of more general criteria. This obviously opens up new opportunities, but also implies bracketing concrete historical details. To a certain extent, the perspective of the *synkriseis* switches from particular historical events to more philosophical issues, from τί to οἷα. Their ἀποθεώρησις often results in a more straightforwardly philosophical reading of history. This reading still makes use of history as the matter of philosophy, but the philosophical perspective now comes to the fore and this difference of emphasis entails dissonance and new evaluation. But here as well, Plutarch carefully refrains from speaking the last word and rather urges his readers to pass their own judgement.[50]

[44] Nikolaidis 2014: 359.
[45] Verdegem 2010a: 36.
[46] Duff 1999b: 200–4 and 252–86, and 2011a: 74–5.
[47] Pelling 2002: 360.
[48] Duff 1999b: 271.
[49] See *Comp. Ag., Cleom. et Gracch.* 1.1; *Comp. Ages. et Pomp.* 4.7. See also *Reg. et imp. apophth.* 172D; Roskam 2011a: 221–3 and 2014a: 188 and 190–1.

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3. The characterization of the heroes

Plutarch refers to the protagonists of the *Parallel Lives* as rulers, lawgivers, and generals (*Reg. et imp. apophth.* 172D). We may wonder in passing why he did not rather write biographies of philosophers. He would have easily found distinguished figures who eminently qualified as moral paradigms: Plato, no doubt, and several of his followers, but also Pythagoras, Socrates,[51] Aristotle, and, as a negative example, the infamous Epicurus. The obvious problem, of course, was that they spent much of their lives in their schools and thus met with fewer difficult practical dilemmas.[52] As a result, their lives were probably less interesting for a project of zetetic moralism such as we find in the *Parallel Lives*.[53]

Plutarch, then, preferred writing about famous politicians and generals, but he wrote about them as a philosopher. Indeed, the general view of humanity that informs the *Parallel Lives* rests on the same philosophical foundations as the ethical thinking in the *Moralia* (see above, Chapter IV). In both cases, the theoretical basis is a dichotomy in the soul between reason and the passions, as elaborated in *On moral virtue*.[54] This is the philosophical lens through which Plutarch views the careers of the protagonists of history and which shapes the moralism of the *Lives*. Every hero had to wage his own struggle with his passions and try to overcome them time and again by the powers of his reason. The *Parallel Lives* contain a kaleidoscope of human passions. Prominent among them, of course, is love of honour (φιλοτιμία), the tireless gadfly of nearly every Plutarchan hero,[55] but many other passions follow in its wake: Nicias is superstitious, Philopoemen contentious, Coriolanus prone to anger, Crassus greedy, Pelopidas reckless, Dion wilful, Demetrius and Antony lovers of pleasure, and so on.

Furthermore, Plutarch's heroes are 'great natures', with potential for great vices and great virtues (*Demetr.* 1.7).[56] If they succeed in bringing

[50] *Comp. Ag., Cleom. et Gracch.* 5.7. See also Pelling 2002: 273–5; Duff 2004: 286–7 and 2011a.
[51] See Beck 2014b on the Socratic paradigm in the *Lives*.
[52] Although Plutarch stresses the political accomplishments of many philosophers, including the Stoics; on this, see Roskam 2009b: 31–65.
[53] Cf. Duff 1999b: 66.
[54] On the soul of the Plutarchan hero, see esp. Duff 1999b: 72–98 and Beneker 2012: 9–17.
[55] Russell 1972: 106; Wardman 1974: 115–24; Frazier 1988 and 2014; Pelling 2002: 242–7 and 292–7; Roskam *et al.* 2012.
[56] See esp. Duff 1999a (pointing to the Platonic antecedents of the theory; *Resp.* 491e1–492a5) and 1999b: 47–9, 60–5, and *passim*; also Bucher-Isler 1972: 80–1.

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their passions under rational control, they are capable of the most brilliant virtuous achievements, whereas their failure to do so ends in utter disaster. Everything depends on how strong a grip the hero's reason has on the irrational powers of his soul. No wonder, then, that Plutarch shows a keen interest in his heroes' attitude towards philosophy in general and notably in their collaboration with philosophers. Many of the heroes were known to have associated with famous thinkers of their day: Pericles with Anaxagoras (*Per.* 4.5–5.1; 16.8–9; *Them.* 2.5), Alexander the Great with Aristotle (*Alex.* 7.2–8.4), Philopoemen with the Academics Ecdemus and Megalophanes (*Phil.* 1.5), Cleomenes with Sphaerus (*Ag./Cleom.* 23.2–3; 32.4), Tiberius Gracchus with Blossius of Cumae (*TG/CG* 8.6; 17.5; 20.5–6), Pompey with Cratippus (*Pomp.* 75.4–5), and – *cause célèbre* – Alcibiades with Socrates (*Alc.* 4.1–4; 6.1; 6.5). Dion was an alumnus of the Academy (*Dion* 1.2; 17.1; 47.4), just like Phocion (*Phoc.* 4.2; 14.7) and Cicero (*Cic.* 3.1; 4.1–3; *Luc.* 42.3), and Lucullus (*Luc.* 42.3) and Brutus (*Brut.* 2.2–3; cf. *Dion* 1.2) also expressed their preference for the Old Academy. The heroes' education is another recurrent motif, especially in the Roman *Lives*: the misbehaviour of Coriolanus (*Cor.* 1.3–6; 15.4–5), Flamininus (*Flam.* 1.4), and Marius (*Mar.* 2.2) can be explained by their lack of an appropriate *paideia*, whereas Marcellus (*Marc.* 1.3; 21.4; 21.7) and Lucullus (*Luc.* 1.6; 42.4) illustrate what can be gained from an adequate Greek education.[57]

All of this raises the question to what extent Plutarch's moralizing agenda in the *Parallel Lives* enables him to do justice to the individual nature of his heroes. The *Lives* are no moral treatises, of course,[58] nor general sermons on particular vices,[59] but they do not lay bare all the idiosyncratic peculiarities of the different protagonists either. In other words, these protagonists are staged as characters rather than personalities.[60] Plutarch sees them as moral agents with a relatively fixed set of qualities and failures, and he likes to exemplify key aspects of their character (ἦθος) through well-chosen anecdotes which contain a snapshot of their basic nature.[61] They are not simplified stereotypes,

[57] On the importance of *paideia* in the *Parallel Lives*, see above, Chapter IV, §4, with n. 31.
[58] Den Boer 1985: 379 goes too far in stating that the *Lives* 'could better be called ethical essays rather than biographies'.
[59] *Contra* Russell 1972: 106.
[60] See esp. Gill 1983; also Bucher-Isler 1972: 61, 79, 83, and 92; Beneker 2012: 84.

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however, but 'integrated characters' that are gradually coloured in as the *Life* goes on, though without ending up as lifelike, psychologically complicated personalities.[62]

Nevertheless, Plutarch's heroes do have distinctive individual features.[63] For surely there was only one Alcibiades. And how could there be a second Sulla, or Alexander, or Antony?[64] On the one hand, their idiosyncrasies are seen from a general, Platonic point of view. *Individuum est ineffabile.* If we really want to learn from their lives, we need to have at least some things in common with them. Therefore, a more generalizing, philosophical perspective is a necessary condition. On the other hand, Plutarch's zetetic moralism can only bear full fruit when due attention is given to particularities, to the peculiarity of the historical context but also to the singularity of every hero and to their mutual differences. Only then can we adequately consider whether Pericles' mildness is entirely the same as that of Fabius Maximus, or in which respects it is different (cf. the passage from *Mul. virt.* 243B–C quoted above). Only then can we obtain a deeper insight into the specificity of their moral decisions. Moreover, the heroes' individual character traits interfere with a simple, thoughtless imitation of them – it is evidently not possible to clone Aristides, Timoleon, or Tiberius Gracchus – and thus again stimulate more in-depth moral reflection. In that sense, a discussion of the hero's individual characteristics and nature significantly contributes to the process of moral *zetesis*. This brings us to the next point.

4. Plutarch's view of historical truth

If the *Parallel Lives* should be regarded as an essentially moral project, and if the work's central comparative approach and the characterization of the protagonists is thoroughly conditioned by this moral goal, the question remains what this implies for Plutarch's attitude towards

[61] On Plutarch's sophisticated use of anecdotes, see Stadter 1996; Beck 1999, 2000, and 2005; Duff 2003; Schmitt Pantel 2008. On the protagonists as moral agents with a fixed set of qualities, exemplified through well-chosen anecdotes revealing their nature, Duff 2008a is particularly relevant.

[62] Pelling 2002: 287–97 and 315–21.

[63] See Nikolaidis 2014: 362–4; Aloumpi 2017: 193; Zadorojnyi 2018: 222–8.

[64] Yet Plutarch repeatedly employs pluralized names: the Cimons (*Per.* 16.3), the Marii (*Brut.* 29.6), even the Alcibiadeses (*De Al. Magn. fort.* 328C; *Flam.* 11.5). See Zadorojnyi 2018 on such 'biographical synecdoche'.

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historical truth. If he uses history as the mere matter of philosophy, does he adapt this matter at his own discretion to the demands of his philosophy? How, in short, does Plutarch the philosopher relate to Plutarch the historian?

Many scholars have argued that Plutarch's account is often quite unreliable,[65] that Plutarch simply did not wish to be a historian,[66] and that the *Parallel Lives* should be understood as a philosophical project.[67] Yet he has his defenders too. Badian, for instance, states that 'Plutarch, when he set his mind to it, could be a critical historian superior to many of the professedly historical writers.'[68] Indeed, Plutarch was not blind to the bias of his sources (see, e.g., *Per.* 13.16; *Pomp.* 10.9; *Arat.* 38.11–12) and frequently mentions alternative views. Furthermore, he attaches great importance to the plausibility (εἰκότης or πιθανόν) of his account. There is no shortage of passages where he appears as a critical author displaying a sincere concern for the historical truth.

In order to better understand Plutarch's attitude towards historical truth, we may again consider it against the backdrop of the zetetic moralism of the *Parallel Lives*. To begin with, such zetetic moralism is in principle open to historical facts, whatever they may be. We have repeatedly seen that Plutarch's zetetic philosophy in general enables him to deal with the most diverse aspects of a given problem, including those that are unwelcome from a Platonic point of view. The same basic open-mindedness can be found in the *Parallel Lives*. In trying to recover what had happened, Plutarch usually saw little need to distort the facts for the sake of a simplifying moralism. Such distortion would sometimes even be counterproductive and would in any case run counter to the spirit of genuine zetetic moralism. A project of zetetic moralism rather presupposes correct and reliable information which can then be questioned and considered from a moral point of view. In other words, zetetic moralism presupposes and includes zetetic historical criticism.

[65] See, among many others, Ameling 1985; Worthington 1985; Schütrumpf 1987; Tritle 1987; Bosworth 1992: 80; Bloedow 1996; Schepens 2000: 351; Bresson 2002; Verdegem 2004/5: 149; Binder 2008: 26.

[66] Barigazzi 1994: 291: 'In realtà Plutarco non volle essere uno storico. Qualcuno si ostina a considerarlo soltanto uno storico, ma egli esplicitamente nega a se stesso tale qualifica' ('In reality Plutarch did not want to be a historian. Some insist on considering him only a historian, but he explicitly denies himself this title').

[67] See Schneeweiss 1979: 382 (arguing that, in the *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch transfers Plato's doctrine of Ideas to the field of history) and Wolman 1972 (on the Roman *Lives*).

[68] Badian 2003: 44; see also Shipley 1997: 5; Nikolaidis 1997b: 341; Schmitt Pantel 2008: 249.

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Thus, Plutarch did not want to gloss over his heroes' mistakes and weaknesses. On the contrary, such flaws often raise interesting moral questions.[69] They should not be overemphasized, though. In the proem to the *Cimon–Lucullus*, Plutarch explains that he regards them rather as 'shortcomings in some virtue than as vile products of vice' (*Cim.* 2.5). Elsewhere, he is willing to evaluate them in the light of their time (*Comp. Sol. et Publ.* 4.4; *Cam.* 1.2). Nevertheless, they are mentioned and criticized.[70]

Sometimes, the same events are understood differently in different *Lives*. For instance, Cleomenes' proposal to give Megalopolis back to its citizens is praised as a reasonable and humane offer in *Ag./Cleom.* 45.8 but unmasked as a clever trick to seize the city in *Phil.* 5.3–4. Again, Plutarch denies that Cimon turned to demagogical practices (*Cim.* 10.8) but elsewhere argues that Pericles was outdone by Cimon's demagogy (καταδημαγωγούμενος, *Per.* 9.2). His evaluation of Athens' foreign policy considerably differs in the *Life of Phocion* and in the *Life of Demosthenes*, and so on.[71] These are neither inconsistencies nor distortions of the historical truth, but zetetic attempts to take into account the perspective of the different heroes and the complexity of the historical situation which could be faced from different – even opposite – angles.

Furthermore, in writing the *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch came across numerous historical situations in which justice was diametrically opposed to efficiency and expediency. Such historical matter is embarrassing for an oversimplifying moralism that without further ado equates justice with usefulness, but it is particularly interesting for a more problematizing zetetic moralism. Typically enough, Plutarch devotes several pairs to this issue[72] and makes no attempt at an intellectual justification of the heroes' morally problematic decisions,[73] simply allowing the facts to speak for themselves and leaving further judgement to his readers. Similarly, quite some attention is given to the influence of fortune and providence on historical events,

[69] Plutarch even decided to add a pair of biographies in which the negative character traits were at the forefront, the *Demetrius–Antony*; see above, n. 19.

[70] Cf. Stadter 2015b: 237–43.

[71] See Duff 1999b: 133–4. More examples can be found in Buszard 2008: 187 and Duff 2011a: 73–4.

[72] E.g. *Lysander–Sulla* and *Phocion–Cato Minor*; see the rich analyses of Duff 1999b: 131–204. On this topic, see also Pérez Jiménez 2004.

[73] See Frazier 1995: 157; see also Leão 2019b on the *Life of Solon*.

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again an issue with potentially far-reaching philosophical overtones.[74] Brenk points to a dichotomy between Plutarch's philosophical convictions about the omnipresent working of providence, on the one hand, and his historical writings, which give a much more significant part to fortune, on the other hand, and even goes so far as to call Plutarch 'a schizophrenic when it comes to *tyche*'.[75] I would rather appreciate this tension as one more telling illustration of Plutarch's intellectual honesty. He essentially stuck to the facts and preferred to deal with them for what they were rather than explaining them away from an ivory tower philosophical perspective. All this shows that his moral goals and interests did not interfere with the demands of history and that he had no problem at all in combining concern for moral truth with respect for historical truth.

This, however, is only one side of the picture. Its other side is that zetetic moralism also conditions the historian's outlook and determines his selection and evaluation of his material. And this, in turn, can entail blind spots. For instance, although Plutarch does not entirely ignore economic and social matters, he repeatedly underestimates their importance and overemphasizes the impact of the heroes' individual decisions. Similarly, military matters are seldom treated in detail, although many battles are mentioned in the *Parallel Lives*. Plutarch's interest lay primarily in the character and career of his heroes and this posed new problems. Information about their days of glory was not difficult to find, but Plutarch all too often faced gaps in the available sources concerning their childhoods. These he tried to fill through 'creative reconstruction', evoking an image of the young hero on the basis of a few well-chosen anecdotes.[76] As a rule, gross distortions of the historical truth are avoided and Plutarch's reconstructions of the childhood remain within the boundaries of what he would call εὐστόχως λέγειν ('successful guesswork'; *Phoc.* 17.6). Finally, the comparative approach can entail reconstructions of a different kind, which may exaggerate minor similarities between the heroes' character or experiences (see below, Chapter VI, for concrete examples). Again, Plutarch was willing to 'help his truth along a little'.[77] In all of these

[74] It is central to the *Aemilius–Timoleon* pair. On this topic, see Swain 1989b; Hershbell 1997: 241–3; Frazier and Leão 2010; Opsomer 2011; Titchener 2014.
[75] Brenk 1977: 163.
[76] The term is borrowed from Pelling 2002: 154; see also 310.
[77] Thus Pelling 2002: 150. Cf. *Cim.* 2.4 with Kaesser 2004.

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cases, the relation between zetetic moralism and its philosophical truth, on the one hand, and historical truth, on the other, is a complicated one.

The same holds true concerning matters of chronology. A notorious case is Plutarch's version of the famous story of Solon's encounter with Croesus (*Sol.* 27.1):

> As for Solon's meeting with Croesus, some think to prove by chronology that it is fictitious. But when a story is so famous and so well-attested, and, what is more to the point, when it comports so well with the character of Solon, and is so worthy of his magnanimity and wisdom, I do not propose to reject it out of deference to any chronological canons, so called, which thousands keep revising, without to this day being able to bring their contradictions into any general agreement.[78]

Prima facie, this passage suggests that Plutarch here deliberately sacrifices historical to moral truth. On closer inspection, though, the matter is not so simple. To begin with, he at least *mentions* the chronological problem. If he had only eye for the rich moral message of the story, he could have ignored chronology altogether. Secondly, his position is not unreasonable, given the great dissension among specialists in chronology. In light of these disagreements, simply dismissing the story on chronological grounds does not show careful historical criticism either. In fact, there also appear to be many witnesses who support the story – although Plutarch gives no names; moreover, the story corroborates what we know about Solon's character, an observation that is relevant for the historian and the moralist alike. In that sense, Plutarch's decision to accept the story shows neither complete lack of historical criticism nor an occasional lack of interest in historical truth.[79] It rather reveals his sense of the limits of historical truth claims and his justified caution (εὐλάβεια) vis-à-vis exaggerated confidence in dubious chronology. His decision to adopt a 'benefit of the doubt' approach in such circumstances is far from uncritical and unreasonable.

A similar case concerns the relation of Numa and Pythagoras. Here, too, Plutarch is aware of chronological difficulties. In the first chapter of the *Life of Numa*, he refers to the view of those who say that Pythagoras lived as many as five generations after Numa (*Num.* 1.4). This

[78] For Plutarch's reception of Herodotus' famous story, see Muñoz Gallarte 2010–11; see also Pelling 2011b: 41–3; Leão 2020: 286–8.

[79] Cf. Pelling 2002: 143: 'This, perhaps, is one instance where Plutarch shows less concern to investigate historical truth than we should like.'

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chronological observation is counterbalanced, however, by a lengthy discussion of the many clear correspondences between Pythagoras' convictions and those of Numa (8.5–20). Plutarch's course thus closely resembles the one he took in the *Life of Solon*: while again mentioning the chronological problem very clearly and right at the start, he does not hesitate to examine the parallels in detail, while adding, at the end of this discussion, that trying to decide the controversial question of Numa's acquaintance with Pythagoras would show youthful contentiousness (μειρακιώδους φιλονεικίας, 8.21). Thus the note of caution sounded at the outset resounds with even more effect at the end.

Plutarch returns once more to the issue at the end of the *Life* (*Num.* 22.5), arguing that 'we may well be quite indulgent (συγγνώμην ἔχειν πολλήν) with those who are eager (φιλοτιμουμένοις) to prove, on the basis of so many resemblances between them, that Numa was acquainted with Pythagoras'. This, if anything, is a strategically well-considered and subtle judgement. The term φιλοτιμουμένοις recalls, albeit in a slightly more positive register, the youthful contentiousness of the over-enthusiastic believers, and the phrase συγγνώμην ἔχειν suggests not merely that Plutarch bears in mind the demands of chronology but even that the hypothesis of the believers is problematic if not false. At the same time, his argument vindicates the lengthy treatment of the many correspondences. This is, once again, a telling way of both having and eating both one's historical and one's moral cake.

5. Heuristics and method of working

The previous section has shown that zetetic moralism goes hand in hand with careful historical criticism. It also presupposes meticulous heuristics, which leads us to the question of Plutarch's sources.[80] What did Plutarch read?

He read an awful lot. The *Parallel Lives* illustrate his erudition no less than the polymathic works of the *Moralia* (see above, Chapter III). He never limited himself to the most obvious sources but actively looked for interesting new material. In the proem to *Nicias–Crassus*, he says (*Nic.* 1.5):

[80] This is a much discussed topic. Nearly every commentary on a *Life* or a pair contains a section on the sources which Plutarch used. General studies include Peter 1865; Theander 1951; Scardigli 1979; Desideri 1992a; Schettino 2014.

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Those deeds which Thucydides and Philistus have set forth – since I cannot entirely pass them by, above all when they indicate the nature of my hero and the disposition which lay hidden beneath his many great sufferings – I have run over briefly, and with no unnecessary detail, in order to escape the reputation of utter carelessness and sloth; but those details which have escaped most writers, and which others have mentioned casually (εἰρημένα σποράδην), or which are found on ancient votive offerings or in public decrees, these I have tried to collect, not massing together useless material of research (ἱστορίαν), but handing on such as furthers the appreciation of character and temperament (κατανόησιν ἤθους καὶ τρόπου).

As usual, the proem should be understood against the background of the following *Life*, yet it also throws light on a more general problem. The main events in Greek and Roman history had been extensively related by excellent writers before Plutarch. For the *Life of Nicias*, he could fall back on Thucydides and Philistus; for other Greek *Lives*, he could rely on Herodotus, Xenophon, Polybius, Ephorus, and Theopompus. All of these were major sources for Plutarch and in one way or another he had to distinguish himself from them. He specifies that his emulation is not of a literary kind – as Thucydides is anyhow beyond imitation (*Nic.* 1.1; 1.4–5) – but concerns the understanding of the hero's character. In this, he claims, he could still add to authors as inimitable as Thucydides.

To that purpose, he also used other sources and, to find these, he was willing to go more than one extra mile. In the above passage he mentions decrees and inscriptions,[81] but he also benefited from other contemporary sources, including the writings of the protagonists themselves.[82] Whenever possible, he supplemented his material through autopsy and hearsay.[83] Furthermore, for his Roman *Lives*, he took pains to read Latin sources as well.[84] In short, all this reveals

[81] Plutarch's use of inscriptions is discussed in Liddel 2008.

[82] E.g. Cicero's Περὶ ὑπατείας (*Crass.* 13.4, *Caes.* 8.4, and probably the main source for *Cic.* 10–23: see Lendle 1967; Pelling 2002: 45–9) and his *Cato*, as well as Caesar's *Anti-Cato* (*Cic.* 39.5, *Caes.* 3.2 and 54.2–3; see also *Ca. Mi.* 11.4 and 36.3); the *Memoirs* of Aratus (*Arat.* 3.3, 32.5, 33.3, 38.6; *Agis/Cleom.* 15.4, 37.4–5, 38.4, 40.4: see Stadter 2015a: 163–5) and of Sulla (*Sull.* 6.8 and 37.1; *Mar.* 35.4: see Russo 2002); the verses of Solon; and the *Letters of Alexander* (Hamilton 1969, lix–lx).

[83] See esp. Buckler 1992; also Theander 1951: 2–32; Frost 1980: 50–2; Muccioli 2012: 78–89.

[84] Plutarch's knowledge of Latin is another much discussed topic. The *locus classicus* on this issue is *Dem.* 2.2–4, where Plutarch claims that his familiarity with the subject matter enables him to understand his Latin sources, but that he cannot appreciate the beauty of the Latin style. The *communis opinio* has it that Plutarch's claims in this passage are largely justified. See, e.g., Rose 1924: 11–19; C. Jones 1971: 81–7; De Rosalia 1991; Moya del Baño and Carrasco Reija 1991; Strobach 1997: 33–9; Setaioli 2007; Stadter 2015b: 133–7 and 2016.

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painstaking research, inspired by the zetetic spirit, in finding the sources.

This *zetesis* especially comes to the fore in Plutarch's attention to the σποράδην εἰρημένα: not the great outlines of the story that everybody knows from Thucydides but the tiny details, anecdotes, and sayings mentioned in passing by only one author, which provide such interesting material for moral reflection. These fill many pages of the *Parallel Lives* and also found their way into separate collections like the *Sayings of kings and commanders* and the *Spartan sayings*.

The precise relation between these collections of sayings and the *Parallel Lives* is a matter of scholarly debate. According to Stadter, the *Spartan sayings* were part of a greater collection which Plutarch used as a source for the *Parallel Lives*, whereas the *Sayings of kings and commanders* are a later, edited selection of the big collection.[85] Pelling, on the other hand, focuses on the *Sayings of kings and commanders*, which he regards as a fruit of the provisional drafts of the *Parallel Lives*.[86] However that may be, the collections of sayings have their own profile, as appears from the dedication letter to Trajan at the outset of the *Sayings of kings and commanders*.[87] There, Plutarch says that the collection aims at an understanding of the characters and fundamental choices of leading men (κατανόησιν ἠθῶν καὶ προαιρέσεων ἡγεμονικῶν; 172C). This strikingly resembles his statement in the proem to *Nicias–Crassus* quoted above. The goal of the collections of sayings, then, is exactly the same as that of the *Parallel Lives*: they are a project of zetetic moralism. But the collections are also presented as a kind of shortcut. Whereas the reading of the *Parallel Lives* requires considerable time, the collections of sayings directly focus on the heroes' pithy statements, which constitute the very core, the 'samples and seeds of their lives' (δείγματα τῶν βίων καὶ σπέρματα; 172E). The difference between the collections of sayings and the *Parallel Lives*, then, lies neither in their moral purpose nor in Plutarch's general attitude towards the relevant material – in both cases, history is regarded as the matter of philosophy – but rather has to do with the selection of the material.

[85] Stadter 2014.
[86] Pelling 2002: 65–90.
[87] The authenticity of the letter (and of the collection as a whole) has long been doubted, but has been convincingly defended by Flacelière 1976: 100–3 and Beck 2002; see also Roskam 2014a: 190–1.

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Yet this selection does have important implications for the goal of the collections of sayings. Trajan can ruminate on these anecdotes in his rare moments of leisure. He can carefully ponder about and learn from them, come to his conclusions, and take inspiration from them, but the short anecdotes do not allow for the same detailed zetetic reflections as the *Parallel Lives*. They provide little information about the historical background, about alternative, opposite reactions to the same event, or about negative behaviour. Plutarch's selection thus omits much material that stimulates genuine and nuanced *zetesis*. He provides his busy reader with a ready-made package of anecdotes that stimulates reflection (ἀναθεώρησιν; 172E) but lacks the depth of the *Parallel Lives*. In short, the collections of sayings aim at zetetic moralism in its light version.

Back to the *Parallel Lives* and to Plutarch's method of working. In all likelihood, Plutarch read all the main sources before he began the composition of a *Life*.[88] He read them very carefully, paying attention to relevant details,[89] and taking notes while reading. These notes probably did not contain the basic outlines of the historical events – which Plutarch knew or easily remembered – but it was precisely the casual mentions (σποράδην εἰρημένα) that caught his eye. His careful zetetic heuristics was thus matched by an equally painstaking *zetesis* in reading the sources.

After Plutarch had finished his reading, he usually selected one principal source. Some *Lives* largely rest on this main source (like the *Life of Nicias* or the *Life of Coriolanus*, respectively based on Thucydides and Dionysius of Halicarnassus[90]), but usually different main sources are used for different sections of a *Life*.[91] Relying on this (or these) source(s), he then composed a provisional draft

[88] This is the hypothesis of Pelling, who distinguishes between three phases in the composition process, viz. the preliminary reading of the sources, the production of a first draft, and the writing of the final version; Pelling 1988: 31–3 and 2011a: 36–42; see also Stadter 1989: xliv–li; Heftner 1995: 12–13; Verdegem 2010b: 76–7. Reading for one *Life* also provided Plutarch with material for other *Lives*, and it is likely that several *Lives* were indeed prepared simultaneously; thus Pelling 2002: 2–11 (on the *Lives of Pompey*, *Cato the Younger*, *Crassus*, *Caesar*, *Brutus*, and *Antony*, as different from the earlier *Cicero* and *Lucullus*). See also Nikolaidis 2005: *passim*; Verdegem 2010b: 93 and 402 (on *Alcibiades* and *Nicias*); Moles 2017: 11 (on the pairs *Dion–Brutus*, *Aemilius–Timoleon*, and *Alexander–Caesar*).

[89] See *De gen. Socr.* 575C–D, with Beneker 2012: 81.

[90] See Pelling 2002: 118–22 and 2011a: 40 n. 90 (on the *Life of Nicias*); and Russell 1963 and Ahlrichs 2005 (on the *Life of Coriolanus*).

[91] Occasionally, Plutarch even combines many sources, so that it is no longer possible to trace back larger sections to specific sources. A case in point is the *Life of Alexander*: see Hamilton 1969: xlix–lxii.

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(a ὑπόμνημα).[92] Whatever was less relevant for his project of zetetic moralism was omitted or shortened, while other material was transposed or added from different sources, sometimes resulting in learned digressions.[93] This substantial and thorough transformation of the source(s) never became a mechanical process in the hands of the experienced biographer but always required a process of searching reflection. The lens of zetetic moralism is no mere glaze on historical earthenware but entails a new perspective on the hero's career.[94] Even though the moral interest of the story is seldom made explicit, the underlying zetetic and moralizing spirit still conditions Plutarch's overall interpretation and evaluation of his material. His solid *zetesis* in finding and reading the sources was thus completed by a painstaking *zetesis* in transforming them.

While the provisional version in all likelihood already contained the core of Plutarch's view of the hero, it was still a great step to the published version. That step not only required final structuring and literary polishing (*dispositio* and *elocutio*) but probably also included the pairing of the two heroes. This obviously necessitated a new process of reflection with further expansion and/or abridgement of the provisional draft. The final result was a product of intensive *zetesis* inviting further *zetesis*, well written and well considered, based on careful historical research and nuanced moral reflections, providing attractive and entertaining reading, as well as inspired and inspiring food for thinking.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has only touched on a few important aspects of the *Parallel Lives*: their moral purpose and comparative approach, Plutarch's dealing with his heroes, and his attitude towards historical truth. There is so much more to say. The ancient historian would certainly

[92] This hypothesis (see above, n. 88) is supported by interesting information about the ancients' working methods that can be found in other authors: see esp. Lucian, *Hist. conscr.* 48; Ammonius, *In Arist. Cat.* 4.6–13 Busse; Philoponus, *In Arist. Cat.* 3.29–4.10 Busse; Olympiodorus, *In Arist. Cat.* 6.25–35 Busse. See also Avenarius 1956: 85–104; Dorandi 1991: 13 and 2000: 111. On Plutarch's ὑπομνήματα, see also above, Chapter III, §5, with n. 53.

[93] Plutarch's adaptation of his source material has often been discussed. Again, Pelling paved the way: Pelling 1988: 33–6, 2002: 1–63 and 91–115, and 2011a: 56–8. See also Moles 1988: 36–8; Stadter 1989: xlviii–li; Larmour 1992: 4165–74; Konrad 1994: xxxix–xli; Heftner 1995: 14–19; Ahlrichs 2005: 41–2 and *passim*; Binder 2008: 22–3; Verdegem 2010b: 62–3 and 405–9.

[94] Cf. Beneker 2012: 59–64.

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want to learn more about Plutarch's reception of the previous historical and biographical tradition; about his historical method and to what extent it differs from, or corresponds to the methodological principles he laid down himself in *On the malice of Herodotus* (see above, Chapter III, §4); or about his view of Greece and Rome and his treatment of different Greek cities and powers. The philosopher would like to explore the Platonic inspiration of the *Parallel Lives* in further detail, as it appears from the many links with Plutarch's ethical and political philosophy (including the ideal of the philosopher-king) but also from digressions about epistemological and theological matters and from his view of the working of providence and fortune in the course of history. The literary scholar would find rich opportunities for a narratological study of the *Parallel Lives*, for an enquiry into their rhetoric, their imagery, their intertextuality, and their relationship with the 'Second Sophistic'.

Reading the *Parallel Lives* is like walking in a gallery full of precious statues, being overwhelmed by their variegated beauty and not knowing where to look first. Every statue is unique and repays accurate observation, and their comparison adds a further dimension to the spectator's experience. This comparison between the *Parallel Lives* and statues was made by Plutarch himself, but he also points to an important difference (*Cim.* 2.2): 'We believe that a portrait which reveals character and habits is far more beautiful than one which merely copies body and countenance.' He had it right: the statues of his *Parallel Lives* are living indeed. It was Plutarch himself who breathed life into them. His breath of life was that of zetetic moralism. This enabled the lively statues of the *Parallel Lives* to interact with one another, beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of their historical existence. In turn it enabled them to interact with Plutarch's readers and, indeed, with all of us.

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