

# Plutarch among the Postcolonialists

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**Abstract:** Postcolonial interpreters of Plutarch attempt to resolve apparent contradictions between the rhetoric of the *Lives* and Plutarch's attitudes toward Roman dominion by invoking conscious and unconscious tensions incident to the identity politics of a colonized Greek elite. This approach fails to render a satisfying account of relevant texts because it refuses to take seriously the fundamental importance of Plutarch's identity as a Platonic philosopher in providing the standards for his judgments of political conditions. Plutarch welcomes Roman dominion as a solution to the intra- and interpolis rivalries that kept love of honor at a pathological pitch in classical Greece and intensified the conflict between philosophy and political practice, while he counsels defense of local administration. These concerns lead him into areas of thought developed by modern thinkers such as Publius and Tocqueville.

**Keywords:** classical political philosophy, Plutarch, post-colonialism

## THE PLUTARCH PROBLEM

**P**lutarch's *Lives* is a massive meditation on noble statesmen of the Greek and Roman past, depicting vividly and attractively the virtues at home in the atmosphere of republican liberty. The collection has inspired generations of enthusiasts of republican, active self-government. A favorite author of Algernon Sidney and John Dryden (who coordinated the classic eighteenth-century translation of the *Lives*), Plutarch also influenced the political imagina-

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tion of the American federalists and antifederalists and was probably a principal inspiration for the civic spirit of Benjamin Franklin, whose favorite reading at age twelve was the *Lives*. The psychology of citizenship that Jean-Jacques Rousseau abstracted from Plutarch is arguably the basis of his notion of the general will, which played an enormous role in subsequent continental social theory and revolutionary ideology. We may well speak of a Plutarchan impetus in the modern world that has exercised a powerful influence on political thought and action.

Interpreters of Plutarch have, however, found it difficult to reconcile the heady effects of the rhetoric of the *Lives* with the apparently complacent attitude of its author toward living in a rather sleepy province of the Roman Empire. As Robert Lamberton puts it:

This brings us immediately in touch with one of the fundamental contradictions that lurk beneath the rather serene surface that Plutarch presents to his reader. Plutarch consistently praised and recommended the active, engaged life. He admired leaders and statesmen and spent much of his life thinking and writing about the great generals of the past, in whose lives a great deal was at stake. But he lived in a place and an age without politics, where there was no foreign policy, no scope for military excellence—except at the limits of the empire, a part of the world that on the whole does not seem to have interested him much.<sup>1</sup>

One of the crucial texts for establishing this apparent contradiction is the *Precepts of Statecraft* (in the form of a letter to his friend Menemachus), in which the author suggests that his contemporaries should be cautious about appealing to past Greek models because they now live under Roman dominion and should not get grand ideas (814a). Plutarch even goes so far as to suggest that this regime of restricted liberty is an improvement for Greece (824c). This suggestion accords well with the sentiment expressed in one of Plutarch's dialogues by the character Theon:

For my part, I am well content with the settled conditions prevailing at present, and I find them very welcome. . . . There is, in fact, profound peace and tranquility; war has ceased, there are no wanderings of peoples, no civil strifes, no despotisms, nor other maladies and ills in Greece requiring many unusual remedial forces.<sup>2</sup>

Is Plutarch an ardent republican like most of his modern admirers, or is he a provincial accommodationist to Roman dominion?

The most influential recent attempt to provide a framework for answering this question is Simon Swain's *Hellenism and Empire*. In terms provided by postcolonial theory, Swain's book examines the movement in the first few centuries of our era known as the Second Sophistic, when the word *sophist* came back into use to describe the professional teachers of rhetoric who began to be established in major cities of the Roman Empire.<sup>3</sup> Swain is particularly concerned with elucidating the way in which these purveyors of Greek culture construct an identity for themselves that justifies their belonging to the elite class in the hellenized provinces of the Roman world. His stated procedure is to characterize the feelings and attitudes of Greek elites in general toward their historical situation, and then build on these analyses to examine the views of Rome held by the leading intellectuals of the day.<sup>4</sup> According to Swain, the way these intellectuals construct the concept of *paideia* (culture or education) provides a standard that justifies their elite status and social power: they are the educated and therefore "the rightful inheritors of the classical world."<sup>5</sup> At the same time, because *paideia* is the child and birthright of Greeks, it provides a standard by which to belittle the cultural capacities and attainments of the Roman conquerors—either implicitly or explicitly, depending on the author in question. Therefore, Swain offers us portraits of men who are at once the victims and the co-opted perpetrators of social and political domination; we are afforded the simultaneous pleasures of unmasking their power-grabbing pretensions to superiority and decoding the expressions of their resentment as the subjugated.

Plutarch scholars such as Rebecca Preston and Timothy Duff follow the path marked out by Swain. Preston proposes "to consider how Plutarch places himself in relation to Roman and Greek culture and identity" by investigating "the complexities of constructing an identity" as revealed in his *Roman Questions* and *Greek Questions*.<sup>6</sup> She explicitly places her reflections within the discourse of postcolonialism and trains her eye on Plutarch only after characterizing the "contradictions of the position of the Greek elite in general."<sup>7</sup> Duff, whose book focuses primarily on the ethical aims of the parallel lives, devotes a chapter to "The Politics of Parallelism," in which he describes Plutarch's act of Greek-to-Roman comparison as "one of resistance, an appropriation of Roman history into a Greek framework," and contends that, "[f]or Plutarch, the past provides a protected space, shielded from the unpleasant realities of Greek political weakness, a space where Roman history might be appropriated into a Greek world-view and Greek culture championed freely."<sup>8</sup> These authors both assume, in Duff's words, that it is "within the context of the contesta-

tion and construction of identities" that we must understand Plutarch's treatment of Greek and Roman topics in relation to one another.

Although the context of Roman rule and Greek loss of freedom undoubtedly governs the rhetoric of much of Plutarch's oeuvre, one may wonder whether the categories of conciliation and acquiescence, resistance and subversion, and elitism and identity construction are sufficiently attuned to understanding Plutarch's thoughts and purposes. The thesis advanced here will be that, in fact, a reduction of the question of Plutarch's thought to the terms of these categories results in a distorting interpretive lens, and that we can more adequately understand Plutarch's attitude toward Roman dominion if we adopt his understanding of his identity, not primarily as an elite Hellene, but more fundamentally as a political philosopher of the Platonic school.<sup>9</sup> What appear through the lens of postcolonial identity politics as ambivalences (to be explained in terms of social and psychic tensions) make rather more sense as symptoms of the peculiar position of the Platonic political philosopher, living simultaneously within and beyond the terms of his own political culture.

## THE POSTCOLONIALIST SOLUTION

The core of Swain's solution to the problem of interpreting Plutarch's attitude is: "If there is a contradiction, it represents the compromise and negotiation we must expect from someone living under a foreign power."<sup>10</sup> That negotiation, by Swain's account, works as follows: On the one hand, Plutarch believes in a benevolent, provident deity, which gives him a concept by which he "theorize[s] Rome's success."<sup>11</sup> In several of the lives, he attributes the increase of Roman dominion to this providential power.<sup>12</sup> This rationalization allows him to maintain his complacency about the current political and economic stability in which he enjoys a privileged status and to acknowledge Roman success without having to concede any superior merit to Roman cultural and political institutions. On the other hand, the dominion thus rationalized still continues to rankle Plutarch the Greek patriot, who, Swain says, "clearly regretted" Greece's loss of freedom.<sup>13</sup> This regret has two consequences. First, his counsel in *Precepts of Statecraft* that the statesman's main task now is to foster civic concord (824c) is intended to reduce occasions for Roman interference and therefore to preserve as much power for the cities and their elites as it is still possible to have.<sup>14</sup> Second, in the *Lives*, which is constructed as a series of comparisons of paired Greek and Roman statesmen, Plutarch engages in a subtle critique of the Romans, frequently attributing their flaws and the consequences of those flaws to a lack of proper Greek *paideia*. Therefore, although Plutarch recognizes a limited sphere of political resistance, he takes a more complete spiritual revenge in his ideology of Greek cultural superiority.

Swain's case study of the parallel lives of the Greek Pyrrhus and the Roman Marius, two outstanding generals, provides a good preliminary illustration of his manner of applying this interpretive rubric and the limitations to which it subjects itself. According to Plutarch, Marius dis-

dained Greek learning on the grounds that it was ridiculous to study a literature whose teachers were other people's slaves.<sup>15</sup> Swain comments:

[T]he wretched end of Marius' highly ambitious career is specifically attributed to his lack of Greek culture. . . . Plutarch might have made the point that, though Pyrrhus was a Greek and therefore had a Greek education . . . he did not benefit from it in the least. But he does not, for though he almost always takes the *paideia* of his Greeks for granted, moral failing or success is explained without reference to it. Romans are seen differently.<sup>16</sup>

By using "culture" in the blanket sense that covers all learning that emanates from the Greeks, Swain here collapses a distinction that, to Plutarch, is fundamental among philosophy and other cultural forms. The soul perfected through the practice of philosophy provides the standard by which to measure the value of the influence of other cultural products. Plutarch's *How the Young Man Should Study Poetry*, for example, takes as its criterion for judging poetry's effects the degree to which they contribute to "the best and most divine condition in us, which we understand to be rightness of reason and the highest development of our rational nature, and the condition of soul agreeable to this."<sup>17</sup> Plutarch elsewhere unambiguously identifies this acme of reason as *sophia*; that is, theoretical as opposed to practical intellect.<sup>18</sup> Certainly we can take for granted that Pyrrhus received an education in Greek laws and customs and probably at least in Homeric poetry, but nothing suggests that his education resulted in the internalization of the lessons of philosophy. In fact, Plutarch shows quite clearly in an arresting passage that Pyrrhus, although perhaps acquainted with philosophy, was not susceptible to its influence in the governing of his life and choices.

Plutarch tells us that among the adherents of Pyrrhus was a man of great eloquence named Cineas:

This person, seeing Pyrrhus eagerly preparing for [the conquest of] Italy, led him one day when he was at leisure into the following reasonings: "The Romans, sir, are reported to be great warriors and conquerors of many warlike nations; if God permit us to overcome them, how should we use our victory?" "You ask," said Pyrrhus, "a thing evident of itself. The Romans once conquered, there is neither Greek nor barbarian city that will resist us, but we shall presently be masters of all Italy, the extent and resources and strength of which any one should profess to be ignorant rather than yourself." Cineas after a little pause, "And having subdued Italy, what shall we do next?" Pyrrhus not yet discovering his intention, "Sicily," he replied, "next holds out her arms to receive us, a wealthy and populous island, and easy to be gained. . . ." "You speak," said Cineas, "what is perfectly probable, but will the possession of Sicily put an end to the war?" "God grant us," answered Pyrrhus, "victory and success in that, and we will use these as forerunners of greater things; who could forbear from Libya and Carthage then within reach? These conquests once perfected, will any assert that of the enemies who now pretend to despise us, any one will dare to make further resistance?" "None," replied Cineas, "for then it is manifest we may with such mighty forces regain Macedon, and make an absolute conquest of Greece; and when all these are in our power what shall we do then?" Said Pyrrhus, smiling, "We will live at our ease, my dear friend, and drink all day, and divert ourselves with pleasant conversation." When Cineas had led Pyrrhus with

his argument to this point: "And what hinders us now, sir, if we have a mind to be merry, and entertain one another, since we have at hand without trouble all those necessary things, to which through much blood and great labour, and infinite hazards and mischief done to ourselves and to others, we design at last to arrive?" Such reasonings rather troubled Pyrrhus with the thought of the happiness he was quitting, than any way altered his purpose, being unable to abandon the hopes of what he so much desired.<sup>19</sup>

The implication of Pyrrhus's reaction to this artful Socratic elenchus is that he lacks the capacity to submit his passions to the rule of reason, a capacity that, for Plutarch, is a significant mark that one has made progress in philosophy.<sup>20</sup> In his initial response, Pyrrhus's jaunty use of the philosophical-sounding phrase "a thing evident of itself" (*pragma phainomenon*) would seem to ironically underscore the superficiality of his philosophical culture.<sup>21</sup>

A reader as sophisticated as Swain could only miss the implications of this passage because of the bias built into an interpretive framework. In fact, Swain is quite explicit about collapsing the distinctions among philosophy and other elements of culture. Swain characterizes the Platonic distinction between philosophy and sophistry, which is emphatically affirmed by Plutarch, as a "prejudice" inherited from Plato and Isocrates.<sup>22</sup> Reducing the status of Plato's critique of the sophists, which may well be the most thoroughly argued and articulated judgment about a way of life in all intellectual history, to a prejudice demonstrates the severe limitations of the attempt to give an unphilosophical interpretation of the rhetoric of a Platonic philosopher.

Swain's reading rests on this refusal to take Plutarch's understanding of philosophy seriously.<sup>23</sup> The elements Swain sees in conflict in Plutarch's psyche are irrational: his theology of providence is a matter of faith, his patriotism a passion beyond which there is no appeal. Above all, Swain sees no need to defend this framework as a tool for interpreting the thought of a philosopher who fundamentally rejects such a reduction of reason to unreason. Let us consider, then, what accounting Plutarch might be expected to give of the rational groundings of his own utterances.

## PLUTARCH THE PHILOSOPHER

Four features of Plutarch's philosophical identity are of particular importance for resolving the apparent contradictions noted by postcolonial interpreters:

First, Plutarch is a skeptic and a dialectical philosopher.<sup>24</sup> In his most extended defense of skepticism, *Against Colotes* (especially 1122a–1124b), Plutarch explicitly asserts the compatibility of skeptical withholding of judgment and the affirmation of divine providence (1123a). Elaborating the grounds provided in his writings for this compatibility would require a separate and lengthy treatment; it is sufficient for my present purposes to observe that such a careful examination would necessarily precede any judgment that Plutarch does not have such reasonable grounds (as he claims to have) for making such an assertion.<sup>25</sup> Unless we have reason to think otherwise, we should expect Plutarch's affirmations of divinity to be skeptical and dialectical. In *The Slowness of Divine Justice*, he invokes as a governing

principle of Academic philosophy a reverent disavowal of sure knowledge about the divine, requiring a resort to what is probable (549e–f; compare with 558d). In the treatise *Isis and Osiris*, Plutarch examines a variety of ways of thinking about the divine, and defends affirmations about divinities because they are better than alternative affirmations when judged by the standard of philosophical rationality (383a). Our working assumption should be that faith, if it has any role in Plutarch's religiosity, is subordinate to rational principles.

Second, a fundamental principle of Platonic rational theology, articulated in book 2 of the *Republic*, is that a god ought only to be said to be the cause of good things (379c). Socrates presents this as a reasonable inference from the premise that there is divinity, deduced on the basis of what an adequate concept of divinity implies. Plutarch explicitly affirms this principle.<sup>26</sup> This means, for my present purposes, that if Plutarch affirms that Roman dominion is attributable to divine providence, either he must have evidence for the providential character of these developments and conclude from this that their dominion must be good, or he must have reason to believe that the dominion is good before he can reasonably attribute it to providence. The following two principles suggest that Plutarch may have reason to think this dominion good prior to any attribution to a divine power.

Third, Plato and Aristotle, the political philosophers whom Plutarch takes as his guides, recognize the philosophical life as the highest human fulfillment.<sup>27</sup> They also recognize that in most actual political orders, the demands of political success tend to undermine the order of the soul that philosophy seeks to attain and therefore the philosophical life itself. Both take their bearings by the measure of the best regime, and in both cases one of the features of that regime is its greater hospitability to the cultivation of philosophy.<sup>28</sup> Plutarch too is quite alive to the dangers that attend a philosopher's entanglement with politics, but is also careful to articulate conditions in which a political philosopher will seek friendship with statesmen so as to enable philosophical wisdom to bear its widest-reaching fruits.<sup>29</sup> The relationship of the philosophical and political (or contemplative and active) lives may or may not ultimately remain as difficult to resolve in Plutarch as it is in Plato and Aristotle. It seems nonetheless plausible that, if a political order were to offer conditions for political activity that are less threatening to the pursuit of philosophical perfection, Plutarch would affirm it as superior in that regard to one whose political culture has a more corrupting influence.

Fourth, the proper ordering of the soul includes the obedience of the spirited and ambitious part of the soul to reason's judgments about the good. Therefore, a political order that encourages the hypertrophy of the spirited part of the soul is one that undermines the pursuit of the human good.<sup>30</sup> This means two things. First, Plutarch—if he is true to his philosophical principles—will not be a patriot simply, but will measure the goodness of his own sociopolitical milieu by the degree to which it is able to foster the human good, and will be liable to love it more the better it does so. Second, Plutarch will not (as Swain assumes he does) uncritically affirm that political independence is an ultimate good, but will consider the conditions that best foster the

good order of the soul as one measure of the optimal degree of independence. Patriotism and love of independence, considered as passions, are manifestations of the spirited part of the soul and receive their proper measure from reason's judgment of the good.

Taken together, these four principles suggest a perfectly consistent and satisfactory interpretation of Plutarch's view of Roman rule. As Swain acknowledges, Plutarch frequently makes remarks, in a variety of contexts, about the inability of the Greeks to live in peace.<sup>31</sup> Further, Plutarch explicitly criticizes the conflation of virtue with martial virtue when he observes that in the early Roman republic the word *virtus* was understood to mean manliness in a militaristic sense. Does not the rivalry between independent cities that keeps the Greeks of the classical period in constant conflict drive them to overemphasize martial virtues? And does not this overemphasis, combined with the intensity of rivalry within independent cities, lead to a pathological overnourishing of the spirited part of the soul?<sup>32</sup> Have not the Romans, by organizing the Greeks into one administrative unit and relieving them of the responsibility for conducting warfare, removed this pathology? This interpretation provides a consistent reading of Plutarch's texts.

## PHILOSOPHY AND LIMITED LOCALISM

In a crucial and much commented-upon passage of the *Precepts of Statecraft*, Plutarch makes the following observations about the implications of the Roman dominion for statesmanship's pursuit of its three principal objects—peace, freedom, and concord:

So far as peace is concerned, the populaces need nothing from statesmen at the present, for all war, both Greek and foreign, has been banished from us and has disappeared; and of liberty the populaces have as great a share as the rulers grant them, and perhaps more would not be better. . . . So then of the works that fall under the statesman's purview there remains only this one, which is in no way the least among goods: to always instill concord and friendship in those who live together, and to remove strifes, discords and all enmities.<sup>33</sup>

Let us focus on two aspects of this passage: first the remark that more liberty might not be better, and then the emphasis on fostering concord.

What does Plutarch mean when he says that more liberty for the Greeks might not be better? Swain interprets him to mean that more freedom might encourage more discord among the elites, decreasing their ability to rule the lower class and increasing the likelihood of the Romans exerting a more vigorous authority (181–82). He draws our attention here to the word “perhaps,” but does not go on to interpret it. Because two pages later he asserts that Plutarch “clearly” regretted the Greek loss of liberty, he must understand Plutarch's qualification here to be that more liberty under Rome would probably not be better, whereas entire liberty from Rome would.

Plutarch's remark is in fact brilliantly ambiguous in its grammar and subtle in its rhetoric. The Greek is *to pleon isos ouk ameion*; “perhaps more would not be better” is not the only possible translation of this very compressed

formulation. Literally, it reads: “more perhaps not better.” It is perfectly natural to take this as a conditional sentence: *If* there were more liberty, *then* it would perhaps not be better. In an example like this, where the protasis is a counterfactual supposition (that is, we are assuming that there were more liberty, which there is not), then the apodosis can dispense with the particle *an* as it does here.<sup>34</sup> But this absence of the particle also means that the clause can be read in two other ways as a nonconditional: “perhaps more is not better” or even (though least likely) “perhaps more was not better.”

In saying “perhaps more would not be better,” Plutarch is offering a prudential judgment, a conjecture about the probable outcome of specific contingent possibilities: if we were granted more liberty, we might not handle it well. The observation that “perhaps more was not better” would constitute a historical judgment about the effects that their bygone greater liberty had on Greek political life. If he is saying “perhaps more is not better,” Plutarch is making a more general judgment based on an atemporal principle, a judgment about the degree of freedom that conduces to good political order—in other words, articulating a principle of political philosophy. We must consider it possible that Plutarch intentionally permits all three readings: more liberty would probably not be better based on the effects it had in the past, and this points to a more general principle of political philosophy. It may be that he uses the word “perhaps” with a similar multiple intention. Plutarch has something to say that a fellow Greek would probably not gladly hear, so he not only expresses it obscurely, but throws in a qualifier to soften it further. At the same time, the “perhaps” may indicate a skeptic’s uncertainty about the precise degree of liberty that would be good, as well as an acknowledgment that such matters do not, in any case, admit of complete precision.

I have already articulated the more general principle of political philosophy suggested here: complete liberty and independence on the level of the city can be harmful to the capacity of the political community to foster the best condition of soul. From the same data set, Plutarch has drawn an inference related to that which James Madison drew in the 1780s when he was intensively studying the ancient historians in preparation for the Philadelphia convention (an inference he later formulated classically in *Federalist* 10); namely, that the way to manage the most dangerous effects of faction is to create a superordinate level of political life, diminishing the stakes on the subordinate or local level. (Also relevant is *Federalist* 9, in which Hamilton, avowing horror and disgust at “the history of the petty republics of Greece and Italy,” argues that rejecting union would result in a host of small, mutually hostile republics that would become more militaristic, and develop standing armies and strong executive powers.)<sup>35</sup> But whereas Publius offers us primarily pragmatic arguments about institutional durability and civil liberties, Plutarch makes a primarily ethical argument about effects on the soul.

Plutarch’s concerns are, in fact, closer to those of a thinker who felt the influence of both the *Lives* and *The Federalist*: Alexis de Tocqueville. In *Precepts of Statecraft*, Plutarch praises and defends the less glorious duties of the

local magistrate who, relieved of the burden of national security and pride, attends to the concrete goods of peaceful civic life:

And no doubt I myself seem ridiculous to visitors in our town when I am seen in public, as I often am, engaged in such matters. . . . I, on the other hand, say to those who criticize me for standing and watching tiles being measured or concrete or stones being delivered, that I attend to these things, not for myself, but for my native place. Yes, for there are many other things in regard to which a man would be petty and sordid who managed them for himself and attended to them for his own sake, but if he does it for the public and for the [sake of the polis], he is not ignoble, on the contrary his attention to duty and his zeal are all the greater when applied to little things.<sup>36</sup>

The portrait of civic activity offered here bears some resemblance to Tocqueville’s celebration of the free institutions of the New England township, which served as a fence against individualist withdrawal and excessive administrative centralization. Plutarch presents administrative participation, be it ever so humble, as a superior alternative to the petty individualism of private concerns. A few pages later, he warns his addressee against being drawn away from local responsibilities by ambition and the appeal of high Roman offices and diminishing the dignity of his polis by referring too many matters to Roman administration.<sup>37</sup> Accomplishing the latter goal also requires guarding oneself against ambitious rivalry and its willingness to profit from public discord.

Therefore, although Plutarch recognizes a negative good in depriving the Greek cities of the independence that over-nourishes spirited and ambitious souls, his emphasis on the statesman’s role in fostering concord also indicates a more positive good that fills this void. Not only has the conflict between politics and philosophy been reduced, but their actual compatibility has also been increased. It is a particularly characteristic skill of the dialectical philosopher, trained to argue both sides of a question, to be able to see beyond the positions of opposing parties, as well as to lead interlocutors to see the strengths of positions opposed to theirs.<sup>38</sup> If maintenance of concord becomes the principal remaining great task of the statesman, the political milieu thereby becomes more friendly and encouraging to the development of the virtues of the philosopher and to the exercise of those virtues to secure common goods.

Swain entirely misses the significance of this development. In fact, earlier in the essay, when Plutarch is talking about how one should go about one’s debut in public life, he makes a gesture toward the particular excellence of this union of philosophy and statesmanship, which Swain overlooks. Plutarch remarks that tyrannicides, forging alliances, and other dramatic debuts of past heroes are no longer possible:

Nowadays, then, when the affairs of the cities no longer include leadership in wars, nor the overthrowing of tyrannies, nor acts of alliances, what opening for a conspicuous and brilliant career could a young man find? There remain the public lawsuits and embassies to the Emperor, which demand a man of ardent temperament, and one who possesses both courage and intellect.<sup>39</sup>

The noble heroic paths that have been cut off catch Swain's attention. He fails to notice two things. First, the remaining legal and diplomatic paths require education, discretion, careful thought, and self-command. These arts of speech and self-vigilance are more the domain of the philosopher than the warrior. Second, Swain passes over (without comment) what Plutarch presents as a better beginning made by Solon, who started his political career when Athens was divided into three factions: "[H]e entangled himself with none of them, but acted for all in common and said and did everything to bring about concord among them, so that he was chosen lawgiver to reconcile their differences."<sup>40</sup>

## PHILOSOPHY AND THE SOUL OF THE STATESMAN

This interpretation, based on principles of Plutarch's political philosophy, seems to work well as a key to understanding the *Precepts of Statecraft*. But this still leaves us with the crux: how is this consistent with the project of the *Parallel Lives*, which is not about philosophers but largely about generals and legislators? Any adequate answer to this question would, of course, require an extensive investigation of the *Lives* and the *Moralia*. We can, however, gain some footing for such an investigation by indicating how Swain's failure to acknowledge the significance of philosophy leads to misrepresentation of Plutarch's *Lives*.

First, let us recall a fundamental point in Swain's interpretation of the *Lives*. He argues that Plutarch uses the standard of Greek *paideia* to subtly discredit Roman culture and imply the superiority of his Greek figures. I have already noted that this blanket use of *paideia* flattens the crucial distinction between philosophy and other forms of culture and that we ought to understand Plutarch's sense of identity to be founded more in Platonic philosophy than in Hellenistic culture as such. It turns out that there is a pair of lives featuring figures—Dion and Brutus—whom Plutarch identifies at the outset as belonging to the Platonic school. Examination of the life of Dion shows that Plutarch's treatment of them directly contradicts Swain's claim about his cultural agenda.

At the beginning of the life of Dion, Plutarch writes:

It may be fairly said that neither Romans nor Greeks can quarrel with the Academy, each nation being equally represented in the following pair of lives, which will give an account of Brutus and Dion—Dion, who was Plato's own hearer, and Brutus, who was brought up in his philosophy. . . . It is very probable that the principles of those who have had the same education should appear with a resemblance in all their actions, creating in them a certain harmony and proportion, at once agreeable and becoming.<sup>41</sup>

In the comparison of the lives that follows the two accounts, however, Plutarch makes clear his judgment that it was the soul of Brutus that, in its actions, had taken most thoroughly the dye of Platonic teachings. He observes:

[T]he chief glory of both was their hatred of tyranny, and abhorrence of wickedness. This was unmixed and sincere in Brutus; for he had no private quarrel with Caesar, but went into the risk singly for the liberty of his country. The other, had he not been privately injured, had not fought.

. . . Moreover, the public good made Brutus Pompey's friend . . . and Caesar's enemy; since he proposed for his hatred and his friendship no other end and standard but justice. Dion was very serviceable to Dionysius whilst in favor; when no longer trusted, he grew angry and fell to arms.<sup>42</sup>

This judgment of Plutarch—that Dion acted out of anger brought on by personal affronts—casts an important light on one of the incidents narrated in the life of Dion. After growing sufficiently exasperated with Dionysius—who had banished him, misused his teacher Plato, and insulted him by trying to separate his wife from him—Dion resolves to launch a campaign against the tyrant, having gotten assurance that the Sicilians would support him as a liberator. After landing in Sicily, he is joyfully received in several towns and ultimately in Syracuse itself. As Plutarch notes, because his quarrel is personal and his manners so dignified and aloof, the Syracusans mistrust his intentions and turn to more flattering demagogues. Plutarch describes the most important of these, Heraclides, as "a very good soldier . . . yet a man of not constant purpose, of a fickle temper, and least of all to be relied upon when he had to act with a colleague in any honorable command."<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, when Dion objects to his elevation to the admiralty by the people and gets them to revoke their decision, he makes the gesture on his own part of offering Heraclides the position as admiral. It might be argued that there was an element of prudence in this decision, insofar as Dion needed to gratify the people in some way. But his later dealings with Heraclides, especially when combined with Plutarch's judgment about his susceptibility to anger, suggest a different account: that Dion's prudence is undermined by pride in his philosophical cultivation.

Eventually, Heraclides succeeds in underhandedly fomenting resentment and suspicion against Dion, and the latter is driven out of Syracuse along with his Peloponnesian soldiers. But when mercenaries engaged by Dionysius get the better of the Syracusans (partly due to the failure of their demagogic leaders to maintain discipline), everyone cries out for an embassy to Dion, who returns with his troops and saves the city from rape, pillage, and destruction by fire.

"The next day," Plutarch writes,

not one of the popular haranguers durst stay in the city, but all of them, knowing their own guilt, by their flight confessed it, and secured their lives. Only Heraclides and Theodotes went voluntarily and surrendered themselves to Dion, acknowledging that they had wronged him, and begging he would be kinder to them than they had been just to him, adding how much it would become him who was master of so many excellent accomplishments to moderate his anger and be generously compassionate to ungrateful men, who were here before him, making their confession that, in all the matter of their former enmity and rivalry against him they were now absolutely overcome by his virtue. Though they thus humbly addressed him, his friends advised him not to pardon these turbulent and ill-conditioned men, but to yield them to the desires of his soldiers, and utterly root out of the commonwealth the ambitious affectation of popularity, a disease as pestilent and pernicious as the passion for tyranny itself. Dion endeavoured to satisfy them, telling them that other generals exercised and trained themselves for the most part in the practices of war and arms; but that he had long studied in the Academy how to conquer anger, and

not let envy and emulation conquer him; that to do this it is not sufficient that a man be obliging and kind to his friends, and those that have deserved well of him, but, rather, gentle and ready to forgive in the case of those who do wrong; that he wished to let the world see that he valued not himself so much upon excelling Heraclides in ability and conduct, as he did in outdoing him in justice and clemency; herein to have the advantage is to excel indeed. . . . What if Heraclides be perfidious, malicious and base, must Dion therefore sully or injure his virtue by passionate concern for it? . . . Dion, making use of these arguments, pardoned and dismissed Heraclides and Theodotes.<sup>44</sup>

It is not hard to recognize that Dion's argument for his decision is not based on what will conduce to the public good, as Plutarch suggests Brutus's would be, but bears entirely on what will display Dion as having successfully absorbed his philosophical lessons and attained to perfect virtue.<sup>45</sup> The result is nearly disastrous to the public good, as Heraclides, returned to naval command by the insistence of the people, turns half the army against Dion and sets a civil war afoot. Eventually Dion gives in to a plan to assassinate Heraclides, and Plutarch suggests that his remorse for this deed, as "like to be a blot and stain upon his life and actions," troubled his mind and undermined his judgment and resolve when another conspiracy against him began to be suspected—a conspiracy that eventually cost his life and the lives of his sister, wife, and infant son.<sup>46</sup> It seems we must conclude from this episode that philosophy succeeded in raising Dion above faction, but not above wishing to display his superiority to faction. He gloried in philosophy, but this love of glory blinded him to the chance to secure the public good by preventing discord.

The flaws of Brutus, if they may be called such, seem on the other hand to reflect various forms of inordinate attachment to liberty. Plutarch goes so far as to say that there is only one accusation against Brutus in all the events of his life that admits no apologia: his promise at Philippi to the soldiers of the slain Cassius to give them Greek cities to plunder as a reward for good service. Plutarch immediately proceeds, however, to offer just such an apologia, observing that Brutus was reduced to such tactics by his desperate situation on the battlefield and the necessity of motivating corrupted troops to fight for him.<sup>47</sup> The implication that Brutus is virtually flawless in character and conduct is borne out in Plutarch's treatment of his few questionable actions.

The first occasion on which Plutarch says Brutus "seemed" to have erred is his handling of Antony.<sup>48</sup> First, he opposes the proposal of his co-conspirators to kill Antony along with Caesar because he considers it unjust and also has hopes that Antony's nobler nature can be inspired by love of liberty once the tyrannicide is accomplished. The true error is his allowing Antony, again against the advice of his friends, to deliver Caesar's funeral oration, which leads to renewed public disorder. But the residual respect for republican liberty and virtue with which Brutus credits the Romans seems not altogether misplaced, because their disgust with Antony when they find him in sole command creates promising conditions for a restoration. It is the unforeseen entry of Octavian on the scene, bearing the magic name of Caesar, that renders the situation impossible

for Brutus and Cassius and makes the original sparing of Antony look like an irremediable error in retrospect.<sup>49</sup>

The other two criticisms of Brutus's conduct appear in the comparison with Dion. One is that Brutus despaired at Philippi when his situation was better than he knew (having obtained total victory at sea, but not having received news of it), and so took his own life when perseverance in the field might well have brought victory. If this is to be accounted an error rather than a mere misfortune, it may reflect Brutus's admiration for his uncle and father-in-law, Cato the Younger, who took his own life, rather than submit to Caesar—an event Brutus explicitly invokes when explaining his resolve to Cassius.<sup>50</sup> In philosophical terms, this represents the metastasis onto his Platonic, philosophical frame of a Stoic determination to defy fortune, when a healthy skepticism would better serve the public good. If so, then Brutus remains fundamentally philosophical in his conduct, even if in a flawed mode.

The second criticism, like the first, revolves around an epistemic deficit. Brutus could not see that Rome needed Caesar as the divinely ordained, gentle physician of a state of affairs requiring a monarchical cure.<sup>51</sup> If this failure has roots in his character, the cause would seem to be a too ardent love of liberty, rendering him incapable of recognizing that his conditions called for another kind of politics. In that instance, the message of the life of Brutus would harmonize with the message of the *Precepts of Statecraft*: liberty as such, however noble and ennobling an aim, does not provide the highest standard for political conduct. Although Brutus does not waver in his devotion to the common good, he does err in judging what it requires, apparently through the very love of republican liberty that supports his devotion to virtue. The life of Brutus, then, poignantly dramatizes the true root of the "Plutarch problem," which is the question of whether love of virtue can be preserved in a political order in which it must and ought to be largely decoupled from the zeal for full republican freedom.

## CONCLUSION

Here, therefore, we have a direct contradiction of Swain's thesis that the lives are written to portray the superiority of Greek attainment of *paideia*. Rather, when Plutarch explicitly raises the question as to which of two students of Platonism has benefited more from his philosophic education, he explicitly decides in favor of the Roman and implies that the deficiency of the Greek is an unconquerable love of personal honor that, although it serves Dion well as a commander and liberator, undermines the crucial task of securing concord.

It is not Greek education and culture, but rather philosophic education that provides Plutarch's standard of judgment; Greeks are no better suited to it than Romans, but seem in fact to suffer under the handicap of a love of glory rendered nearly incurable by their factiousness. The terms of Roman rule seem, on the contrary, to enhance the possibility of the coincidence of philosophy and political engagement for the ruled, especially if, as Plutarch counsels, one remains satisfied with securing the concrete goods of local

civic life, rather than chasing the prospect of becoming Roman provincial administrators and senators.<sup>52</sup> On these grounds, Plutarch can recognize that rule as providing a good the Greeks were not able to secure for themselves and can identify that rule as a divine dispensation.

Therefore we find, in fact, no contradiction that needs to be explained by appeal to irrational forces at war within Plutarch's psyche. Claiming that he uses Greek culture as an instrument of resistance and subversion might make Plutarch more appealing to some contemporary scholars, but as Plutarch observes, "those who do not adjust their tenets to fit the facts, but rather try to force the facts into an unnatural agreement with their own assumptions, have filled philosophy with a great number of difficulties."<sup>53</sup>

### NOTES

1. Robert Lamberton, *Plutarch* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 2.

2. Plutarch, *The Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse, in Plutarch's Moralia*, vol. 5, trans. F. C. Babbitt (London: Harvard University Press, 1969), 408b–c. Subsequent parenthetical references in the text of this article will refer to the standard pagination of the Greek text of the *Moralia*.

3. Simon Swain, *Hellenism and Empire: Language, Classicism, and Power in the Greek World AD 50–250* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

4. *Ibid.*, 414.

5. *Ibid.*, 8.

6. Rebecca Preston, "Roman Questions, Greek Answers: Plutarch and the Construction of Identity," in *Being Greek Under Rome: Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic and the Development of Empire*, ed. Simon Goldhill, 88, 95 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

7. *Ibid.*, 87, 91.

8. Timothy Duff, *Plutarch's Lives: Exploring Virtue and Vice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 291.

9. That Plutarch is first and foremost a Platonic philosopher is uncontroversial, although how thoroughly Platonist is a matter of some dispute. The most extensive discussions of his Platonism are Roger Miller Jones, *The Platonism of Plutarch* (Menasha, WI: George Banta, 1916); and John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), chapter 4. George Karamanolis offers a compelling account of Plutarch's absorption of Aristotle into his Platonism in chapter 2 of his *Plato and Aristotle in Agreement?: Platonists on Aristotle from Antiochus to Porphyry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

10. Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, 162.

11. *Ibid.*, 183.

12. Especially Plutarch's *Philopoemon* 17.2 and *Flaminius* 12.10 (numeration refers to the standard pagination in editions of the Greek text of the *Lives*).

13. Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, 183.

14. *Ibid.*, 173.

15. Plutarch *Marius* 2.2.

16. Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, 142–43.

17. Plutarch *How the Young Man Should Study Poetry* 24e (my translation). The process of cultivating this philosophical disposition of soul is best described in *How a Man May Become Aware of His Progress in Virtue*.

18. Plutarch *On Moral Virtue* 444d, where he explicitly invokes the Aristotelian distinction between *sophia* and *phronesis*; the former is distinguished as *autoteles*, an end in itself.

19. Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, trans. John Dryden et al. (New York: Modern Library, 1942), 476–77 (*Pyrrhus* 14.2–8).

20. Plutarch *Progress in Virtue* 81f–82a. Note the association at 82e of *abelteria* (failure to be motivated by what is better) with *amathia* (lack of learning). See also 84a and *On the Control of Anger* 453e.

21. Plutarch *Pyrrhus* 14.3; Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1913 (φαινω B.II.2). See also Plutarch *Progress in Virtue* 79c.

22. Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, 99; Plutarch *On Listening to Lectures* 43f; Plutarch *Progress in Virtue* 78f; Plutarch *That a Philosopher ought to Converse especially with Men in Power* 776c; Plutarch *On Moral Virtue* 446c.

23. In "Plutarch, Plato, Athens and Rome," Swain suggests that Plutarch's

admiration for "the divine Plato" reflects a desire to secure his bona fides as a true Hellene. In *Philosophia Togata II: Plato and Aristotle at Rome*, ed. Jonathan Barnes and Miriam Griffin, 174, 176, 186 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). On Plutarch's own critique of the use of philosophical culture as a source of prestige, see *Progress in Virtue* 81c–d.

24. "Dialectical" is here used as shorthand for what is sometimes called Socrates' "hypothetical method" of reasoning, described by him in *Phaedo* 99d–100a. On the similarity between this description and the account of dialectic in *Republic* 533a–534c, see Francisco Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 238–44. On Plutarch's skepticism, see Karamanolis, *Plato and Aristotle in Agreement?*, 85–86.

25. One would have at least to offer complete interpretations of *Isis and Osiris*, *The Generation of the Soul in Plato's Timaeus*, and *Against Colotes*, with particular attention to their invocations of Plato's *Laws* (370f, 1013e, and 1124e–f, respectively).

26. Plutarch *Isis and Osiris* 369a–b and *The Face in the Moon* 927d. He rearticulates the point in terms of Platonic-Aristotelian metaphysics at *Isis and Osiris* 371a, affirming that there is a fundamental principle in the cosmos (which he calls both *nous* and *logos*) that directs things toward the good, or provides them with an orientation toward the good (compare with *The Face in the Moon* 944e).

27. Compare Plutarch *On Moral Virtue* 444c–d and 446e. Although this essay shows a clear Aristotelian influence, the extent of Plutarch's firsthand knowledge of Aristotle's corpus (and in particular of the *Politics*) is a matter of debate. For a judicious overview, see Jackson P. Hershbell, "Plutarch's Political Philosophy: Peripatetic and Platonic," in *The Statesman in Plutarch's Works: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference of the International Plutarch Society*, ed. De Blois, Bons, Kessels, and Schenkeveld, 151–62 (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

28. Plato *Republic* 491b–497c; Aristotle *Politics* 1271b2–11, 1324a23–b12, 1325a16–b33.

29. See, as a whole, Plutarch's *That a Philosopher Ought to Converse Especially with Men in Power*, and particularly 776c–d and 778a–b.

30. Plutarch *On the Control of Anger* 453b and 455b. Compare with Duff, *Plutarch's Lives*, 83–86.

31. Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, 148.

32. Plutarch *Coriolanus* 1.4; *Agessilaus* 5.5–7, 7.1–8.7, 23.11–24.3, and 28.1–8 (the latter discussed by Duff, *Plutarch's Lives*, 83–86).

33. Plutarch, *Precepts of Statecraft*, 824c, in *Plutarch's Moralia*, Loeb vol. 10, trans. H. N. Fowler (London: Harvard University Press, 1960), 291.

34. Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 520.

35. Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist*, ed. George W. Carey and James McClellan, 37–49 (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2001).

36. Plutarch, *Precepts of Statecraft*, 811b–c, in *Plutarch's Moralia*, Loeb vol. 10, 225. I have substituted "for the sake of the polis" for the misleading Loeb translation "for the State's sake," which is insensitive to the question of scale at issue here.

37. *Ibid.*, 814c–815a. Compare Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), vol. 1, part 1, chap. 5, esp. 82–83; and vol. 2, part 2, chap. 2 and 4 (482–84, 485–88). We may note that Tocqueville's defense of administrative decentralization and the vitality of the township, which combines the institutional concerns of Publius and the ethical concerns of Plutarch, concedes the wisdom of political and military centralization.

38. Compare with Leo Strauss, "On Classical Political Philosophy," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, ed. Hilail Gildin, 61–63 (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989).

39. Plutarch *Precepts of Statecraft* 805a–b.

40. *Ibid.* 805e.

41. Plutarch *Lives* 1155 (*Dion* 1.1–2).

42. Plutarch *Lives* 1220 (*Comparison of Dion and Brutus* 2.4–5).

43. Plutarch *Lives* 1172 (*Dion* 32.2).

44. Plutarch *Lives* 1180–81 (*Dion* 47.1–48.1).

45. Compare with Plutarch *Progress in Virtue* 80e–81b.

46. Plutarch *Lives* 1185 (*Dion* 56.2)

47. Plutarch *Brutus* 46.2.

48. *Ibid.* 20.2.

49. *Ibid.* 22.1.

50. *Ibid.* 40.4–40.5.

51. Plutarch *Comparison of Dion and Brutus* 2.1. Compare with Plutarch *Brutus* 47.4 (which, incidentally, suggests that Brutus's fatalism is justified, although perhaps not on Stoic grounds).

52. Plutarch *Precepts of Statecraft* 814c–e; Plutarch *On Tranquillity of Mind* 470c (see the discussion in Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, 168–71).

53. Plutarch *Progress in Virtue* 75f.



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