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CATO'S SUICIDE IN PLUTARCH*

68.1–5: … having embraced and taken farewell of his son and each of his friends more affectionately than he used to, Cato retired to his room; again his intentions seemed suspicious. Once inside his room he lay down and took in his hands one of Plato's dialogues, *On the Soul*. When he had read most of the book, he looked up and saw that his sword was no longer hanging over his head. (His son had removed it during dinner.) Cato called a servant and asked him who had taken the sword. The servant did not reply, so he returned to his book. A little while later, as though with no concern or haste, but casually looking for his sword he ordered the servant to fetch it. There was some delay and no one brought the sword. Cato finished the book and then called the servants one by one, raising his voice louder and demanding his sword. He struck one slave on the mouth bruising his hand and shouted out loudly and angrily (*χαλεπαίνων καὶ βοῶν ἤδη μέγα*) that his son and servants were betraying him naked into the hands of his enemy…

70.1–2: … A little boy was sent in with the sword. Cato drew it from its sheath and inspected it. Seeing that the point and the edge were still sharp, he said, 'Now I am my own master', put down the sword, started reading the book again and is said to have read it right through twice (*δίς*).

70.8–10: … he drew the sword and stabbed himself in the stomach. The inflammation of his hand somewhat weakened the blow, so that he did not kill himself at once, but in his throes fell from the bed and made a noise by knocking over a geometrical abacus beside the bed. The servants heard the noise and shouted out; Cato's son together with his friends rushed in at once. They were horrified to find him covered in blood with most of his entrails protruding, but still alive and with his eyes open. The doctor approached him and tried to replace the entrails which were uninjured and to sew up the wound. When Cato revived and realized this, he pushed the doctor away (*ἀπεώσατο*), tore his entrails with his own hands, opened the wound again, and died. Plutarch, *Cato minor*, transl. J. Murrell (modified)

The death of Marcus Porcius Cato in Utica in April 46 B.C. was construed and generally admired by Cato's contemporaries and onwards as a feat of political as well as philosophical (specifically, Stoic) virtue.[1] Cato kills himself because his loyalty to the defeated republican values forbids him to live under Caesar's autocracy: 'neither was freedom survived by Cato, nor Cato by freedom' (Sen. *Constant*. 2.2; cf. Val. Max. 6.11.5). But Stoicism is a factor in his suicide, too: accepting life under tyranny would have compromised Cato's self-consistency (*constantia*) as a Stoic and impaired his freedom to make the honourable moral choices.[2] Moreover, Cato turns his death

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[1] See Benz (1929), 118–19; Grisé (1982), 201–5, 214; Fehrle (1983), 276–8; Griffin (1986), 194–8; Hill (2004), 71, 157, 179, 186–7. Surveys of ancient sources: Tandoi (1965), 329–30; MacMullen (1967), 4–5, 19; Zecchini (1980); generally, Pecchiura (1965), *passim* and Goar (1987), 13–76.

[2] Cf. Cic. *Off*. 1.112, with *Fin*. 3.60 and *Brut*. 118 (Cato as *perfectissimus Stoicus*); Sen. *Ep*. 24.6–8; Grisé (1982), 163, n. 38; Griffin (1986), 196–7; Lamberton (2001a), 130; Hill (2004),

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into a philosophical intertext: he spends his last hours reading Plato's *Phaedo*[3] and thus inevitably assimilates himself to Socrates.[4]

The most detailed and dramatic account of the famous suicide is found in Plutarch's biography of Cato, chs. 66–70. One expects the Platonist Plutarch to elaborate on the philosophical side of the episode: on three occasions across the *Parallel Lives* he calls Cato a *philosophos* (*Cato Mai*. 27.7; *Brut*. 2.1; *Pomp*. 40.2), which is a rare tag for the Plutarchan Romans.[5] Indeed Cato is portrayed approaching his act with resolve (64.4) articulated through a real and vigorous philosophical debate. On the eve of the suicide he takes a bath, just like the Platonic Socrates (66.6, 67.1 ~ *Phd*. 115A). Then, having dined with his entourage, he engages in an after-dinner discussion with the Peripatetic Demetrius. The argument in support of the Stoic tenet that the good man alone is free (cf. *SVF* 3.355, 3.360, 3.362–3) is made by Cato so forcefully that the rest of the company grow apprehensive about his intentions (67.1–4). This is an important moment: it shows that Cato has a deep-seated theoretical awareness of what he is preparing to do. His decision to take his own life is highlighted as consciously consistent with the authority of the Stoic doctrine. The Socratic pose, on the other hand, is a cumulative product, crystallizing out of the undercurrent and explicit reminiscences throughout the *Life*.[6] So, by any reckoning, everything should be all right on the night. Well, is it?

Cato withdraws to his room and reads the *Phaedo*. Suddenly he discovers that his sword has been removed. He calls for it; nothing happens. He reads some more *Phaedo*, angrily demands the sword, hits a sluggish slave on the mouth, bruising his hand (68.5). He is then interrupted by his son and friends, with whom he has a peevish argument about his own capacity for responsible judgement and behaviour. Cato also addresses the two philosophers present, the Peripatetic Demetrius and the Stoic Apollonides. He tricks them by hinting at his reason for committing suicide, yet promising to consult more with them in the nearest future:

64–71. For the Stoic views on suicide, cf. *SVF* 3.757, 3.763, 3.768; Grisé (1982), 180–4, 192–223; Griffin (1986), 72–4; Cooper (1999), 531–6; Van Hooff (1990), 189–91; Englert (1996), 69–86; Hill (2004), 37–41; Evenepoel (2004), 220–1. Benz (1929) overestimates the role of the Stoic concept of individual freedom (*Freiheitsbegriff*) both in general and (at 72–3) as part of Cato's motivation.

[3] Referred to in the sources as *On the Soul* (App. *B Civ*. 2.98–9, Cass. Dio 43.11.3), *On Immortality of the Soul* (Flor. 2.13.71), *On the Good of Death* (*De vir. illustr.* 80.4 *lecto Platonis libro, qui de bono mortis est*), or simply 'a book by Plato' (Sen. *Ep*. 24.6, cf. 71.11). *On the Soul* (περὶ ψυχῆς) was the standard ancient title for the *Phaedo*: [Pl.] *Ep*. 13.363a ; Cic. *Tusc*. 1.24; [Plut.] *Cons. ad Apoll*. 120D–E; Diog. Laert. 2.65, 3.36–7; *Anth. Pal*. 7.471.

[4] Döring (1979, 39; Geiger (1979), 63 and (1999), 359–60; Griffin (1986), 195–6; Duff (1999a), 144; Lamberton (2001a), 126. For the Cato–Socrates parallel, cf. esp. Cic. *Tusc*. 1.74, Sen. *Ep*. 67.7, 71.17, 98.12, 104.28–9; *Prov*. 3.4, 3.12–14; *Tranq*. 16.1, and (with negative overtones) Lactant. *Div. inst*. 3.18.

[5] As noted by Swain (1990a), 134. The other known cases are Varro (*Rom*. 12.3) and P. Nigidius Figulus (*An seni* 797D, cf. *Cic*. 20.3). Curiously, Cato is never described as a philosopher in his own *Life*, although he is frequently seen associating with philosophers: the Stoic Antipater of Tyre (4.1–2), the Stoic Athenodorus (10.1–3, 16.1), the Peripatetic Demetrius and the Stoic Apollonides (65.11, 66.6–8, 69.1, 70.1), the philosopher–sophist Philostratus (57.4; cf. *Ant*. 80.3; Philostr. *VS* 1.5), unnamed *philosophoi* (6.3, 20.2); Duff (1999a), 149–50 with n. 62.

[6] Cato's Socratic traits: walking about barefoot and without a tunic (6.6, 44.1, 50.1), philosophizing over wine through the night (6.2–3), attracting many 'lovers and admirers' (25.3 ἐρασταῖς καὶ θαυμασταῖς); Favonius a zealot of Cato, as Apollodorus was of Socrates (46.1), cf. Babut (1969), 168–9; further, Duff (1999a), 142–5. On Socrates in Plutarch see, generally, Hershbell (1988); Opsomer (1998), 84–104, 122–4, 127–60; Pelling (2005).

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I have not decided anything about myself.

καίτοι βεβούλευμαι μὲν οὐθὲν ἔγωγε περὶ ἐμαυτοῦ (69.4)

After they leave him alone, he checks the sword, reads some more *Phaedo*, then sleeps until midnight.[7] His hand gets bandaged; he sends a freedman to enquire about his companions, who were supposed to put to sea the day before; he sleeps a bit more. While unattended, he stabs himself in the stomach but fails to kill himself straight away. He falls from the bed; his guts drop out. He is discovered, the doctor tries to sew up his stomach, but Cato tears the wound open and finally dies (70.10).

An awfully messy suicide that does not to go according to plan. The plan was, clearly, to re-enact Socrates' sublime serenity, hence Cato's intense reading of the *Phaedo*.[8] Perhaps, more broadly, Cato wished to achieve maximum saturation with a solemn philosophical ethos before departing from this world. The *Phaedo* is a very appropriate text for that, proffering the classic formula of philosophy as 'practice in death' (ἡ θανάτου μελετή).[9] The result, however, is a troublesome and bloody, certainly un-Socratic, manner of dying.[10] It is not only that Cato uses a sword, in line with the Roman tradition.[11] Nor does Plutarch exploit the apparent contradiction of someone committing suicide after steeping himself in a text that rejects self-killing as 'unholy' (*Phd*. 62A5-B9). The Platonic position on suicide was in fact more flexible than the *Phaedo* passage suggests.[12] Plutarch illustrates this through the figure of Brutus. In a conversation with Cassius, Brutus says that he used to condemn Cato's suicide as 'unholy and unmanly' (οὐχ ὅσιον οὐδ' ἀνδρὸς ἔργον); the language is a direct reference to Plato (*Phd*. 62A6 μὴ ὅσιον). Yet later, Brutus continues, he changed his mind and now regards suicide as an honourable exit out of impossible, 'god-forsaken' circumstances (*Brut*. 40.7–8).[13] Within Plutarch's moral framework suicide is by no means always wrong.[14] So Cato's problem seems to lie not in his choice to die voluntarily but rather in his lame stage-management of this choice.

The account of Cato's suicide in Plutarch contains a whole list of symptoms unsuitable for a philosophical environment, such as deception, suspicion, distraction, angry shouting, noise, and physical violence. The Platonic Socrates, by contrast, ends his life in an atmosphere of resigned and amicable tranquillity: 'one should die in well-omened silence' (*Phd*. 117E1-2 ἐν εὐφημίᾳ χρὴ τελευτᾶν). There is no pummelling, pushing, or shouting in the *Phaedo*, just some weeping by the disconsolate disciples, but even that ceases (117E3-4). The picture of Cato punching the slave (which occurs only in Plutarch's version of the story) is particularly damning, since

[7] The description (70.3 ὕπνον βαθύν, ὥστε τοὺς ἐκτὸς αἰσθέσθαι) may suggest snoring. Duff (1999a), 144, recalls Socrates' sleep in the *Crito*, 43B4–5.

[8] It appears that Cato has read through the *Phaedo* at least three times in the space of a few hours: 68.2 διελθὼν τοῦ βιβλίου τὸ πλεῖστον, 68.3 πάλιν ἦν πρὸς τῷ βιβλίῳ, 68.4 ἐξαναγνούς, 70.2 αὖθις ἀνεγίνωσκε ... δὶς ὅλον διεξελθεῖν.

[9] *Phd*. 67E4-5, cf. 64A4–6, 80E5–81A1; Plut. *Non posse* 1105D.

[10] Cf. Grisé (1982), 123: Cato's end was 'en realité, une horrible boucherie'; Trapp (1999), 494–5: 'the manner of his death is, finally, harsh and nasty'; Lamberton (2001a), 127: the story of Cato's suicide is told 'in the most hideous and painful terms'.

[11] Suicide by the sword as *Romana mors*: Mart. 1.78; Van Hooff (1990), 47, 50–4. Grisé (1982), 95–104 is less categorical.

[12] *Pace* Brenk (2005), 67–9. Cf. Cic. *Rep.* 6.15 and *Tusc.* 1.74; Olymp. *In Phd.* 1.2–9; Grisé (1982), 170–2; Cooper (1999), 517–31; Warren (2001); Hill (2004), 48–56.

[13] Hill (2004), 51. For plausible speculation on the background to this passage, see Moles (1983), 767–71. Brutus' Platonism: *Brut*. 2.2.

[14] Cf. also *Tranq*. 476A, *Comp. Dem.-Cic.* 5.2; Frazier (1996), 166–8.

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punishment of slaves in anger was regarded as precisely the kind of error a philosophical individual must aim to avoid.[15] The abacus knocked over by Cato in his death-throes (70.8) is a symbolic detail: the instrument of mathematics and reasoning literally gets a kick during this botched up, grotesquely brutal hara-kiri.[16] Cato persists in reading Plato's *On the Soul*, but his own soul is not in exemplary good order. He hardly resembles Socrates as he tears out his entrails in a fit of heroic hysteria—we might rather think of the dying Antony dangling in the air outside Cleopatra's window with his stomach open (*Ant*. 77.2–3 and *Comp. Demetr.-Ant*. 6.4 *δειλῶς μὲν καὶ οἰκτρῶς καὶ ἀτίμως*, cf. Gell. 3.9 on Antony's *detestabili exitio*).

Cato's suicide was meant to be a composed and rational action. Yet in Plutarch's narrative it is adulterated with emotional and violent elements that do not fit—as Plutarch knew well—with the ideal of the Stoic *apatheia*.[17] Cato gets uptight and angry, whereas the Stoic sage is never angry.[18] Labelled as 'brief madness' in the ethical vocabulary of Stoicism (Sen. *De ira* 3.1.2),[19] anger undermines the very rationality of Cato's performance. The attempt to hide the sword from him is spelled out by way of Cato's riposte (68.6) that centres on the idea of insanity:

> Have I gone mad, without realising it, and so … must be disarmed?
>
> *ποῦ λέληθα παρανοίας ἡλωκώς, ὅτι … παροπλίζομαι;*

This seems to allude to the proverbial situation of (not) trusting a madman with a sword.[20] The Plutarchan Cato is determined but also bitterly temperamental and therefore removed from the level-headed rational composure that is pivotal to the Stoic discourse of (voluntary) death:[21] his behaviour does not come near the attitude exemplified, for the Stoics, by Socrates (Sen. *Ep.* 104.28).

[15] Cf. Plut. *De coh. ira* 459B–462B and fr. 148 Sandbach; Gell. 1.26.4–9; Plato ap. Diog. Laert. 3.39; Duff (1999a), 151. Evocatively, the Plutarchan Alexander in a paroxysm of rage punches a soldier who declines to carry out a preposterous command (*Alex*. 51.6); see also n. 20 below. Note that in the *Phaedo* Socrates has a very cordial relationship with his gaoler (116B8–D7).

[16] It is worth observing Cato's hands in the episode. Reading the *Phaedo* to himself, he holds the book roll in both hands (68.2 *ἔλαβεν εἰς χεῖρας*). He must stop reading in order to hit the slave. His hand swells from the blow and has to be bandaged (70.4): presumably not only the stabbing (70.8), but also the reading that precedes it must be made uncomfortable. When searching and calling for his sword, Cato has to look away from the *Phaedo* (cf. 68.2–4). It is perhaps symbolic that Cato can handle *either* the book, *or* the sword (70.2 *τὸ μὲν ξίφος ἔθηκε, τὸ δὲ βιβλίον αὖθις ἀνεγίνωσκε*); contrast Sen. *Ep.* 24.6, where the book and the sword co-operate in Cato's martyrdom: *Platonis librum legentem posito ad caput gladio … duo haec in rebus extremis instrumenta prospexerat, alterum ut vellet mori, alterum ut posset.*

[17] Cf. Benz (1929), 118; Tandoi (1966), 25; Griffin (1986), 202; Goar (1987), 71, n. 64; Duff (1999a), 151.

[18] So, poignantly, Cic. *Mur.* 62, *numquam… sapiens irascitur.* Plutarch was aware that this Ciceronian speech lampooned Cato's Stoicism: *Cato Min*. 21.7, *Comp. Dem.-Cic.* 1.5. For Plutarch's views on anger, see generally Ingenkamp (1971), 80–1 and (2000), 260–3; Becchi (1990); Duff (1999a), 87–9, 212–13; Alexiou (1999).

[19] Cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 4.52; Plut. *De garr.* 503D–E.

[20] Pl. *Resp.* 331C; Xen. *Mem*. 4.2.17; Sen. *De ira* 1.19.8, *male irato ferrum committitur.* Note that the sword is brought back to Cato by a 'young boy' (70.1)—maybe an adult would have known better: cf. the precaution of Alexander's bodyguard during the king's drunken quarrel with Cleitus (*Alex*. 51.5–6). For the link between suicide and destructive mania, cf. Sen. *Controv.* 3.9; Aretaeus 3.6.5, p. 42, 12–14 Hude; Van Hooff (1990), 96–9.

[21] Cf. Sen. *Ep.* 4.5, 30.12. Recent re-evaluations of Seneca's views on suicide: Hill (2004), 146–92; Evenepoel (2004).

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It would appear that, by zooming in on the passionate and disturbingly gruesome features in the suicide-episode, Plutarch questions the validity of the philosophical claims entailed in Cato's act. Neither Stoicism, nor imitation of Socrates,[22] works as it should have. Cato fares notably worse than his Greek counterpart Phocion whose lifestyle and especially the setting of his death—in prison, unjustly sentenced by the Athenians, drinking hemlock (for which he graciously agrees to pay himself)—display strong affinities with Socrates.[23] It is significant that while Phocion's end is said to 'remind the Greeks of Socrates' (*Phoc.* 38.5), there is no such explicit equation in Cato's case. Instead, a mischievous parting shot:[24] in 72.3 we are told that Cato might have been motivated by a spiteful desire to waste Caesar's chance of adding to his reputation for clemency in victory:

> … for actually if Cato had accepted to be kept alive by Caesar, he would have appeared to enhance Caesar's image rather than to lower his own.
>
> *τῷ γὰρ ὄντι σωθῆναι Κάτων ἀνασχόμενος ὑπὸ Καίσαρος οὐκ ἂν οὕτω δοκεῖ καταισχῦναι τὴν αὑτοῦ δόξαν ὡς κοσμῆσαι τὴν ἐκείνου*[25]

Why is the death of the Plutarchan Cato so flawed? The straightforward solution is to blame the negative bias in Plutarch's source material. Plutarch was familiar (superficially, at the least) with hostile accounts of Cato, including Caesar's *Anti-Cato* (*Caes.* 54.4–6; *Cato Min.* 36.5, 52.6, cf. 11.7–8). Discrediting the suicide-scene was a tactic those politically prejudiced sources did not pass over untried.[26] Interestingly, Appian (*B Civ.* 2.101) mentions that during Caesar's civil war triumph visual imagery (*ἐν εἰκόσι καὶ ποικίλαις γραφαῖς*) of eminent Pompeian commanders killing themselves was paraded in the streets of Rome. One tableau depicted Cato 'tearing himself apart like a beast' (*ὑφ' ἑαυτοῦ διασπώμενον ὡς θηρίον*); the Roman crowd was upset at the sight.[27] We can assume that graphic brutality of the suicide was part of the anti-Catonian rhetoric in some contemporary texts as well.

But it is also possible that Plutarch picked up the details in his pro-Catonian sources. The consensus of scholarship is that Plutarch's *Life of Cato* is heavily dependent on a biography of Cato by the first-century A.D. Stoic Thrasea Paetus who was using earlier literature, such as the eyewitness memoirs of Munatius Rufus.[28] Although generally favourable to Cato, these narratives did not suppress the more controversial facets of his character and career (cf. 25.1–13, 36.5, 44.1–2). It would

[22] Obviously, Socrates always keeps his anger firmly under control: e.g. Sen. *De ira* 3.13.3; Plut. *De coh. ira* 455B; generally, Cic. *Off.* 1.90.

[23] Pelling (2002a), 377; Trapp (1999), 495–6. Duff (1999a), 143–4, overlooks the point ('both men remain calm despite the emotion of others'). For Phocion–Socrates, cf. *Phoc.* 4.4, 8.4, 32.6–7 ('better to suffer wrong than to do wrong'), 36.3–7, esp. 38.5; Nep. *Phoc.* 4.3; Trapp (1999), 487–9; Alcalde Martín (1999).

[24] That would count as 'malice' by Plutarch's own standards, cf. *De Hdt. mal.* 855E–856A.

[25] Cf. *Caes.* 54.2; also App. *B Civ.* 2.99; Cass. Dio 43.12.1; August. *De civ. D* 1.23; Zecchini (1980), 41; Swain (1990b), 199.

[26] So Fehrle (1983), 15–16. Cf. *De Hdt. mal.* 856B on the writers who impute Cato's suicide to fear of a cruel death at the hands of Caesar. August. *De Civ. D* 1.23 seems to proceed from philosophical, rather than political, criticism of Cato's self-killing.

[27] It has been noticed that Appian's version of Cato's death (*B Civ.* 2.98–9) is the closest to Plutarch's: see Zecchini (1980), 53–4 and Fehrle (1983), 29–31, who rightly thinks (at 31–2) that Appian is drawing on Plutarch.

[28] Tandoi (1966), 26–7; Scardigli (1979), 136–40; Geiger (1979), esp. 49–57; Fehrle (1983), 7–18; Delvaux (1993), 618, 620; Duff (1999a), 142 with n. 41.

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seem that their strategy was to assemble a 'realistically' idealized picture of Cato that would admit, yet reinterpret, his defects as shortcomings on the essentially right side of virtue. The emotional tantrums and gore of the suicide-episode could stem from this tradition.[29] Thus Seneca, *Epistle* 24.8 in the effort to salvage Cato's breach of *apatheia* argues that Cato's final outburst of anger was directed at himself (*sibi iratus nudas in uulnus manus egit*)—that is, at his body's failure to obey his decision to die—which makes the emotion nobler and more excusable from the Stoic perspective. Similarly, the emphasis on the pain of self-stabbing and disembowelment serves to visualize Cato's commitment to the Stoic virtue as defined through his militant indifference to all things external.[30]

However, we must not forget that Plutarch is telling the story on his terms, and that he is responsible for selecting and arranging the source material to promote his own agenda. As a Greek writer in the late first and early second century A.D., he is sufficiently detached, chronologically as well as psychologically, from the propaganda pressures of the Roman civil war. He is not a partisan of Stoicism either.[31] In other words, the mise-en-scène of Cato's death must be aligned with Plutarch's methods and values as a narrator-cum-ideologue.

Several scholars have looked for intertextual clues to the passage. Vincenzo Tandoi discerns influence of the ancient novel. According to Tandoi, the aura of tension and suspense about the suicide, the tears and speeches, and the possibility of last-moment rescue by a skilful doctor go back to novelistic narrative patterns.[32] Michael Trapp, in the most sustained scrutiny of the episode to date, tentatively considers the possibility of (de)constructing the Plutarchan Cato as an echo of Sophocles' Ajax. Trapp's implicit list of parallels between the two texts includes: suicide by the sword, alleged madness,[33] deception of the anxious loved ones, and the overall grandeur of the protagonist figure.[34] Next, Trapp postulates an allusion to the *Ajax* (654–6) in Plato's *Phaedo*, 115A5-6; on this assumption, the finale of Plutarch's *Cato*, Plato's *Phaedo*, and Sophocles' tragedy gravitate together into a richly intertextual triangular relationship.[35]

Previously in his argument Trapp examines two answers to the central question of why Cato's end in the Plutarchan *Life* is presented as philosophically and aesthetically problematic and inferior to both Socrates' and Phocion's. Is it because Cato is a

[29] Cf. Griffin (1986), 202, n. 20. More (uncommitted) speculation on the sources of the suicide-scene: Geiger (1979), 65–7.

[30] Cf. Sen. *Prov.* 2.10–11; *Ep.* 70.19; Hill (2004), 179–80. Tandoi (1966), 33–4, points out that Cato's last-minute concern for his comrades (Plut. *Cat. Min.* 70.4–7) can be read as a positive deviation from the Stoic *apatheia* in the direction of *philanthrôpia*; cf. *Ad princ. iner.* 781D. On the semantic span of *apatheia* in Plutarch, see Alexiou (1998).

[31] The axial study is Babut (1969); see also Hershbell (1992).

[32] Tandoi (1966), 24–6.

[33] Which is of course open to ambivalence—thus, for Cicero (*Tusc.* 4.52) Ajax' madness was real (*Aiacem quidem ira ad furorem mortemque perduxit*).

[34] Trapp (1999), 497–8. I am not persuaded, although I do not share the suspicions of Di Gregorio (1979), 32, that Plutarch lacked first-hand knowledge of Sophocles' *Ajax* as he only quotes the play once (*Quaes. conv.* 741A ~ *Aj.* 914). Plutarch normally flags 'tragic' intertextuality in more pronounced ways, with metaphors and quotations—the suicide of Demosthenes (*Dem.* 29) is a relevant example here: see Mossman (1999), electronic text to nn. 43–6; Senzasono (2001). Besides, the Sophoclean Ajax prays to Hermes for swift, convulsions-free death (831–4 *καλῶ δ' ἅμα / πομπαῖον Ἑρμῆν χθόνιον εὖ με κοιμίσαι, / ξὺν ἀσφαδάστῳ καὶ ταχεῖ πηδήματι / πλευρὰν διαρρήξαντα τῷδε φασγάνῳ*)—exactly what Cato fails to achieve…

[35] Trapp (1999), 498.

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Roman, and Plutarch is sceptical about the Romans' chances of attaining the same sublimity of moral behaviour and *paideia* that the Greeks have mastered? Or is Plutarch reacting against the (Roman) tendency to mythologize Cato as 'a second Socrates'? Trapp cautiously opts for the latter explanation: Plutarch objects to the crude (Roman) readings of Cato by exploring a more complex one.[36]

But why does Plutarch want a complicated Cato? In his narrative, is intertextual and dramatic depth created for its own sake? Interpretations such as those offered by Tandoi and Trapp stop short of relating the concerns adumbrated in the description of Cato's last hours to the larger set of issues that Plutarch keeps addressing across the whole corpus of his works. I would like to take an altogether different approach, that would link the suicide-scene in the *Life of Cato* to Plutarch's philosophical position as a Platonist. In the rest of this discussion I shall demonstrate that there are two overlapping trends of thought behind the episode, namely (a) Plutarch's fundamental opposition to Stoicism, and (b) his Platonically informed reservations about written discourse.

Cato's commitment to the Stoic philosophy is a major element of his identity in the *Life*. It is brought forward repeatedly:[37] Cato studies with the prominent Stoic professors Antipater (4.2) and Athenodorus (10; 16.1); Cicero's mockery of Stoicism in the *Pro Murena* was provoked by Cato's allegiance to the school (21.7). Cato is said to have internalized the radical Stoic views on virtue, vice, and indifference to everything else (4.2, 6.6; cf. *SVF* 3.35–7, 3.41, 3.117–18). Stoicism thus becomes an explanatory gloss to Cato's political demeanour: throughout his career Cato rigidly sticks by his ideals and refuses to compromise.[38] At the same time, Plutarch's Cato is far from being a perfect Stoic. Cato has by nature a steadfast and unemotional (1.3 *ἄτρεπτον καὶ ἀπαθὲς καὶ βέβαιον*) but also irascible character (cf. 2.8, 3.7); his anger grows slowly but, once grown, it is 'inexorable' (1.5). Exposure to Stoicism should have cured that, but it scarcely did. On numerous occasions in the narrative we see Cato reacting passionately and angrily (7.2, 13.2, 23.1 *μετ' ὀργῆς καὶ πάθους*, 36.5–37.1).[39] Under stress, he lapses into totally un-Stoic emotionalism. The grief over his brother's death caused him to behave 'affectively rather than philosophically' (11.3 *ἐμπαθέστερον ἔδοξεν ἢ φιλοσοφώτερον ἐνεγκεῖν τὴν συμφοράν*).

Cato's temper in the suicide-scene is consistent with his inconsistency in handling emotions. His argument against the Peripatetic at dinner is described as violent and harsh (67.3 *σφοδρὸς ἐμπεσὼν ὁ Κάτων, καὶ τόνον προσθεὶς καὶ τραχύτητα φωνῆς*): a striking clash between the contents of discourse and its delivery style. Before withdrawing to read the *Phaedo*, Cato embraces his son and friends 'with more affection than usual' (68.1 *μᾶλλον ἢ πρότερον εἰώθει προσαγαγόμενος καὶ φιλοφρονηθείς*). In his final hours Cato succumbs to emotional onsets that, as a good Stoic, he should have been able to resist—punching a slave in rage (68.5), groaning with pity (*ἐστέναξεν οἰκτῳ*) at the news that stormy weather has delayed the departure of some of his comrades (70.5–6). In a typically nonchalant way, Plutarch reports (70.3) that the doctor who tried to save Cato but was pushed away was called

[36] Ibid. 496–7.

[37] See Babut (1969), 170–2; Duff (1999a), 155–8. Swain (1990b), 197–201, is hard-pressed denying it; strangely, Duff (1999a), 156, finds Plutarch 'reticent' on Cato's Stoicism.

[38] Pelling (1989), 229–30 and (2002b), 315; Duff (1999a), 139–41, 148–55; Lamberton (2001a), 125–8; Plut. *Prae. ger. reip.* 808E.

[39] Babut (1969), 172–3; Duff (1999a), 151. To be fair, sometimes Cato succeeds in restraining anger and emotionalism: 21.8; 51.3, 59.4; cf. *Prae. ger. reip.* 809E; Sen. *De ira* 2.32.2, 3.38.2, *Constant*. 2.14.3, etc.

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Cleanthes; the fluke detail of the doctor sharing the name with one of the founders of Stoicism could be a tongue-in-cheek allusion to Cato's faulty self-fashioning as a Stoic.

To seize upon the incongruities between an individual's conduct and the doctrine which this individual upholds is a stock move of interschool polemics in ancient philosophy. Plutarch maps out his recognition of this approach in the programmatic proem of *On Stoic Self-Contradictions*:

> First of all, I demand visible consistency of doctrines with ways of living, since it is even more necessary for a philosopher's life to be in harmony with his logos than for an orator (as Aeschines put it) to speak in unison with the law. For the philosopher's logos is a freely chosen private law …(1033A–B)

As a Platonist, Plutarch is ever keen to score points against the Stoics by sniping at—or rather insinuating—self-contradictions. It seems likely that the portrait of Cato reflects an anti-Stoic agenda, too. The anecdotes about Cato's psychological failings can be taken an example of an inconsistent Stoic; but perhaps they belong in a broader debate, namely Plutarch's critique of the Stoic ethics as a radical and excessively dogmatic system that is unrealistic, unlivable, and even dangerous for naturally strong, heroic characters.[40] It is important that Plutarch does not gloat over Cato's un-Stoic behaviour in mourning for his dead brother (11.3), but welcomes the humanity of it instead:

> how much gentleness and tender affection (τὸ ἥμερον … καὶ φιλόστοργον) there was in this man's inflexibility and firmness against pleasures, fears, and pleadings. (11.4)[41]

Plutarch's objective is to pick on Stoicism, rather than on Cato as a person—he was, after all, an outstanding practitioner of *aretê* (26.5; 52.8; *Cato Mai*. 27.7)[42] who simply chose an extreme logos to live by.

Cato also had a steady image as a voracious reader. He could not have enough of books; he read in the curia before Senate meetings; Cicero playfully describes him as a 'book-orgiast'.[43] I shall now argue that in Plutarch's *Life* this motive is subtly elaborated and laden with far-reaching implications. To return to the suicide-scene: Plutarch appears to invest considerable narrative effort to project the impression that Cato is trying to get philosophical inspiration *from a text*. The word 'book' (βιβλίον) occurs no less than four times (68.2, 68.3, 68.4, 70.2) within the space of approximately one and a third Teubner pages. In the whole of the *Life* βιβλίον, in singular and plural, is used twelve times[44]—a markedly higher rate of occurrence than in any other extant Plutarchan work (as can be speedily verified thanks to the *TLG* CD–ROM). I would like to believe that this is not entirely accidental. Abundant references to literary material (books, tablets, and so on) contribute to Cato's characterization as an aloof stickler for rules, as well as switching on influential intertexts.

[40] Cf. *De aud. poet*. 25C, *De prof. virt*. 75F–76A, *Stoic. rep.* 1041F–1042A, esp. *Agis.–Cleom*. 23.6 'the Stoic teaching is somehow precarious and risky for great and sharp natures…', with Duff (1999a), 155–6. On Plutarch's concept of 'great natures', see Bucher-Isler (1972), 80–1; Duff (1999a), esp. 47–9, 62 and (1999b).

[41] Cf. Duff (1999a), 147.

[42] Babut (1969), 173–5.

[43] Cic. *Fin*. 3.7, *erat enim ut scis in eo auiditas legendi nec satiari potest … quasi helluari libris, si hoc uerbo in tam clara re utendum est, uidebatur*; Val. Max. 8.7.2.

[44] 18.9, 19.1, 20.2, 28.1, 38.3–4, 57.3, 59.4, 68.2–4, 70.2.

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In the prologue to the *Lives of Phocion and Cato* Plutarch quotes Cicero's remark on Cato's unworldly high-mindedness:

> he was doing politics as if in Plato's *Republic* and not among the dregs of Romulus.
>
> *ὥσπερ ἐν τῇ Πλάτωνος πολιτείᾳ καὶ οὐκ ἐν τῇ Ῥωμύλου πολιτευόμενον ὑποστάθμῃ*
> (*Phoc.* 3.2 ~ Cic. *Ad Att.* 2.1.8)

The sentence sums up the tensions of Cato's personality and career in more than one way. The Plutarchan Cato is not only an obsessive reader who reads in the Senate, holding the book under his toga (19.1). He works hard to transfer models and values from books, such as the *Republic* or the *Phaedo*, into life. Philosophy and texts for Cato are inseparable: going on vacation in the countryside he takes with him 'books and philosophers' (20.2 *παραλαβὼν βιβλία καὶ φιλοσόφους*), in that order. Cato pays a great deal of attention to the written word. He conspicuously relies on texts; he takes pains to have the records and to have them as accurate and legitimate as possible. He has his slaves copying the daily proceedings of the treasury even when he is no longer in charge of it (18.9). He purchases a full record of the public accounts for some fifteen–twenty years at the exorbitant price of 5 talents and 'always keeps it in hand' (18.9 *ἀεὶ διὰ χειρὸς εἶχεν*). In Utica, before addressing the local citizen assembly and the remaining Pompeians in the face of imminent defeat, Cato calmly reads to himself, from a book roll, a list of available military resources (59.4). Back in 64 B.C., the first thing Cato did as quaestor of the treasury was actually to read the relevant laws (16.2). He then waged and won a major office war against the wicked treasury clerks (*γραμματεῖς*: 16.3–17.1). His interventions to overturn unconstitutional legislation involved the symbolic gesture of physically destroying the offensive record (18.7 Marcellus' tablets; 28.1 Metellus' book roll). He protests against illegal destruction of records by others as a matter of principle (40.1–2) and quickly detects foul play in elections by discovering identical handwriting on the voting tablets (46.3). Cato's figure conjures up an ambiance of extraordinary and efficient practices of literacy: he reads silently (19.1, 59.4),[45] his only extant speech owes its survival to shorthand, freshly invented by Cicero's secretaries (23.3).

But, like many swots, Cato has a turbulent relationship with literacy. The biggest blow is the loss at sea of his meticulously compiled logbooks of his administration of Cyprus (56 B.C.). Plutarch comments that Cato was vexed by this: his ambition was to impress the Roman political world with his accuracy (38.2–4, esp. 38.4 *ἀλλὰ παράδειγμα τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀκριβείας ἐξενεγκεῖν φιλοτιμούμενος, ἐνεμεσήθη*). Another setback happened in 63 B.C. at a Senate meeting dealing with Catiline's conspiracy. Spotting a letter being brought to Caesar, Cato immediately smells treachery and demands to read the message (aloud?!): it turns out to be a sexually explicit letter from Caesar's lover and Cato's own sister Servilia (24.1–3, cf. *Brut.* 5.3–4).[46] Cato's opponents attack him via open letters and pamphlets, both in his lifetime and posthumously (Scipio: 57.3; Caesar: 51.3–5, 36.5, 52.6, cf. 11.8 on Caesar's hubristic 'pen'). Getting clerical support is often an uphill battle for Cato: in the treasury he has to fight with his own staff (16.3–17.1), whereas on the mission to Cyprus he is accompanied by just two *γραμματεῖς*, both of them villains (34.6).

[45] Gavrilov (1997), 70.

[46] This anecdote is introduced as a 'small mark of character … in my, as it were, soul-sketching' (24.1 *τὰ μικρὰ τῶν ἠθῶν σημεῖα ... ὥσπερ εἰκόνα ψυχῆς ὑπογραφομένους*); cf. Duff (1999a), 16.

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I contend that the wide-ranging anecdotal material in Plutarch on the topic of Cato and literacy (books, tablets, clerks, handwriting, and so forth) makes sense as a means to create a cumulative emphasis on the bookish and therefore sterile qualities of Cato's virtue as moralist and statesman. Blindfolded by his own political rigour, he misreads the Roman republic as a utopian philosophical polity (*Phoc.* 3.2). Likewise his philosophizing by the book (cf. 20.2) has its pitfalls. His imitation of Socrates comes across as absurdly literal. It was fine for Socrates to walk around barefooted; for a Roman praetor it is disgraceful (44.1).[47] Reading the *Phaedo* before suicide is, ironically, an overkill as it does not help Cato to achieve Socratic serenity.[48] Cato's crucial error is that throughout the *Life* he sets too much store on written discourse.[49]

The idea that a skill is best learned not from books but via live instruction and experience was a current one in antiquity.[50] But Cato's case is more special. Given the philosophical colouring of his *Life*, along with Plutarch's adherence to a Platonic framework of thought, it is likely that Cato's problems with texts, and especially the *Phaedo*-debacle, have some sort of connection with Plato's views on literacy. Plato criticizes writing in the *Phaedrus* (274B6-278B4) as well as in the *Protagoras* and the attributed *Seventh Epistle*. Plato's attack on writing has been much and closely studied from a variety of perspectives.[51] Without entering the complexities of the discussion, it appears that Plato is genuinely dissatisfied with the potential and impact of written texts as opposed to live dialectics. A text is a dubious aid to knowledge, 'unable to speak in its own support and teach sufficiently what is true' (*Phdr.* 276C8-9);[52] arguably, even Plato's own works are not immune from this disparaging assessment.

[47] Cf. Plutarch's reservations about Phocion's application to statesmanship of the Socratic principle of suffering injustice rather than committing it: in politics, the communal good should take priority over personal scruples (*Phoc.* 32.6–7).

[48] On one occasion during the civil war Cato uses philosophical arguments to harangue the soldiers. His address proves inspirational, yet total victory eludes the Pompeians (54.8–11).

[49] Again, with one small exception: in 10.1–2 Cato realizes that writing letters would not get him tuition with the old and extremely popular Stoic professor Athenodorus of Pergamum, so he travels there in person.

[50] The skill in question can be medicine, jurisdiction, rhetoric, statesmanship, military tactics, and so on. Cf. Pl. *Phdr.* 268C2–4; Gal. *De comp. med.* 6.1 = vol. 12, p. 894, 1–6 Kühn; *De alim. facult.* 1.1 = vol. 6, p. 480, 3–14 Kühn: 'For only methodical (κατὰ διέξοδον) training and teaching produces experts. That is why I believe that people (οἱ πολλοί) rightly say that the best education takes place through living voice (παρὰ τῆς ζώσης φωνῆς), and that one cannot become a ship's pilot or any other expert on the basis of a book (ἐκ βιβλίου). Books are aids for remembering (ὑπομνήματα) at the disposal of those who have already learned things (τῶν προμεμαθηκότων) and possess knowledge, but do not constitute complete education for the ignorant. However, if some who have no access to teachers are willing to study closely works which have already been lucidly and methodically written (like the ones we have produced), they benefit greatly, especially if they will not shun reading them many times'; Gell. 14.2.1; Sall. *Iug.* 85.13–14; Cic. *Tusc.* 1.2; Quint. 2.2.8; Plut. *An seni* 790E, *Phil.* 4.8–9; Sen. *Ep.* 6.6, with Snyder (2000), 37; generally, Karpp (1964), 190–4; Alexander (1990). A related motive is criticism of the armchair historian: cf. Polyb. 12.27.4–5; on a possible Plutarchan echo of this passage, see Zadorojnyi (2005).

[51] See esp. Szlezák (1985), (1992) and (1999), 9–17, 39–65, 103, 109–12; Burger (1980); Derrida (1972); Griswold (1986), 202–29; Heitsch (1987); Ferrari (1987), 204–22; Isnardi Parente (1992); also Greene (1951), 23–4, 45–50; Hackworth (1952), 162–4; Luther (1961); De Vries (1969), 20–2; Zaslavsky (1981), 29–34, 92–6; Erler (1985); Richard (1986), 50–8; Rowe (1988), 9–11, 208–12; Svenbro (1993), 198–216; Harris (1989), 91–2; Kullman (1990), 322–34 and (1991); Ferber (1992); Gill (1992); Cerri (1992); Nieddu (1992), 567–85; Trabattoni (1994), 48–99; Heitsch (1997), 188–203; Woolf (1999); Kahn (1996), 371–92, with Tarrant (1996); Ford (2002), 244–8.

[52] Cf. *Prt.* 329A2–4, *Ep.* 7.344C–E, *Leg.* 968D4–E5, and, with different twists of argument, *Tht.* 142D6–143A5, 143B5–C6; *Plt.* 298B6–300B7; note also Xen. *Mem.* 4.2.8–39. On the debate

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I argue that Cato's botched suicide in Plutarch might have been constructed as a response to, and confirmation of, Plato's idea that texts are inadequate guides to philosophy.[53] Even the *Phaedo*[54] will not make you a Socrates, without going through full-scale, live, and (by implication) oral training—in Platonism. Phocion, again, gets the better of Cato: he studied in the Academy with Plato and Xenocrates (*Phoc.* 4.2, 27.1–3, cf. 14.7, 27.6).[55] As a result he is more successful in reproducing the Socratic model. Importantly, Phocion is not reproached for acting like a statesman out of Plato's *Republic*: only Cato is.

The upshot of my hypothesis is that, by problematizing Cato's suicide, Plutarch's narrative reflects several things. First, there is the desire of Platonists to have copyright over the figure of Socrates. Other schools must not lay claim to him; if they try, it does not quite work for them—see what happened to Cato who sought to learn the *exemplum Socratis* as a non-Platonist, just by reading texts.[56] The transpiring message is that you cannot be Socrates if you are a Stoic, and, more generally, that it is impossible to cross over successfully into other people's philosophical sects without a full conversion.

Second, the episode could be read as indirect evidence of a persisting traditionalist tenor of philosophical education in later Platonism, deriving ultimately from the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Epistle*.[57] Studying a book, even if it is a Platonic dialogue, may not suffice to generate the required impact on the psyche that would reformat the reader's life- and death-style. Philosophical scriptures alone do not guarantee progress; guidance and discussion with a teacher are needed. It is well known that in post-classical and late antiquity philosophizing activity was increasingly focused on the exegesis of earlier texts. And yet there is evidence that the lingering self-perception of philosophical reading was not one of a solitary study, but rather of a group effort

for and against authenticity of the *Seventh Epistle*, see, more recently, Schofield (2000), 298–302. For more anti-literacy statements from classical Athens, see Morgan (1999), 56–8. Broadly similar ideas were developed by the Stoics and the Cynics: cf. Arrian's preface to Epict. *Disc.* 8; Epict. *Disc.* 1.4.6–9, 1.4.14–16, 4.4.11; Sen. *Ep.* 88.32; M. Aur. 2.3; Antisthenes ap. Diog. Laert. 6.5, 6.48.

[53] Against the background of pervasive literacy in the *Life*, the description of young Cato as a slow learner with retentive, deep memory of the type that is better at remembering than at recalling (1.6–7) may be taken as another piece of sophisticated interplay with the *Phaedrus*. Memory is a key theme in Plato's mini-myth about the invention of writing that is at first introduced as a 'drug for memory and wisdom' (274E6) yet soon dismissed as 'a drug not for memory, but for reminding' (275A5). By turning into a book-addict, is Cato trying to expand his learning horizons? Has he misread the *Phaedrus* too?

[54] Or maybe especially the *Phaedo*? Apart from Cato, at least one more problematic and suicidal ancient reader of the dialogue is attested: Cleombrotus of Ambracia jumped to his death after having read the *Phaedo*: Callim. *Epigr.* 23 Pfeiffer = *Anth. Pal.* 7.471; Cic. *Tusc.* 1.84; *Scaur.* 4; Ov. *Ib.* 493–4; August. *De civ. D* 1.22 (Theombrotus). See Grisé (1982), 172, n. 20; Griffin (1986), 71; White (1994); Williams (1995). It is tempting to identify this Cleombrotus with his namesake who is mentioned in the *Phaedo* (59C3–4) as one of the absent disciples of Socrates.

[55] Cf. Lamberton (2001a), 120.

[56] On the Stoic appropriation of Socrates, see Long (1988), 150–1, 160–71; Striker (1994); generally, Döring (1979); De Luise (1997), 151–65; Dihle (2000).

[57] Baltussen (2002), 186, ruminates over the 'embarrassed silence in the Platonic tradition' on the problem of the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus vis-à-vis* Plato's texts. He refers to Hermias, *In Phaedr.* 274e–275e, pp. 257, 1–259, 27 Couvreur; cf. also anon. *Proleg.* 13 and 24 Westerink. It cannot be ruled out that many non-philosophical objections to literacy, such as those cited in n. 50 above, were influenced by the Platonic outlook, too. Tarrant (1983), 81–4, argues that Plutarch (and other Middle Platonists) did not know the relevant section of the *Seventh Epistle*, but this is highly unconvincing.

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in seminars led by a teacher,[58] as if in the wake of Socrates who 'unrolled' (*ἀνελίττων*) and discussed textual 'treasures' in the company of his friends and disciples (Xen. *Mem* 1.6.14). Lucian satirizes a student of philosophy for having spent twenty years

> … going to teachers and always stooping over a book to copy out notes of lectures (*ὑπομνήματα τῶν συνουσιῶν*). (*Hermot*. 2)

Marinus' *Life* of Proclus (ch. 22), presents the fifth-century Platonist organizing reflective hermeneutics of 'all ancient writings' so as to strike a balance between spoken word and text:

> … in seminars (*ἐν … ταῖς συνουσίαις*) expounding everything lustily and lucidly, and also setting it all down in dissertations (*ἐν συγγράμμασιν*).

But the same Proclus took care to hold evening sessions earmarked as 'writing-free' (ibid. *ἀγράφους … συνουσίας*). Passages such as these bear witness that philosophy, although clearly inseparable from literacy, played at having retained its interpersonal, dialogic, and effectively oral component.[59]

If my interpretation is correct, and the suicide-narrative in the *Life of Cato* is connected with the broader Platonizing concern about the value of written discourse, some pertinent questions should be raised about Plutarch's own moral programme. Plutarch encourages his addressees to read for the sake of examples and reflective self-improvement (*De prof. virt*. 79B–C); he describes his own texts as ethical mirrors that 'correct lives' (*Aem*. 1.1–3). How do such statements tally with apprehensions about the traps and limitations of text as a medium for logos? What special status can philosophical discourse claim when even a Platonist thinks that acting like a character from the *Republic* is freakish (cf. *Phoc*. 3.2)? The Plutarchan readers are expected, it seems, to remain mindful that education through ethico-political *exempla* is a non-linear, discriminative exercise where one has to tread carefully: thus, in the *Rules of Statesmanship* the imperial Greek elite is advised to stay away, in public rhetoric, from inflammatory references to 'Marathon, Eurymedon, Plataea' (814C). Cato's failure to die like Socrates illustrates the danger of copycatting philosophical postures even from the most renowned of books. So when the Plutarchan narrator(s) impress upon the readers the technique of comparing themselves with the examples in front of them (e.g. *Aem*. 1.2, 1.5, *De prof. virt*. 85A–B, *De coh. ira* 463E), something quite different from point-blank, one-to-one transferral is envisaged. Plutarch looks to and constructs paradigmatic texts as moral stencils, yet holds back from peremptory dirigisme: for him, philosophical discourse is a contextual, rather than simply textual, affair.

University of Liverpool ALEXEI V. ZADOROJNYI
avzadoro@liverpool.ac.uk

[58] Cf. Epicur. fr. 104 Arrighetti; Epict. *Disc*. 1.26.1, 1.26.13, 2.21.11, 3.21.6–8; Gell. 1.26.2, 17.20.1–6, 19.6.2; Plut. *Quaes. conv*. 700C; *An seni* 796D; Fronto, *De eloq*. 4.3 p. 154 Naber = 5.4 p. 151 Van der Hout; Philostr. *VA* 4.17; Porph. *Plot*. 14.10. Clarke (1971), 87–8; Hadot (1987), 15–17; Mansfeld (1994), 27–8, 193–4; Dillon (1996), 338; Sluiter (2000), 191–2; Lamberton (2001b), 442–3, 453–4; generally, Hahn (1989), 67–8; Donini (1994), 5089–94; Snyder (2000), 19–29, 86–92, 111–20, 223–7; Tarrant (1999).

[59] Baltussen (2002), 187–8, makes an interesting suggestion that Simplicius' preference for lengthy verbatim quotations may reflect the Platonic anxiety about the 'living voice'.

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