IV. THE COMPLICATED PATH TO VIRTUE: PLUTARCH'S ETHICAL THINKING

Moralists are boring. Plutarch is a moralist. Thus Plutarch is boring. The following chapter will only be successful when it has shown that this syllogism, though logically valid, is wrong. Plutarch has much to say about virtue and wickedness, about moral progress and human shortcomings, but he always avoids dull moralizing and oversimplified general rules. In short, there are no wagging fingers in Plutarch's works! Moreover, in the previous chapters, we have seen that Plutarch was an open-minded thinker, carefully looking for the truth but refraining from apodictic truth claims and always open to different alternatives. We may wonder then how he was able to maintain this attitude in the domain of ethics, where norms often have an absolute character. How could he avoid replacing the vital dynamics of his zetetic thinking by a much more rigid discourse consisting of strict universal rules? How did he conceive moral virtue – the beating heart of his thinking[1] – and what did it mean for him to make moral progress?

1. The theoretical foundations

The obvious place to start is *On moral virtue*. Significantly enough, this is not a dogmatic school handbook full of prescriptions and straightforward advice but a lively polemical attack against the Stoics, more precisely against their psychological monism that regards passions as wrong judgements.[2] The implication of the Stoic view is that passions should be eradicated completely (the condition of *apatheia*), so that our conduct is entirely rational. For Plutarch, such an ideal rests on an erroneous understanding of human nature. In line with Plato, and through the method of introspection,[3] he argues in the main part of the work that we should distinguish between two parts of the soul:

[1] Cf. Gréard 1885: xix: 'Plutarque a touché à tous les sujets; la morale n'est pas seulement une des applications de son génie: c'est son génie même' ('Plutarch touched on all subjects; moral virtue is not simply one of the applications of his genius: it *is* his genius').

[2] All studies of *On moral virtue* should start with the seminal commentary of Babut 1969a. Much useful material is also to be found in Becchi 1990.

[3] See *De virt. mor.* 448F (συνηισθημένος ἐν ἑαυτῷ, 'having perceived in himself'); see further Ingenkamp 1999.

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the rational and the irrational (the latter can further be subdivided into the appetitive and the spirited part).[4] This implies that a complete eradication of the passions is neither possible nor better (οὔτε…δυνατὸν οὔτ' ἄμεινον, 443C). Passions should rather be brought under the control of reason and thus directly contribute to virtue. They are necessary (τὴν τοῦ πάθους ἀρχήν…ἀναγκαίαν οὖσαν) but require therapy and education (451C). Plutarch argues that, if passions were completely rooted out, even reason would be more inactive too (452B) – quite a remarkable claim for a Platonist, yet fully consistent with his overall argument.

Virtue, then, consists in a due proportion and mean of the passions (συμμετρίας παθῶν καὶ μεσότητας, 443C–D).[5] At first sight, this sounds quite Aristotelian and, as a matter of fact, scholars have often pointed to Peripatetic influences on Plutarch's position in *On moral virtue*.[6] Yet this does not mean that Plutarch here argues as a representative of the Peripatetic tradition. Rather, he uses this material as a welcome polemical tool against the Stoa and fully appropriates it to his own philosophical perspective.[7] His main source of inspiration, however, remains Plato.

There is an important passage near the beginning of the work, where Plutarch points to the connection between the human soul and the World Soul. Since the former, just like the latter (see above, Chapter II, §1), consists of two parts (441F–442A), passions cannot be done away with: they should participate in reason or be mixed with it (440D).[8] Just as the Demiurge takes the disordered precosmic soul and blends it with reason, we have to blend our passions with reason in order to acquire a well-ordered virtuous disposition. This parallel shows that the core of Plutarch's ethical thinking is rooted in his metaphysics. Moreover, this metaphysical background does not merely explain his attack on the Stoics and his general conception of moral

[4] On the wide applications of the concept of reason in Plutarch's thinking, see Horky 2017: 109–12.

[5] Cf. *Quaest. Plat.* 1009A–B, with Bellanti 2007.

[6] The Peripatetic character of *On moral virtue* is especially discussed by Becchi (e.g. 1975, 1978, 1981, and 1990); see also Gréard 1885: 58; R. Jones 1916: 12–13 and 20; Russell 1972: 84; Dumortier 1975: 18–19; Dillon 1977: 195.

[7] Babut 1969a. Donini 1974: 81–8 correctly places *On moral virtue* in its Middle Platonic background. See also Roskam 2011b: 49–56.

[8] The idea is alluded to at the very outset of the work (440D) and returns at the end, in the comparison with Lycurgus' excessive destruction of the vine (451C). See on this Castelnérac 2007.

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virtue but, as we will see in the remainder of this chapter, it also exerts a considerable influence on his moral methodology. We here come across a major hermeneutic key for the correct understanding of all of Plutarch's ethical writings.

2. The basics of moral progress

Controlling passions and striving for virtue is far less easy than it sounds. If even the Demiurge could not completely overcome recalcitrant matter, we should not expect that human beings will succeed in entirely subjugating their passions. Ultimate perfection may well be beyond humans,[9] yet moral progress is possible and moral virtue can even be taught, as Plutarch argues in the short rhetorical work *Is virtue teachable?*[10] And if virtue is indeed teachable – a notorious Socratic issue – we should also be able to develop a substantial pedagogical method that supports our striving for it.

The general outlines of such a method can be found in *How can one become aware of one's moral progress?*, yet another attack against the Stoics.[11] Plutarch there rejects the radical Stoic dichotomy between perfect sages and wicked fools, which in his view rules out moral progress, and goes on to provide his readers with several indications of such moral progress (προκοπή): the continuity of our course (76C–78A), mildness (πραότης)[12] and lack of jealousy (78A–E), a change in our attitude towards and use of words (78E–80E), less interest in self-display (80E–82F), untroubled dreams (82F–83E), alleviation of the passions (83E–84B), consistency (84B–85B), ability to associate with good people (85B–D), and watchfulness regarding all faults (85E–86A). The whole list of indications, which are often discussed in a lively and astute way, throws interesting light on Plutarch's understanding of moral progress.

The starting point of the whole process of our moral improvement is our insight into our own deplorable condition. Self-examination should

[9] See esp. *An virt. doc.* 439B; *Cim.* 2.4; Babut 1969b: 301–4.

[10] Barigazzi 1993 regards this work, together with *On fortune*, *Are the affections of the soul worse, or those of the body?*, *Is vice a sufficient cause for unhappiness?*, and *On virtue and vice*, as fragments from a lengthy work on the teachability of virtue, but his hypothesis has found little support; cf. Melandri 2003 for a critical discussion.

[11] See Roskam 2005b: 220–363 for a detailed interpretation of this work.

[12] Mildness occurs very often in Plutarch's works, as has long been observed; see esp. H. Martin 1960 and de Romilly 1979: 275–307; also Panagopoulos 1977: 216–18 and Roskam 2005b: 256–8.

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reveal our disease and show that we need moral therapy. This traditional medical imagery is omnipresent in Plutarch's works: time and again, the philosopher is seen as a doctor able to cure the souls of his patients.[13] Once these patients have acquired a certain self-knowledge, they should take the fundamental decision (προαίρεσις) to enter the process of moral progress.[14] Their course will contain several intermissions and retrogressions but also show a gradual evolution towards greater stability, consistency, and authenticity. They will develop a correct value scale and begin to regard things from the right perspective, which will significantly contribute to their tranquillity of mind.

Thus, we come to another important work, *On tranquillity of mind*, where Plutarch is especially concerned with the appropriate attitude towards fortune.[15] Reason enables us to rise above fortune. We should acquire the knowledge of making the right use of the present situation (χρῆσθαι τοῖς παροῦσιν ὀρθῶς; 466C) and begin to 'live towards ourselves' (πρὸς αὑτοὺς ζῆν; 471A). Such an inner-directed attitude will give us a certain invulnerability against unavoidable adversity.[16] Indeed, we all have the treasure of our tranquillity within ourselves (473B; see also 467A). The work culminates in a beautiful comparison: life is a festival, celebrated in the holy temple of the universe (477C–D). This is a fitting conclusion of a work that generally shows an optimistic spirit without being naïve or simplistic. Plutarch does not ignore the fact that much can go wrong in life (473F–474A; 475C) but prefers to focus on the positive side, countering negative experiences with a 'yes, we can' optimism that combines philosophical ideals with sober realism.

3. Plutarch's therapy

Plutarch devoted many works to individual passions and problematic behaviour. He deals at length with anger (*On the control of anger*), talkativeness (*On talkativeness*), curiosity (*On curiosity*), excessive compliance (*On compliance*), love of wealth (*On love of wealth*), envy

[13] See esp. Fuhrmann 1964: 41–3 and *passim*; Hirsch-Luipold 2002: 225–81. The medical metaphor is central to *Are the affections of the soul worse, or those of the body?*.

[14] See Roskam 2005b: 350–1; see also Wardman 1974: 107–15 and Pérez Jiménez 1995 on the *Parallel Lives*.

[15] Important studies of *De tranq. an.* are Gill 1994: 4624–31; Van Hoof 2010: 83–115; Demulder 2018: 33–127. Broecker 1954 is still worth consulting.

[16] Basically the same view is developed in *On fortune*, *Is vice a sufficient cause for unhappiness?*, and *On virtue and vice*.

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and hate (*On envy and hate*), self-praise (*On praising oneself inoffensively*), and borrowing (*That one ought not to borrow*). All of these works contain elaborate and penetrating discussions of the respective passions and together they give an excellent idea of Plutarch's psychotherapeutic methods.[17]

The key passage that reveals the overall structure of Plutarch's therapy is to be found in *On talkativeness* (510C–D):

> We overcome our passions by diagnosis (κρίσει) and treatment (ἀσκήσει), but the diagnosis must come first (προτέρα δ' ἡ κρίσις ἐστίν); since no one can become habituated to shun or to eradicate from his soul what does not distress him, and we only grow distressed with our passions when we have perceived, by the exercise of reason, the injuries (τὰς βλάβας) and shame (τὰς αἰσχύνας) which result from them.

The judgement or κρίσις consists in a detailed analysis of the passion, so that the patient begins to realize how harmful and shameful their condition actually is. The κρίσις is then followed by the ἄσκησις, which can itself be further subdivided into ἐπιλογισμοί and ἐθισμοί. The former are sound thoughts, which should always be reconsidered, whereas the latter consist of a series of concrete exercises: the patient should begin with small things (*De coh. ira* 464C; *De cur.* 520D; *De vit. pud.* 530E; 531F; 532B) and gradually move on to more difficult steps, while avoiding those situations that stimulate their passion (*De gar.* 513D–514C; *De se ipsum laud.* 546B–547C). The whole method thus presupposes and rests on the powerful force of habituation and requires continuous efforts and attention.[18] We should accept living under continuous treatment (ἀεὶ θεραπευομένους βιοῦν, *De coh. ira* 453D) and pay attention to every single detail (*De prof. in virt.* 85E–F). Needless to say, Plutarch's moral therapy is very demanding.

Moreover, from what we have seen so far, it also appears to be fairly traditional. It is, indeed, built around a couple of ideas that had long become common property among the different philosophical schools. Most ancient philosophers agreed on the importance of one's basic choice, considered virtue far more powerful than fortune, and underlined the importance of habituation and exercise. All this is high-minded and well-considered ethical thinking, no doubt, yet it is far from sparkling, to say the least, and the reader may be inclined to

[17] The classic study of Plutarch's psychotherapeutic method is Ingenkamp 1971.

[18] On habituation, see, e.g., *De coh. ira* 459B; *De gar.* 511E; *De cur.* 520D and 522E; *De soll. an.* 959F–960A. See also Ingenkamp 1971: 105–11.

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think that the syllogism with which we began this chapter has so far been corroborated rather than refuted. Was Plutarch a dull moralist after all? High time to explore the true spirit and attractiveness of Plutarch's moral works.

First, these works illustrate the full wealth of Plutarch's literary mastery, his erudition and rhetorical skills (see above, Chapter III, §5). The passions are depicted with striking images that often in a few well-chosen words reveal more than theoretical definitions. The endless talking of the chatterbox is compared to the perpetual outflow of the mouth of the Black Sea (*De gar.* 503C–D) and the Seven-voiced Stoa at Olympia (502D), the busybody to a wind that pulls up our garments (*De cur.* 516F–517A), the bad judgement of the niggard to a flat intestinal worm (*De cup. div.* 524D), compliance to a low-lying and loose terrain (*De vit. pud.* 530A), envy to sore eyes (*De inv. et od.* 537A) and beetles (537F), and money-lenders to vultures (*De vit. aer.* 829A) and harpies (832A). These are a mere handful of examples out of many more.

The effect of these images is enhanced by numerous charming anecdotes. The silly behaviour of the angry man is illustrated by the story of Ctesiphon the pancratiast, who thought it right to kick back at his mule (*De coh. ira* 457A), or by that of 'the man who wished to beat the ass-driver, but when the driver cried out, "I am an Athenian," indicated the ass and said, "You at any rate are not an Athenian," and fell to beating it with many blows' (461A). The next lively story is only one of the many entertaining anecdotes by which Plutarch illustrates the incurable condition of the inveterate chatterbox (*De gar.* 509A–C):

> It was a barber who first announced the great disaster of the Athenians in Sicily, having learned it in the Peiraeus from a slave, one of those who had escaped from the island. Then the barber left his shop and hurried at full speed to the city,
>
> Lest another might win the glory
>
> of imparting the news to the city,
>
> and he come second. [Homer, *Il.* 22.207]
>
> Tumult naturally arose and the people gathered in assembly and tried to come at the origin of the rumour. So the barber was brought forward and questioned; yet he did not even know the name of his informant, but referred the origin to a nameless and unknown person. The assembly was enraged and cried out, 'Torture the cursed fellow! Put him on the rack! He has fabricated and concocted this tale! Who else heard it? Who believed it?' The wheel was brought and the man was stretched upon it. Meanwhile there arrived the bearers of the disastrous news, men who had escaped from the slaughter itself. All, therefore, dispersed, each to his private mourning, leaving the wretched fellow bound on the wheel. But when he was set free late in the day when it was already

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nearly evening, he asked the executioner if they had also heard 'how the general, Nicias, had died.' Such an unconquerable and incorrigible evil does habit make garrulity.

Plutarch was a born storyteller. Such enthralling stories have a clear moral relevance (here made explicit in the last sentence) but they also carry the reader along, making the message easily digestible. This is anything but dull moralizing. Plutarch's moral therapy indeed largely benefits from all the powers of his virtuoso rhetoric, although this rhetoric always serves a philosophical purpose.[19]

Second, his moral works time and again show his deep insight into human psychology and psychopathology. He lays bare the secret motivations behind our shortcomings and reveals our vulnerable spots: how we are more upset by unexpected events,[20] or how old men are prone to self-glorification while admonishing others (*De se ipsum laud.* 546F–547A). Such insights are juxtaposed to lifelike portraits of the vicious persons and their typical behaviour, like that of the curious man (*De cur.* 519E–F):

To pass by so many women who are public property open to all and then to be drawn toward a woman who is kept under lock and key and is expensive, and often, if so it happens, quite ugly too, is the very height of madness and insanity. And it is this same thing which busybodies do: they pass by much that is beautiful to see and to hear, many matters excellent for relaxation and amusement, and spend their time digging into other men's trifling correspondence, gluing their ears to their neighbours' walls, whispering with slaves and women of the streets, often incurring danger, and always infamy.

Or of the chatterbox (*De gar.* 514C):

The chatterer, if some topic comes up from which he can learn and find out something he does not know, thrusts it aside and diverts it, being unable to give even so small a fee as silence, but he works steadily around until he drives the conversation into the stale and well-worn paths of twaddle. Just so, in my native town, there was a man who chanced to have read two or three books of Ephorus, and would always bore everybody to death and put every dinner-party to rout by invariably narrating the battle of Leuctra and its sequel; so he got the nickname of 'Epameinondas'.

Such passages combine remarkable literary qualities with sound psychological insight. Plutarch's moral therapy is definitely no package of rigid generalizations and simplifications but rests on a well-considered

[19] See Ingenkamp 2000; Van Hoof 2010: 50 and *passim*.
[20] *De virt. mor.* 449E; *De coh. ira* 463D; *De tranq. an.* 474E–475A.

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and sophisticated method rooted in a deep understanding of the human mind and careful observations of human behaviour.

Third, Plutarch always reminds his readers of their own responsibility and stimulates them to self-examination (αὑτὸν ἐπισκοπεῖν καὶ τὰ καθ' αὑτόν, *De tranq. an.* 470B; cf. 472C).[21] In that sense, his moral thinking has an important emancipatory aspect. He provides his readers with a wealth of precious ideas but leaves the rest to them. They have to decide for themselves what they will do with all this material and how they may benefit from it and apply it to their own needs. In other words, they have to look for the moral course that best fits in with their own character and needs. Thus, we again come upon one of the fundamental characteristics of Plutarch's zetetic philosophy. Plutarch indeed invites his readers to moral *zetesis*.

This moral *zetesis* has its own character. Whereas intellectual problems can be examined together, for instance at school or over wine, in an amiable context of *syzetesis*, the individual role of the reader is much greater in a moral context. It is all about the reader's own virtue, about the therapy of their personal shortcomings. Plutarch's role is adapted in light of this focus. He shares all his erudition with his readers and appeals to them with the full power of his rhetorical talents, but then retreats into the background and never takes the decision for them.

This can also be seen in his use of moral examples. These constitute an important part of his moral therapy and are useful in the most varied circumstances. We should always have good men before our eyes and consider: 'What would Plato have done in this case? What would Epameinondas have said? How would Lycurgus have conducted himself, or Agesilaus?' (*De prof. in virt.* 85A–B). To a certain extent, even such personal *zetesis* is open to a component of *syzetesis*, in that Plutarch can help the reader in looking for appropriate examples. Yet his contribution to this process is confined to a respectful and emancipatory *syzetesis* that always considers the autonomy of his reader.[22] It is this pedagogy of examples, inspired by the principles of a respectful zetetic moral therapy, that also inspires the *Parallel Lives* (see below, Chapters V and VI).

[21] See Van Hoof 2010: 31.

[22] Cf. *De tranq. an.* 467E–F, where Plutarch lists several concrete examples of good conduct and connects them with all kind of difficult situations, while, however, refraining from deriving clear-cut prescriptions from them. Here as well, the decision about what is relevant and how it can be used is left to the reader.

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Finally, Plutarch's general approach in his moral works is characterized by a spirit of distinct pragmatism and down-to-earthness.[23] Van Hoof has shown that Plutarch carefully addresses the specific problems of his aristocratic readers, rather than trying to convert them into fully-fledged professional philosophers.[24] He certainly did not philosophize *in vacuo*, yet we may add that such a down-to-earth focus is precisely part and parcel of his zetetic philosophical project. The previous chapters have already shown that Plutarch did not keep problematic issues dark nor cheaply explain them away, even when they were at odds with his own philosophical convictions. Even then, he preferred to mention them, since they could explain at least a few aspects of a given problem. His approach towards moral problems is fundamentally the same: he does not disregard the daily problems, trivial as well as serious, that interfere with high moral ideals. It would be all too easy to overemphasize the prominent importance of virtue while keeping silent about all the potholes and bumps in the road. Matters are usually not so simple, as Plutarch knew very well. He, the learned philosopher who breathed erudition and lived by theoretical thinking, was not blind to real life but was always willing to 'look fortune in the face with open eyes' (*De tranq. an.* 476E).

This also appears from his *On exile*, written to comfort an exile from Sardis. The work contains many commonplaces, adapted to a Platonic perspective,[25] but also focuses on the concrete political consequences of banishment.[26] Similarly, the *Consolation to his wife* is a moving attempt to comfort his wife on the death of their daughter. Again, many traditional ideas are passed in review,[27] without minimizing what happened: 'I know and can set a measure to the magnitude of our loss' (608C). In such works and confronted with such circumstances, Plutarch begins by recognizing the problem and then looks for new opportunities, trying to arrive at a (more) positive outlook – not unlike the course he recommends in *On tranquillity of mind*: 'This, then, we should train and practise first of all, like the man who threw a stone at his dog, but missed her and hit his stepmother, whereupon he exclaimed: "That is not bad either!"' (467C).

[23] As has often been observed; see, e.g., Ingenkamp 1984; Teodorsson 2005–6: 139; Van Hoof 2010.
[24] Van Hoof 2010 and 2014.
[25] Opsomer 2002; see also Vamvouri Ruffy 2017.
[26] Van Hoof 2010: 116–50 and 2014: 141.
[27] Baltussen 2009.

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This is another striking example of Plutarch's 'yes, we can' optimism, yet we may wonder whether it is not extremely banal in this kind of 'limit situation'.[28] It might be so in other authors but not in Plutarch. Even in such situations, his reflections are inspired by an authentic and sober-minded *zetesis* that modestly tries to encompass the bad with the good (τὰ χείρονα τοῖς χρηστοῖς ἐμπεριλαμβάνειν; 474B) without claiming to know the final reassuring truth.[29]

The same down-to-earth quality also appears in *Precepts of health care*. There, Plutarch advocates moderation concerning food, baths, exercises, and so on, underscoring the demands of our body. The whole work shows judicious reasonableness, underpinned by solid medical knowledge and natural philosophy and, as usual, embellished by entertaining anecdotes. Plutarch even goes so far as to state that the body suffers more from the soul than the soul from the body (135E), quite a surprising statement for a Platonist. What a difference from Plotinus, who felt ashamed to have a body (Porphyry, *Plot.* 1)! Yet Plutarch's position is perfectly in line with his general approach and even with the metaphysical basis of his ethical thinking: we should not act as if the body does not exist, nor should we be enslaved to it. The soul should rather use the body properly and, as it were, with demiurgic care, so that it can partake of a reasonable mode of living. In this light, Plutarch's general argument in *Precepts of health care* is not only sensible but also thoroughly Platonic.

We may conclude, then, that Plutarch's moral therapy is perfectly in line with the principles of his zetetic philosophy. He generally avoids dogmatic a prioris and distinct prescriptions. His moral therapy, based on a carefully elaborated method and irrigated by the streams of his multifaceted erudition, stimulates and supports a gradual process of improvement in which the individual readers take their responsibility to find and follow their own path towards moral virtue.

4. Lessons in virtue: listening to poets and philosophers

To an important extent, then, moral progress is for Plutarch a process of self-education. Every reader has to enter a process of moral *zetesis*, while benefiting from Plutarch's respectful *syzetesis*. This process can

[28] On Plutarch's dealing with such a 'limit situation', see Roskam 2012.
[29] Roskam 1999b.

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be encouraged from early childhood on, through parents, pedagogues, and teachers. We thus arrive at the topic of education, which is often discussed in Plutarch's works.[30] It is a main theme in the *Parallel Lives*,[31] is no less important in the *Table Talk* (above, Chapter III, §3, with note 34) and in the polemical works, and also informs Plutarch's reflections about friendship (below, §5) and family relations (below, §6). This section briefly discusses two works that deal with two different phases of the educational process.

The starting point of *How the young man should listen to poetry*, dedicated to Marcus Sedatus, is Plutarch's observation that Sedatus' son Cleander and his own son Soclarus have got to the age where they may become interested in poetry. Yet reading the poets requires guidance (15A):

> Since, then, it is neither possible, perhaps, nor profitable (οὔτ' ἴσως δυνατόν ἐστιν οὔτ' ὠφέλιμον) to debar from poetry a boy as old as my Soclarus and your Cleander now are, let us keep a very close watch over them (εὖ μάλα παραφυλάττωμεν αὐτούς), believing that they require oversight in their reading even more than in the streets.

In turning to the poets, Cleander and Soclarus tread on slippery ground. Plutarch frequently reminds the reader that the poets 'tell many lies' (16A; cf. 17E) and appeal to our passions: for their verses are full of disturbing factors (τὸ ταρακτικόν; 15C; cf. 25A and D) and thus constitute a potential source of immoral behaviour.

The most obvious conclusion would be a ban on all poetry, yet Plutarch realizes that such a solution would be 'neither possible, perhaps, nor profitable'. It would not be profitable because such a rigorous anathema would also wipe out the many useful insights that can be found in the poets – insights, moreover, that are expressed in a charming poetic language, which yields no slight pedagogical advantage. If Cleander and Soclarus learn to read the poets with a philosopher's eye, they will at an early age gain a foretaste of philosophical thinking. Poetry is thus turned into propaedeutic for philosophy (36D–37B). Plutarch also adds that a complete anathema would perhaps not be possible. This reflects a sober evaluation of the situation – Plutarch knew the psychology of youngsters – but is also perfectly in

[30] See esp. Xenophontos 2016 for a full discussion of this topic. Roskam 2004a focuses on Plutarch's views on education as a communicative process; Herchenroeder 2008 on Plutarch's subtle criticism of the extravagant claims of *paideia* in the *Gryllus*.

[31] Pelling 1989 and 2002: 339–47; Swain 1990 and 1996: 139–45; Duff 1999b: 73–8 and 2008a.

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line with the view he defends in *On moral virtue* about the passions. There as well, he argues that a complete eradication would be 'neither possible nor better' (οὔτε…δυνατὸν οὔτ' ἄμεινον; 443C) and the imagery of Lycurgus' blameworthy uprooting of the vine occurs in both works (*De aud. poet.* 15E–F and *De virt. mor.* 451C). Thus, we again find the same underlying methodological approach that can ultimately be traced back to Plutarch's metaphysics.

This, however, is not the end of the story. Theoretically speaking, several options are still open. Plutarch could have chosen a selection of ready-made verses like the *Monostichae Menandri*. Such a collection has all the benefits of a perfect propaedeutic while avoiding the dangers: the material is carefully selected, easily digestible, and philosophically blameless. It is characteristic of Plutarch that he does not choose this easy way but rather defends the integral reading of Homer, tragedy, lyric poetry, and so on, including all the risky and censurable passages. Again, he refuses to ignore facts. He does not wish to create a cocoon of artificial intellectual safety, even for younger people, but prefers to face the facts and deal with them in the best possible way. In other words, he chooses to seize the verses and blend them *more demiurgico* with a rational perspective.

Such a project requires a very careful and critical reading that pays attention to every single detail (19E; 28E–F; cf. 32A).[32] Again, we see how demanding Plutarch's moral thinking actually is. At the same time, it is perfectly in line with his zetetic conception of philosophy: also, when dealing with poetry, we always have to look for what is useful (τὸ χρήσιμον ζητεῖν, 16A; cf. 14F; 30D–E). Thus, the interpretation of the poets as conceived in *How the young man should listen to poetry* also provides a *methodological propaedeutic* to philosophy.

The next step in the educative process is discussed in *On listening*. This work is not dedicated to a father who still has to guide his son but to the young Nicander, who has recently assumed the *toga virilis* and no longer stands in need of a pedagogue. We are now at the level of the philosopher's school, where Nicander will often have to listen to lectures. Again, this is both useful and dangerous (μεγάλην μὲν ὠφέλειαν οὐκ ἐλάττω δὲ κίνδυνον τοῖς νέοις τοῦ ἀκούειν ἔχοντος, 38D) – a combination that recalls the situation concerning poetry in *How the young man should*

[32] Plutarch's method of reading has often been discussed; apart from the commentaries of Valgiglio 1973 and Hunter and Russell 2011, see, e.g., Saïd 2005b; Konstan 2004 (Plutarch as a precursor of postmodern literary theory), and the studies mentioned above, p. 56, n. 46.

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listen to poetry. And, indeed, the basic approach in both works is very similar.[33] In *On listening* Plutarch's focus is again on what is useful. Nicander has come to the school in order to amend his life and should thus assess every lecture by examining whether it has improved him (42A). Again, Plutarch thus recommends an active process of listening in which the listener should, as a fellow-worker with the speaker (συνεργὸς τοῦ λέγοντος; 45E), make a contribution himself. In general, Nicander should achieve the balance between a magnanimous and charitable attitude and a critical stance (44E–45B; 46C): 'in praising the speakers we must be generous, but in believing their words cautious' (41A).

One of the most attractive elements of this work is its many descriptions of the typical behaviour of students. We meet the know-it-all (39C–D), the envious student, regretting that the discourse is excellent and trembling with anxiety lest the remaining part prove even better (39D–40A), the over-enthusiastic student who readily agrees with everything (40F–41A), the overzealous student who time and again interrupts the speaker (42F), the student who likes to bother the speaker with problems beyond his expertise (43B–D), the student who wants to show off himself (43D), and the timid student, nodding in assent as if he understands the speaker (47D; 48A–B). All of them are characterized in a lively and attractive way, and together form a fine typology of students which, we may add, has lost little of its relevance today.

5. Friendship

The topic of friendship occurs very often in Plutarch's oeuvre. In the *Parallel Lives*, many examples of friendship can be found, like that between Theseus and Peirithous (*Thes.* 30.1–2), Epameinondas and Pelopidas (*Pel.* 3.1–4.8), and many others. It is important in family relations (e.g. between brothers, as developed in *On brotherly love*; see below, §6) and in politics (e.g. between the ruler and the philosopher; see below, §7). But Plutarch also devoted several works to questions about friendship.

In *On having many friends*, he argues that πολυφιλία ('having many friends') is a contradiction in terms. Many friends are like flies in the

[33] See esp. Xenophontos 2016: 79–91 on *How the young man should listen to poetry* and *On listening* as companion pieces. On *On listening*, see esp. Hillyard 1988; see also Schmitz 2012, on Plutarch's attitude towards sophistic ambition (φιλοτιμία), with particular attention to *On listening*.

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kitchen, disappearing as soon as the dainties are gone (94B). Real friends are rare, for true friendship rests on three things: virtue, intimacy, and usefulness (94B), and all these entail so many duties that it is simply impossible to cultivate the bonds of lasting friendship with more than a few persons. Behind the rhetoric of Plutarch's arguments thus appears a high-minded conception of friendship.[34]

A similar and more detailed ideal is to be found in *How can one tell a flatterer from a friend?*. In this treatise, dedicated to the king C. Julius Antiochus Philopappus, Plutarch examines how we can distinguish a flatterer from a friend. This is a traditional theme that can be discussed from different perspectives: economic (flatterers being parasites filling their belly without contributing anything themselves) or political (the flatterers of influential politicians).[35] We may presume that the difficult exposure of flatterers[36] was not merely a theoretical problem for the rich and powerful Philopappus – and, indeed, Plutarch pays attention to these aspects[37] – yet the overall focus of the work is a moral one. Plutarch zooms in on the negative consequences of flattery for the victim's character and virtue. And these consequences are devastating indeed.

The philosophical foundation of the work is the moral psychology of *On moral virtue* with its division of the soul into a rational and an irrational part. The former is connected with the friend, who appears throughout the work as a benevolent and competent doctor who mitigates the passions and fosters virtue. The irrational part of the soul falls prey to the flatterer, the advocate of the passions (62B), who justifies wickedness and attacks virtue (49B; 55E–57D). He finds an easy target in our vulnerable spot, that is, our self-love, which makes us blind regarding ourselves and thus does away with our self-knowledge and sound judgement.[38] We can understand very well why Plutarch considers the flatterer so great a menace: he undermines everything that is of vital importance for authentic zetetic moral philosophy.

[34] Cf. Van der Stockt 2011.

[35] See esp. Cicero, *Orat.* 3.117; see further Philodemus' *On flattery* and Maximus of Tyre, *Orat.* 14. The topic of flattery is also important in Plutarch's *Life of Alcibiades*.

[36] See Whitmarsh 2006.

[37] As is often pointed out; see, e.g., Babbitt 1927: 263; Sirinelli in Klaerr *et al.* 1989: 73; Van Hoof 2010: 25; Sirinelli 2000: 146, 193, 197.

[38] *De ad. et am.* 48F, with reference to Plato, *Leg.* 731e5–753a1, also quoted in *De cap. ex inim.* 90A and 92F; *Quaest. Plat.* 1000A. See also Opsomer 1998: 150–5 and 2009b: 101–8.

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Moreover, Plutarch is not dealing with the ordinary flatterer but with the true professional, the τεχνίτης κόλαξ (57F),[39] who cannot easily be unmasked, since he has many cunning techniques at his disposal. Plutarch provides us with a detailed description of the flatterer's conduct, embellished with numerous images: the flatterer is a bore-worm (49B), vermin (49C), a gadfly (55E), an ape (52B; 64E), and so on. Anecdotes and examples add a wealth of salient details: 'The flatterers of Dionysius, whose sight was failing, used to bump against one another and upset the dishes at dinner' (53F), or again: 'I personally know of one man who put away his wife after his friend had sent his own away; but he was caught visiting her in secret and sending messages to her after his friend's wife had got wind of what was going on' (54A–B). Thus Plutarch clarifies the wily behaviour of the flatterer. Such passages correspond to the κρίσις-part of his psychotherapeutic writings (see above, §3), offering an accurate diagnosis of the disease as the first step towards recovery. Such diagnosis actually constitutes the main part of the work, although more practical advice and handy hints are also scattered through it.

The final section deals with the frankness (παρρησία) of the true friend, who speaks his mind in order to reveal the truth and promote virtue. Several scholars have suggested that this section, which prima facie seems to stand on its own, was first written as a separate treatise and later added to *How can one tell a flatterer from a friend?*, but this hypothesis unduly minimizes the strong connections between the two parts.[40] In fact, the last part provides a necessary addendum to and clarification of the previous discussion. Hitherto, Plutarch has suggested that there exists a strict opposition between the salutary frankness of the friend and the deceptive words of the flatterer who only aims at pleasure (55A–E; cf. 51C on frankness as the characteristic language of friendship, ἰδία φωνὴ τῆς φιλίας). The flatterer thus only uses a counterfeit frankness, if any (51C–D; 59B; 60B). Such a clear-cut opposition implies that the friend will always frankly blame our shortcomings. That is basically true, yet Philopappus could infer that the only true friend is a rigid and severe schoolmaster with the air of a Cato. And such a conclusion would be wrong, for this is not how Plutarch conceives of frankness.

[39] Cf. Opsomer 2009b: 115–16.

[40] The idea was first put forward by Brokate 1913: 7 and later revived by Sirinelli in Klaerr *et al.* 1989: 68–71 and Sirinelli 2000: 146, 193, 197; see also Russell 1972: 95.

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In that sense, the section on *parrhesia* is a necessary clarification and elaboration of the previous discussion. At its beginning, Plutarch again recalls the philosophical foundations of his ethical thinking: vice (notably flattery) should not be cured by another vice (that is, excessively harsh criticism) but by virtue (66C). Again we find the same ideal of achieving the right from moderation (τὸ καλὸν ἐκ τοῦ μετρίου λαβεῖν, 66D–E), the same sense of nuance, and the same sharp psychological insight.[41] Less careful doctors of the soul may be inclined to find the easy solution for flattery in its opposite – that is, a strict and straightforward *parrhesia* – but Plutarch wisely realized that such frankness can also have negative effects (66D) and that sound *parrhesia* requires a certain know-how.

This explains the addition of the second part, where Plutarch explains what such sound frankness precisely means. One of its crucial aspects is taking the right opportunity (καιρός) into account (69B–C):

> For a man who is sick it is intolerable, nay, an aggravation of the sickness, to be told, 'See what comes of your intemperance, your soft living, your gluttony and wenching.' 'Heavens, man, what a time to talk of that! I am writing my will, the doctors are preparing for me a dose of castor or scammony, and you admonish me and play the philosopher!' Under such conditions, then, the very circumstances in which the unfortunate find themselves leave no room for frank speaking and sententious saws, but they do require gentle usage and help.

Furthermore, we should avoid insults, but instead mix some praise with our admonitions, not make a fuss about every single detail, and most of all proceed with mildness and benevolence. The whole section about frankness shows Plutarch to be a good and tactful judge of human character. Moreover, he as usual avoids casuistry and prefers to leave the final judgement to the reader. The last section, and the work as a whole, thus reflects the general spirit of Plutarch's diversified, nuanced, and open-minded moral thinking.

Yet there remains an obvious problem. Plutarch has argued that we need the frankness of the true friend on our way to moral perfection, but, if such true friends are rare (the lesson of *On having many friends*) and if true frankness is far from easy (as shown in *How can one tell a flatterer from a friend?*), are we then not cut off from all help in our attempts to find out the truth about ourselves? 'Since friendship's voice has nowadays become thin and weak when it comes to frank

[41] Cf. Opsomer 2009b: 108–14.

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speaking, while its flattery is voluble and its admonition mute, we have to depend upon our enemies to hear the truth' (*De cap. ex inim.* 89B–C).

Thus Plutarch comes up with a new and quite unexpected solution: even our enemies can be very useful for our moral progress. This is the thesis of *How can one profit from one's enemies?*, which thus forms an interesting complement to *How can one tell a flatterer from a friend?*. The too rigid criticism that was rejected in the latter treatise is recovered in the former: such harsh criticism does not fit with genuine friends but it *is* fitting for enemies. Frankness is never ascribed to enemies, but their insults and attacks can be used for analogous purposes and often reveal more about ourselves than the comments of true friends. For if self-love, as we saw above, makes us blind regarding ourselves, a true friend may well, as another self, overlook our shortcomings. Enemies often have a much keener eye, as appears from the charming anecdote about Hiero (90B):

> Hiero was reviled by one of his enemies for his offensive breath; so when he went home he said to his wife, 'What do you say to that? Even you never told me of this.' But she being temperate and innocent said, 'I supposed that all men smelt so.'

Enemies can thus play an interesting part in a broader project of moral (self-)therapy. The treatise in fact contains a whole method and art (μέθοδον καὶ τέχνην, 86E) of benefiting in different ways from the criticisms of our enemies. Their very existence compels us to continuous vigilance and a circumspect life (εὐλαβούμενον ζῆν, 87D). We should mildly endure their attacks and try to imitate or surpass them in their virtue. Many pages from *How can one profit from one's enemies?* illustrate the demanding character of Plutarch's ethical thinking and the high expectations he has for his readers. The work is dedicated to Cornelius Pulcher, a politician rather than a professional philosopher, but Plutarch does not lower his requirements. Pulcher is invited to surpass himself and to keep his life blameless (87D), and throughout the work, Plutarch seeks a delicate balance between demanding and edifying ideals and feasibility.

This balance even includes a dose of sober pragmatism. The starting point of the work is the observation that enmities are simply unavoidable (86C; 91E). Thus we find the same general approach as in *On tranquillity of mind* and the *Consolations*: Plutarch does not ignore this negative aspect of life, as if enmities were unimportant, but recognizes the problem and tries to transform it into something positive. The enemy ends up as an unpaid teacher (90A). Thus Plutarch again tries to organize a disordered

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aspect of life along rational principles. In that sense, *How can one profit from one's enemies?* is a 'demiurgic' treatise.

6. The family

Plutarch often discussed the relations in the οἶκος (household). In *On affection for offspring*, for instance, he argues against Epicurus that parental love for offspring is natural, and in *On brotherly love* he sings the praises of friendship between brothers and quite systematically shows how this can be maintained in several situations.[42] Marriage is central to two works. His *Precepts of marriage* consist of a series of short comparisons and moral reflections concerning married life, dedicated as a common present (κοινὸν δῶρον, 138C) to his students Pollianus and Eurydice. This work is a very interesting source for Plutarch's conception of marriage.[43] Husband and wife really share their lives (συμβιοῦν rather than συνοικεῖν), as in a complete blending (κρᾶσις δι' ὅλων).[44] Their marriage and household should be ruled by philosophical reason (138A).

> Fishing with poison is a quick way to catch fish and an easy method of taking them, but it makes the fish inedible and bad. In the same way women who artfully employ love-potions and magic spells upon their husbands, and gain the mastery over them through pleasure, find themselves consorts of dull-witted, degenerate fools. For the men bewitched by Circe were of no service to her, nor did she make the least use of them after they had been changed into swine and asses, while for Odysseus, who had sense and showed discretion in her company, she had an exceeding great love. (139A)

It is clear, then, that the wife should be no less familiar with philosophy and general education than her husband (145C–D), and then she will be held in esteem and even reach a blessed life (145F). Yet Plutarch was also a child of his times. Throughout the work, he makes it perfectly clear that the wife is subordinate to her husband: she should have no feelings of her own (140A), should not herself make advances to her husband (140C–D), should make no friends of her own (140D),

[42] A detailed analysis of *On affection for offspring* can be found in Roskam 2011c; see also Postiglione 1991. For *On brotherly love*, see Postiglione 1991.

[43] Plutarch's view of love and marriage has received ample attention in scholarly research: see, e.g., Goessler 1962; Nikolaidis 1997a; Pomeroy 1999; Nieto Ibáñez and López López 2007; Boulogne 2009–10; Beneker 2012; Tsouvala 2014.

[44] *Con. praec.* 142F; *Amatorius* 769F; Boulogne 2009–10: 27–30.

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and so on.[45] Eurydice should be educated by her husband and Pollianus should be her professor, philosopher, and teacher in all that is most noble and divine (145C).

If all this is 'traditional wisdom through a philosophical lens',[46] Plutarch takes it a step further in his *Dialogue on love*. In this dialogue, Plutarch's son Autobulus relates how his father long ago went to Thespiae with his young bride in order to sacrifice to Eros as a result of a conflict between their parents. While he was camped with his friends on Helicon, the group was visited by Anthemion and Pisias, who came to consult them about a remarkable question. In Thespiae lived a relatively young, beautiful, and rich widow called Ismenodora, who had fallen in love with a much younger boy, Bacchon, and wanted to marry him. The boy's mother and friends were opposed to the plan and Bacchon, still an ephebe, left the decision to his older cousin Anthemion and to Pisias, the most austere of his lovers (749E–F). Those two, however, disagreed on the question, Anthemion supporting the marriage and Pisias rejecting it, and had therefore decided to choose 'Plutarch' and his friends as arbiters.

The group of 'Plutarch' is itself divided: Protogenes praises pederastic love (750B–751B), whereas Daphnaeus replies with an attack on pederasty and a defence of conjugal love (751B–752B). The specific case of Bacchon and Ismenodora is discussed as well (752E–754E), but then follows a *coup de théâtre*: a messenger reports that Ismenodora has kidnapped Bacchon and is making preparations for the marriage (754E–F). Pisias leaves, blazing with indignation, and a bit later Anthemion also departs. This peripeteia forms the point of departure for a new discussion. 'Plutarch' makes a lengthy speech about the divine status of Eros, his domain and benefits (756A–766D). This is in several respects the culmination of the work, where, in an innovative way, Plutarch connects the ascent to the Beautiful with heterosexual, conjugal love.[47] In a final speech, now in reply to Zeuxippus' criticisms of such conjugal love, 'Plutarch' again defends the love between husband and wife, with a new attack on pederasty – a conspicuous change from Plato – and a few inspiring love stories (766E–771C). This section contains several close parallels to the *Precepts of marriage*. The same traditional perspective on marriage

[45] See further Auberger 1993; Roskam 2004b: 265–9.
[46] Thus Patterson 1999.
[47] See, e.g., Brenk 1988 and Rist 2001.

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is thus authorized at the end of the work and we may presume that this is how Plutarch generally thinks about married life. The last paragraph of the work adds the dénouement: the marriage between Ismenodora and Bacchon is celebrated (771D–E). All's well that ends well. . .or is it?

Perhaps things are just a little bit more complicated. The *Dialogue on love* illustrates in a particularly expressive way how Plutarch's zetetic philosophy also examines family relations. The οἶκος should ideally be a place of stability and order, and this is indeed what Plutarch aims at in the *Precepts of marriage*. In the *Dialogue on love*, this ideal is questioned through an exceptional situation. The case of Ismenodora and Bacchon is quite singular. It may be the product of Plutarch's 'rhetoric of exaggeration', yet such a rhetoric is also philosophically relevant.[48] Plutarch here deliberately pushes the boundaries and explores how far he can go. In the *Precepts of marriage*, the man clearly dominates his wife, and, for Plutarch, that is how it should be. Yet the husband's supremacy is not based on gender but on his intellectual and moral superiority.[49] And this, of course, raises the question of what should be done in a case where such intellectual and moral superiority lies with the wife. Can she then assume the role of *erastes*? Is such an *Umwertung aller Werte* in the domain of marriage ethics really conceivable?

This is a masterly example of philosophical *zetesis*. Once again, Plutarch is not afraid of raising challenging and difficult questions and as usual carefully ponders alternative solutions. No wonder, then, that he mentions arguments both against and in support of the marriage. Pisias argues that Ismenodora will dominate Bacchon through her money (752E–753A), a point countered by 'Plutarch' (753C–754B). Protogenes points to the problem of the age difference (753A), again dismissed by 'Plutarch' (754B–E). Protogenes, however, plays his last trump (753B):

> If she is really modest and orderly, let her sit decently at home awaiting the suitors and men with serious designs. For if a woman makes a declaration of love, a man could only take to his heels in utter disgust, let alone accepting and founding a marriage on such intemperance.

This is a strong argument that is fully in line with the ideal promoted in the *Precepts of marriage* and it is characteristic of Plutarch that he places

[48] Brenk 2000.
[49] Thus correctly Nikolaidis 1997a: 76 and 80.

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it at the end of his list of counterarguments, where it receives its full effect.[50] There can be little doubt that a tension exists between the general advice of the *Precepts of marriage* and the peculiar situation discussed in the *Dialogue on love*. Ismenodora's deed is aptly called a bold act by 'Plutarch' (πρᾶγμα θαυμαστὸν τετολμημένον, 754E), and even by Anthemion (τόλμημα, 755C). If Plutarch does not argue this away, we should not do that either.[51]

This tension is also reflected in the disagreement between the characters: the opposition between Pisias and Anthemion is soon mirrored by that of Protogenes and Daphnaeus, and even by that of the gymnasiarchs of the city (756A). This, if anything, shows that the evaluation is far from easy, as the conflicting claims both have good arguments. The final decision, then, is not easy, even after the sublime reflections of 'Plutarch' and his general defence of marriage. His arguments will do for Pollianus and Eurydice, but the case of Ismenodora and Bacchon is no standard situation and the peculiarities do matter. Ignoring them would amount to oversimplifying the zetetic process.

Yet this is exactly what Plutarch seems to do at the very end of the work. Pisias has given up his resistance and has even become an enthusiastic champion of the marriage. This is another odd peripeteia, for there is nothing that can explain such a volte-face. As a matter of fact, his approval makes him a ridiculous figure (ἐπεγγελάσωμεν τἀνδρί, 771E). He had put forward strong arguments and now seems to have forgotten all of them. In that sense, the work's happy end is also a baffling one. It is no less the outcome of Ismenodora's bold act than the result of an authorial one by Plutarch himself.

Nevertheless, this unexpected end also reflects a tendency that occurs throughout the *Dialogue on love*. Philosophical arguments never influence the events. Rather, the opposite is true: the events follow their own logic and provide the starting point for philosophical reflection. And this logic of the events is the logic of the god Eros. The final sentence of the work thus contains a crucial hermeneutic clue: 'it is clear that the god takes pleasure in what happens and is benevolently present in it' (771E). At the end, everything turns out to be the work of Eros, the god whose great power has been praised earlier. Philosophy has done its work. It has provided understanding and justification, yet it cannot put life on hold: the last word should be

[50] Cf. Goldhill 1995: 150.
[51] Thus I side with Goldhill 1995 against Rist 2001: 575 n. 48 and Effe 2002.

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for love/Love. The unexpected end is a recognition of this insight, a reverent obeisance to the god (τὸν θεὸν προσκυνήσωμεν, 771E).

7. Plutarch's political thinking

We have already seen that Plutarch was politically active, holding both minor and major offices in Chaeronea (see above, Chapter I, §3). At an advanced age, he characterized politics as an old familiar friend (*An seni* 783C). The philosophical basis of his political thinking and commitment can be found in two small works that complement one another. In *That a philosopher should especially converse with rulers*, he persuades the philosopher to associate with rulers, for, by educating these rulers to virtue, the philosopher will benefit 'many through one' and thus maximize both his usefulness and his pleasure.[52] *To an uneducated ruler* focuses on the other pole: the ruler who should listen to the philosopher's advice, control his passions by reason, and thus become the image of God in the state.[53] Just like Plato, Plutarch thus aims at an ideal combination of philosophical insight and political power. The ruler, enlightened by reason and motivated by his love of what is honourable (φιλοκαλία),[54] will guide his fellow citizens to virtue by controlling their passions and improving their character. In short, in Plutarch's eyes, honourable politics is care of the soul.

Plutarch's political project is thoroughly Platonic and we may presume that he had such ideals in view when deciding on his own political course in Chaeronea. Yet here the obvious problem of feasibility arises. Plutarch knew history well enough to know that philosophical education was no guarantee of political success. Plato's own ambitions in Sicily proved a total fiasco (*Maxime cum principibus* 779B–C; *Dion* 13.1–20.4). Alcibiades, the pupil of Socrates (*Alc.* 4.1–4; 6.1; 6.5), greatly harmed his own city. The honourable projects of Dion, Plato's close friend and student (*Dion* 1.2 and 4.4–5), and Phocion, an alumnus of the Academy (*Phoc.* 4.2 and 14.7), both ended in disaster. Time and again, history questions the feasibility of such Platonic ideals.

Plutarch was not naïve. In two other works, he examines how such theoretical ideals can be translated into political praxis. *Should an old*

[52] See Roskam 2009b for an interpretation of the work.

[53] On this work, see esp. the commentary of Tirelli 2005; also Harrison 1995.

[54] On Plutarch's notion of φιλοκαλία, which is central to his political thinking, see Roskam 2009b: 73–4.

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man engage in politics? is a passionate plea for the political relevance of old men, who should put their rich expertise at the disposal of their fellow citizens. They should continue to participate in politics, not by assuming all kinds of offices and interfering in every single detail, but by delegating, supervising, and advising their younger colleagues to serve the public interest. Even more concrete advice is given in the *Political precepts*, by far Plutarch's most important political work, dedicated to the novice politician Menemachus of Sardis. With this work, we find ourselves in the middle of municipal politics in Plutarch's day.[55]

At that time, the Greek cities were usually a kind of political aristocracy, governed by a few rich families, the πρῶτοι or 'first citizens', as Plutarch calls them (*Praec. ger. reip.* 815A). They occupied all the important positions and their rivalry sometimes caused internal disorders that risked destroying the balance of power and undermining social order. Their power base rested on their noble birth and their financial means, which enabled them to spend large sums of money on public projects. In return for these donations, they were publicly honoured as benefactors, which of course added to their influence. The days of democracy were gone,[56] but the euergetic system at least brought about a certain stability and well-being.

This is the situation that constitutes the horizon of Plutarch's political thinking. We have already seen that Plutarch was never prone to forget the demands of real life and this is all the more true when dealing with politics. He recalls Cicero's apt evaluation of Cato the Younger, who lost the consular elections because he acted 'as if he lived in Plato's state and not in the dregs of Romulus' (*Phoc.* 3.2). Plutarch never forgot that he lived in the dregs of Chaeronea and this insight forms the down-to-earth starting point of his political thinking.[57] He was a clever, sensible politician with a full measure of common sense and a pragmatic spirit. Yet, at the same time, this sobermindedness is perfectly in line with the general philosophical approach that we have found in all his ethical thinking. Just as he preferred to control the passions rather

[55] On Plutarch's political thinking, see, e.g., Weber 1959; Carrière 1977; Aalders 1982; Desideri 1986; Aalders and de Blois 1992; Gallo and Scardigli 1995; Swain 1996: 135–86; Stadter and Van der Stockt 2002; de Blois *et al.* 2004 and 2005; Roskam 2009b; Pelling 2014; Liebert 2016. See also the seminal studies of the *Political precepts* by Renoirte 1951 and Carrière and Cuvigny 1984.

[56] Unless democracy is understood as the rule of the elite in the service of the people: see Plácido 1995; Teixeira 1995; Roskam 2005a: 408.

[57] Although Trapp 2004 argues that Plutarch's political ideals (esp. his thinking about euergetism) were unrealistic and at odds with mainstream civic ideas.

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than to completely eradicate them, and to face misfortune rather than to explain it away, he also faced the reality of political life with all its complicated problems. He realized well enough that Lycurgus' achievement of turning his city Sparta into a *polis philosophousa* (*Lyc.* 31.3) was extremely hard to imitate in his own day. For the populace is like a suspicious and capricious beast (*Praec. ger. reip.* 800C) that should, as much as possible, be brought under the control of reason, as recalcitrant matter was controlled by the Demiurge.[58] In several respects, in fact, Plutarch's political project has a strongly demiurgical aspect. The politician himself is characterized as the best of artificers and the Demiurge of good order and justice (807C), and his task is to mix a healthy element free from passions with the diseased, faction-ridden part of the state (824A).[59]

But Menemachus is no Demiurge. Plutarch is not addressing a professional philosopher who has decided to enter politics, but a young politician, and this is something that he carefully bears in mind. Throughout the work, he starts from real life, from the dregs of the Greek *polis*, and then tries to reorient this towards a philosophical perspective. And this begins with the person of the politician himself: his political engagement should rest on the fundamental choice (προαίρεσις) to serve the public interest. A political career should not be for profit (798E–F; 819E) nor should we enter upon public life mainly for the sake of personal ambition or 'love of honour' (φιλοτιμία; 819F–822A).[60] The politician should pursue what is honourable (τὸ καλόν) and thus we can also expect of him that he has acquired a virtuous disposition (800B–801C).

How should Menemachus conceive of this honourable ideal? Plutarch provides him with much general advice, while, as usual, respectfully leaving it to his reader to decide on how to apply this to his own situation. Menemachus should always be concerned with the public interest (807B; 812B; 817D; cf. *An seni* 794D). He should cause men to be good subjects (816F) and especially avoid internal disorder and pursue concord (824D). These are traditional political ideals that

[58] On Plutarch's very negative view of the people, see esp. Saïd 2005a.

[59] On the politician as *aristotechnas* (a quotation from Pindar, fr. 57 Maehler), see Van der Stockt 2002 and Lather 2017: 334–44.

[60] Such an ambition is one of the main motivations of many heroes in the *Parallel Lives* and is often discussed in the *Moralia* too. See esp. Frazier 1988; Duff 1999b: 83–7; Roskam *et al.* 2012; Liebert 2016, *passim*; Aloumpi 2017 (including a comparison with Demosthenes and Thucydides). On Plutarch's view of the politician's correct motivations, see also Roskam 2004–5.

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are here adopted in and adapted to a philosophical project.[61] For these ideals should indeed be reached through educating the citizens' characters and making them better. A beginning politician like Menemachus should proceed in a systematic way, by first examining the general character of the people and accommodating himself to it, and then gradually changing it for the better (799B–800A). This idea, expressed with medical imagery, remains an important motif in the whole work: the politician should act as the physician of his fellow citizens' souls. In other words, he should carry out a fundamentally philosophical project.

In order to reach this goal, he should fully master the rules of the political game. Again, Plutarch blends the often recalcitrant matter of political reality with more philosophical ideals. He recognizes the importance of virtuoso rhetoric as a means to persuade the people (801C–804C). While rhetoric is not the creator of persuasion (δημιουργὸς πειθοῦς), it certainly is its helper (συνεργός) (801C), for the people should not be led by their bellies but by their ears (802D). This does not mean, of course, that Menemachus should turn into a demagogue: his speech should be full of character, high-mindedness, and fatherly frankness (802F; cf. 815D). He should respect and use offices and office-holders, but also be prepared to overrule them whenever the public good is at stake (816A–817F).[62] He should make use of friends as his living instruments, while carefully avoiding favouritism (806F–809B). Time and again, Plutarch thus views the concrete contemporary political situation from the point of view of the philosopher, but always observes moderation and balance. An excessively strict and rigid course is consistently rejected. The politician should sometimes be indulgent on smaller details (817F–818E)[63] and can even resort to cunning tricks (813A–C),[64] without forgetting his honourable mission to educate the people to virtue.

Finally, what is the role of Rome? In politics, Rome is, of course, highly relevant: one small decree of the proconsul suffices to annul

[61] See, e.g., Sheppard 1984–6 (on *homonoia*) and the more general survey of the sources of Plutarch's political thinking in Aalders 1982: 61–5 and Aalders and de Blois 1992.

[62] See Roskam 2005a.

[63] The idea also occurs in *On monarchy, democracy, and oligarchy* (at 827B). The authenticity of this work, of which only a few passages survive, is controversial; see esp. Caiazza 1995; further literature in Roskam 2009b: 25 n. 52.

[64] Cf. Carrière 1977.

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all the politician's efforts (824E–F). This the politician should bear in mind and abstain from silly démarches (814A):

> When we see little children trying playfully to bind their fathers' shoes on their feet or fit their crowns upon their heads, we only laugh, but the officials in the cities, when they foolishly urge the people to imitate the deeds, ideals, and actions of their ancestors, however unsuitable they may be to the present times and conditions, stir up the common folk and, though what they do is laughable, what is done to them is no laughing matter any more, unless they are merely treated with utter contempt.

Menemachus must realize that he always has the Roman shoe above his head (813E), as a new sword of Damocles.[65] And even if a shoe may at first sight seem less terrifying than a sword, this shoe surely had equally devastating powers. He should therefore try to make himself and his fatherland blameless (814C) and obedient (814E) towards his rulers. At the same time, he should not exaggerate and force the Romans 'to be their master more than they wish' (814F–815A). This addendum reflects the political interest of the πρῶτοι, who had everything to win in keeping Rome at a distance and preserving their own restricted autonomy, although Plutarch cloaks this point too in philosophical terms. He argues that the politician is best placed to cure the souls of his fellow citizens in the enclosed space of his own city, administering a secret medical treatment (ἀπόρρητον ἰατρείαν, 815B), so that there is no need for external doctors and medicines (815B). To give Rome a philosophically meaningful place means to relegate it to the margin.

Thus Plutarch advocates a particularly clever and considered political course. He keeps loyal to his Platonic convictions and always translates his political aims into philosophical terms: the politician should educate his fellow citizens, promote concord, and serve the public interest. For that is honourable (καλόν). That is what Plato's political ideals can mean in the cities of Plutarch's day. At the same time, however, all these high-minded philosophical ideals serve the political ideology and interests of the ruling class. Plutarch's advice to Menemachus is a rationalization of the existing political order, a plea for a political status quo. There is no place for political revolution in Plutarch: the aristocrats should be pulling the strings, whereas the people should listen, obey, and be content. Nevertheless, we should not consider Plutarch's political philosophy as a mere façade, shrewdly developed in order to secure the privileges of his own class. Such an interpretation would be too

[65] See C. Jones 1971: 133; Carrière and Cuvigny 1984: 186.

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cynical: Plutarch was not the man to use philosophy as a pretext. The sincerity of his philosophical ideals cannot be doubted, yet he knew how to reconcile them very cleverly with the concrete political situation of his day and with the interests of his own class, and how he could combine the happiness of the people (as he understood it) and the well-being of the city with his own self-realization as philosopher and aristocrat. For all these reasons, Plutarch stands out as a particularly intelligent political thinker.

8. Conclusion

Plutarch is a moralist. His ethical thinking is very attractive. Thus the ethical thinking of some moralists is very attractive. That, at last, is a syllogism that is both logically valid and true. One looks in vain for casuistry or black and white thinking in Plutarch's ethics. His ethical reflections are nuanced, based on sound psychological insights, and ultimately rooted in metaphysics. This theoretical basis is seldom made explicit, but it significantly informs his general method and approach in his ethical works. Moreover, the genuine zetetic spirit is not absent from these works. Plutarch raises challenging moral questions and fully acknowledges the moral complexity of real life. And he deeply respects the autonomy of his readers. He tries to help those readers on their way towards moral improvement, trying to stimulate and mould their thinking through traditional moral insights but also through a wealth of particularly attractive images and anecdotes. He makes heavy demands on his readers but always leaves the decision to them, reminding them of their responsibility. Thus the response to Plutarch's moral works always reflects the reader's own character, and reveals it. This holds true both for ancient readers and for those of our own day.

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