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Plutarchus



Plutarchus ein natürlicher maister vnd aussprechender geistlicher vberbeschreyer ein gepie-
ter vñ anrichter des kaisers Trajani ist zu diser zeit an firmen vmbtingen vñ glantz-
würdigkeit in fast großer achtung gewest. von dem Dolcantes in jener vnsungigen vñ gantz-
Plutarchus der natürlich maister ist ein mensch in de beschreyung vñ in was er so fragig in de fest-
gewest das er leichtlich ein gepierer des kaisers hat mögen erlanen. nennlich vñer willkür-
chus tet sundern fleiß dem kaiser seinen unger vier ding eingepiden. nemlich vñer willkür-
digkeit. sein selbs ersamkeit. der amblewt man gar vil bacher von mancherley materien vñ vñ-
sachen in frechyschem vñ hochgelerter man gar vil bacher von mancherley materien vñ vñ-
tappferheit bey Trajano angenehme begabung erlangt.

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ODYSSEUS IN ROME. ON PLUTARCH'S INTRODUCTION TO *DE COHIBENDA IRA*

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Abstract

In the past, Plutarch's *De cohibenda ira* attracted attention from Quellenforscher, but was also studied for the information it gives us about the Chareonean's psychotherapy (Ingenkamp). In this paper, some aspects of a 'forgotten' chapter of that dialogue, nl. the introduction in § 1, are brought to the fore. More specifically, it is shown how the pivotal concept of *praotes* is brought up through a cluster of parallels (*De virt. Mor.* 442C = *De prof. in virt.* 83A = *De coh. Ira* 453C-E).

Introduction

Scholarly investigations on Plutarch's *De cohibenda ira* seem to confirm the saddening intuition of any reader skimming through that dialogue: what on earth had Plutarch hoped to contribute to the elaboration of a theme which had been treated many times before him, in the Greek world as well as in the Roman, and from various philosophical perspectives (see, e.g., Laurenti – In-delli, 1988, pp.7-18)?

The results of modern research are indeed mostly negative. This comes as no surprise, since that research was undertaken within the framework of the positivistic paradigm of the *Quellen-*

forschung, which believed to explain Plutarch by reducing him to almost exclusively literary antecedents. The inevitable conclusion was that, as far as *inventio* is concerned, Plutarch lacked originality and was 'eclectic' (Dumortier – Defradas, 1975, p.54), pasting together excerpts from the Peripatetic Hieronymus of Rhodus (Pöhlentz, 1896), or from some Stoic source(s) (Schlemm, 1903), more specifically from Posidonius (Rabbow, 1914) and Sotion (Ringeltaube, 1913, pp. 68-69). His personal contribution was supposed to be limited to the insertion of '*Beispielreihen*' (Ziegler, 1952, col. 774) into other people's thoughts. Nor was Plutarch's *dispositio* of the material considered a success: we are supposed to deal with one of the

“weniger wohldisponierten” writings of our author (Schlemm, 1903, p.587). The essay would contain inexplicable parts, repetitions and many insertions, most of them disturbing the train of thoughts. But then again, the device of letting Fundanus tell the story of his self-treatment (from § 2 on!), is recognized to be a merit of Plutarch (Helmbold, 1993 (=1939), p. 91). On the level of *elocutio*, it was observed that the doubling expressions are the mark

of the diatribe character of the dialogue (Schlemm, 1903, pp.587-588) (not Plutarch’s!).

As a result of this approach, interest in *De cohibenda ira* understandably faded away: Plutarch’s originality and expertise in the field of anger had been profoundly discredited.

Still, the scholars came to remarkably parallel conclusions concerning the overall structure of the dialogue:

	Pohlenz	Schlemm	Rabbow	Ingenkamp ¹
introduction	§ 1: Einkleidung des Scheindialoges § 2-4: Einleitung	§ 2-5: Einleitung	§ 1: Dialogische Ein- führung § 2 - : Einleitung	§ 1: Einleitung § 2-5: Allgemeine Be- trachtungen zur Heilung
part 1	§ 5-10: Krisis	§ 6-11: Erkenntnis des Übels	§ 6-10: κρίσις	§ 6-10: ἐπιλογισμοί
part 2	§ 11-14: Therapie	§ 12-16: Vorschriften pro- phylaktischer Art	§ 11 - : ἄσκησις	§ 11-16: ἔθισμοί

Except for Ingenkamp, the scholars paid little or no attention to the first chapter of the dialogue². In this paper I will try to understand the meaning and the function of that introduction to *De cohibenda ira*. I will pay attention to a specific mark of Plutarch’s compositional technique, viz. his use of ὑπομνήμα-

τα, that are written notes composed by Plutarch himself (Van der Stockt. 1999, pp. 577-580). Ὑπομνήματα can be detected by the repetition, in unrelated contexts of Plutarch’s œuvre, of specific data (such as examples, quotations, comparisons, names and the like), related to a particular theme. In order to

¹ Followed by BETZ, 1978, pp.173-178.

² Most significant is the statement of PÖHLENZ, 1896, p. 321: “Cap. 1, ..., kommt für den Inhalt der Schrift nicht in betracht”.

exclude their accidental amalgamation, we require that at least three of those data be repeated.

The dialogic introduction: Platonizing Romans

The fact that most scholars cut Plutarch's dialogic introduction dead and failed to value it for their interpretation, is at the same time significant and deplorable. Significant, because Plutarch, to their mind, was an interesting author for anything but –apparently– for what is, even according to all of them, his own. Deplorable, because Plutarch is likely to be putting his own perspective on the theme of anger and to be giving us the key to an adequate interpretation of his dialogue.

1. The Roman setting

a. To begin with: the scene is Rome –or its environment–, and there are only two interlocutors, the Romans Fundanus and Sulla. The fact that Plutarch, who usually introduces himself and/or his relatives in his dialogues, now deviates from this custom cannot be meaningless. I am not so much suggesting that the Roman

public in general was in need of reflection on the theme of anger³. After all, Seneca, who 'knew a lot more'⁴ about the theme, had already published his *De Ira*. I rather suppose that the Roman characters that Plutarch staged represent the public that our author wanted to address: the leading Roman aristocracy.

Indeed, who are these Roman characters⁵? Fundanus is a coming star, working his way through the stressing duties of the Imperial administration to the highest responsibilities - and from time to time suffering from the stress; Sulla is a Carthaginian with Roman citizenship; he is respectable enough to be in the position of offering Plutarch at his arrival in Rome the traditional 'welcome banquet'. These Romans belong to the aristocratic upper class in which Plutarch feels at home.

Now these people have no time to indulge in much philosophy, and they may not always be inclined to take warning from philosophers⁶. In these circumstances, a short ἐφόδιον will do, if only it pays due attention to the remedy of the stress which affects these rulers in their private as well as in their public life. Stress and depression can

³ In this case the Roman setting would be merely an excuse to ventilate traditional dogma's concerning anger, and the dialogue *merely* an "Ehrendenkmal" (HIRZEL, 1895, p.170) for Fundanus.

⁴ Seneca's essay, published before 52 AD (DINGEL, 2001, p. 414), counts 124 pages in the Loeb edition, Plutarch's dialogue, published later than 92/93 (JONES, 1966, p. 61) counts 34.

⁵ On Fundanus and Sulla, see LAURENTI – INDELLI, 1988, pp. 30-31.

⁶ Cf. 457D: "... sayings and deeds of the philosophers, who are said by fools to have no bile...".

lead to grim and violent outbursts of the urge to protect oneself, to vindicate ‘*Lebensraum*’ against what is felt as a disturbing impediment to one’s own actions and aspirations⁷. That situation calls for relaxation and confirmation of the self as well as for the recognition of the legitimate actions and aspirations of any other people. Anyone who wishes to afford meaningful advice to these persons, will touch on the theme of *tranquillitas animi*, the joyful equilibrium of the mind which is unimpelled to each and every annoyance, and on the necessity to control the urge to ‘vindicate for oneself’, lest this urge “produces tragedies” (462A).

b. Secondly - and consequently -, the Roman setting will appeal to Roman sensitivities on how an official and *pater familias* should act and behave: *gravitas*, the authoritative self-presentation (Drexler 1956, p.292), and all it requires in the field of social *decorum*, will pop up (see especially 455 E-F, 458D).

c. Thirdly, it is Plutarch who creates the setting and the ‘mood’ in which the text is to be read. Now the ‘mood’ of Plutarch is that of an Academic, venerating Plato, or rather: vindicating a Platonic position with regard to practical as well as theoretical problems. Concerning practical-ethical questions, we will not be surprised to see him rely on Platonic psychological concepts, and affording the comforting advice of a Platonist

against a psychic compulsion like anger. Yet, ‘philosophy’ has no boundaries and Plutarch will make reference to Romans and Greeks alike. The urge to afford practical help to the Roman people with whom Plutarch is involved in a relation of *Sorge*, will not only produce Platonic precepts, nor will it exclude any effective medicine ‘belonging’ to whatever ‘sect’: *primum vivere, deinde philosophari!*

2. A call for self-presentation

In *De ad. et am.* § 1 effectful introspection is called impossible because of φιλαυτία: self-love blinds one towards oneself and therefore the παρησία of a friend is needed to detect and correct ethical flaws. The ethical qualification of self-love is absent from the introduction of *De coh. ira* and Sylla’s invitation rests on the mere psychological observation of the impossibility of genuine introspection: we are captives of our own subjectivity and genuine examination of one’s own behaviour and character calls for the sounding board of friends: *quis fallere possit amantem?* That is why Fundanus is to share his psychic and ethic life with his friend Sylla. Such a procedure presupposes a bond of mutual confidence, or at least the certainty that no one of the partners will lash out mercilessly and kill, together with any detected vice, the man who suffers from it⁸. Sulla will, if it be still necessary

⁷ In terms of ancient ethics, we can expect a warning against φιλαυτία; see indeed 461A.

⁸ Plutarch nowhere in his oeuvre takes notice of the possibly negative implications of such “public confessions” among friends. He simply requires their merciless, albeit healing,

among friends, reassure Fundanus.

Sylla's overall - and expert⁹ - diagnosis of Fundanus' progress is indeed positive, if not flattering. If Fundanus' passion of anger, for which he was formerly famous (ἐκεῖνο), is now healed, there is no longer any reason to blame him for φιλαυτία in this matter. On the other hand, we are not to expect a dialogue in which Sylla as a παρησιαστής urges Fundanus "to do something about it", but only the narration of an accomplished healing process. The literary presentation of this narration thus conveniently goes hand in hand with careful respect for a spirited Roman aristocrat...

3. The psycho-ethical program

Fundanus is doing well, even –and this is the reason for Sulla's astonishment, and at the same time the definition of the theme of the dialogue– concerning "τὸ σφοδρὸν ἐκεῖνο καὶ διάπυρον πρὸς ὀργήν...πρᾶον οὕτως καὶ χειρόηθες τῷ λογισμῷ γεγενημένον". For all its obviousness¹⁰, the sentence nevertheless suggests a non-evident psychological and ethical program: "a) anger should be controlled by reason, b) πραότης / *mansuetudo* is admirable".

The program might not be evident to the average (male) Roman: he is prone

to consider the angry brawning of one's muscles a sign of virility, and *mansuetudo* too close to submission to be admirable. Moreover, any infringement on virility threatens to hamper the virile dynamism requested from a Roman official. Hence, we see Sulla add immediately that the new situation, called μαλακότης, surprisingly enough has not diminished Fundanus' energy (he still has the propensity ἐπὶ τὰς πράξεις), and ... his θυμοειδές is not fading away!

"Τὸ θυμοειδές" sounds very Platonic, but perhaps we should start from a more generic interpretation of the term. Indeed, θυμός, –for which Sulla in the Plutarchan, philosophically tinged way uses an abstract substantivation–, is actually the seat of vital energy. But it remains true that anger relates to θυμός particularly in Platonic ethics, where anger is even regarded as a virtue of the θυμοειδές (Fillion – Lahille 1984, p. 24). This particular relation is clarified by the suggestion of Görgemanns (1994, p. 137, n. 191) to understand θυμός as "den Impuls, aktiv, auch gewalttätig, für begründete Ansprüche und für einen sozialen Status, also ethisch gesprochen für Recht und Ehre einzutreten". Thus, after all, we would be invited to read the ethical program from a Platonic background: θυμός

candour. Obviously the benefits of the procedure optimistically blinded him as to its possible dangers. An overall study of Plutarch's view on the relation between public and private space is needed before we exclaim: *Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Plutarchum!*

⁹ He has been observing Fundanus for several months: 453A.

¹⁰ The dialogue presents the program as evident at this point, because Sylla and Fundanus, as "pupils of Plutarch" (DUMORTIER – DEFRADES, 1975, p.51), are initiated into the higher knowledge of Plutarch's philosophy.

is in itself a non-rational aspect of our basic energy, but it should, at least in principle, be submissive to reason. That is to say: ὀργή as an offspring of θυμός should not just be eradicated—as the Stoics would prefer—, precisely because it is an offspring of our vital energy: let's not throw out the baby with the bathwater!

Anyhow, the possibilities for a Roman leader to misunderstand the exact implications of the psycho-ethical program are many, and we can expect the dialogue to clarify some notions in this field and to unmask some widespread pre-reflexive prejudices¹¹.

Sulla then casually makes an assumption: since Fundanus managed to submit his anger to λογισμός, the present situation is brought about by λόγοι χρηστοί¹². For passions belong to the realm of φύσις, growing and flourishing its own way unless human intervention channels and shapes it according to its own standards. Any humane παιδεία is resulting from cultivating nature, or, as Sulla words it, from “working the land”¹³.

The therapy of passions, then, rests on the application of λόγοι χρηστοί. If

the healing of a passion is analogous to the art of healing a body, then the therapy of passion is a technè, whose effectiveness is guaranteed by its methodical procedure: we need a clear picture of the goal that is to be realized, a correct diagnosis of the ailment, a (theoretical) analysis (νόησις) of the steps which need to be taken systematically on the road from ailment to health (and, of course, a practical implementation (ποίησις) of all those steps)¹⁴. The “wholesome and effective” words come in at the level of theoretical analysis on the one hand, and of practical application on the other: in the analysis, they are words testifying to a keen insight in the procedure of the healing process, in the praxis, they are effective precepts.

It is of course of the utmost importance to agree on the precise nature of the goal. In the case at hand, the (already realized and) applauded goal is πραότης, not something like ἀοργησία, or ἀπάθεια or the like. The goal is a virtue, a positive state¹⁵, brought along by subduing θυμός to reason in order to make it χειροήθης (453B), *mansuetus*. At this crucial point, Plutarch apparently falls back on one of

¹¹ See e.g. § 8 of the essay (anger is not manly, but rather a sign of weakness; but see § 9, where Plutarch unconsciously betrays the same prejudice!).

¹² The possibilities of a spontaneous ἀπομάρανσις or of wear because of a lapse of a long time are simply dismissed: Fundanus succeeded in subduing his anger in a very short time (453A).

¹³ 453B: ἡ κατεργασμένη γῆ. The image must appeal to Romans inasmuch as agriculture and the virtues involved in it were in high repute.

¹⁴ For the concept of technè, I rely on BARTELS, 1965.

¹⁵ Cf. MARTIN, 1960, pp.70 sqq. Martin rightly points also points to the Aristotelian treatment of praotes.

his favourite themes, expressed in a stereotypic way (whilst at the same time he is gracefully providing the title for this paper; see table 1):

Table 1: Odysseus in Rome: πραότης

<i>De virt. mor.</i>	442C: a) the irrational part of the soul <i>can</i> be obedient (ὑπήκοον) b) reason subdues it by means of gentle persuasion 442D: c) reason shakes the reins (ἡνίας); τὸ ἄλογον ὑπακούει (Plato, <i>Phaedr.</i> 247B, 238A) d) Homer expresses this with regard to Odysseus: his “tear was κατήκοον” ¹⁶ e) reason controls the (male) private parts f) body responding to bad food; music instruments sympathizing with our emotions
<i>De prof. in virt.</i>	83A: (Plato, <i>Rep.</i> 571b-572a: the irrational part of the soul is φύσει τυραννικῆ) ¹⁷ c) the leader sways the reins (ἡνίας) a) the irrational part, if well educated, is εὐπειθὲς καὶ πρᾶον by the operation of reason d) the body, if exercised, is ὑπήκοον, so that we don't cry (hidden allusion to the Homeric Odysseus!) e) and private parts are controlled
<i>De coh. ira</i>	453B: Sulla: b) ὑπὸ λόγων τινῶν χρηστῶν θεραπευόμενον 453C-E: Sulla: c) οὕτως εὐήμιον a) καὶ ἀπαλδὸν καὶ τῷ λόγῳ πρᾶον καὶ ὑπήκοον ¹⁸ ἐποίησω τὸν θυμόν Fundanus: d) ἐν τῇ Ὀμηρικῇ πείσῃ f) ¹⁹ images from music (453D) and food (453E)

¹⁶ Cf. *De tranq. an.* 475A: Homer makes clear the effect of τὸ παρὰ προσδοκίαν: Odysseus did not cry, he was prepared, his emotion was τῷ λογισμῷ... ὑποχείριον; *De garr.* 506A: Homer shows the self-control of Odysseus: his reason held everything ὑποχείρια and ordered him not to cry and to be silent, and his λογισμὸς made everything κατήκοον ἐαυτῷ καὶ χειρόηθες. *De vita et poes. Hom.* 135: the poet represents Odysseus withholding his tears as an example of Peripatetic μετριοπάθεια.

¹⁷ The image of the tyrant occurs in *De coh. ira* 454B and 455B; see also *De prof. in virt.* 83A.

¹⁸ Cf. 453B: πρᾶον οὕτως καὶ χειρόηθες τῷ λογισμῷ.

¹⁹ I am not sure f) belongs to the cluster because the elements are not strict parallels.

In the first place one should notice the flexibility with which Plutarch adapts the cluster to its various contexts. For instance, in *De virt. mor.*, he is arguing against the Stoics, and the stress is on the very possibility for reason to subdue the irrational part of the soul; but in *De prof. in virt.* the argument is that it is possible to control even one's dreams²⁰ and, as a consequence, the focus there is laid on the necessity to exercise the passionate part of the soul in the obedience to reason. Or again, the Homeric Odysseus simply illustrates the conformity of the irrational with reason in *De virt. mor.*; in *De garr.*, in a chapter on the importance of silence, he is called λογιώτατος, yet very silent because of the control his reason had over his tongue; in *De tranq. an.*, he illustrates *e contrario* the effect of the unexpected: his reason controlled his emotion and thus he was prepared and did not weep when he saw his wife in tears.

In *De coh. ira* the cluster is adopted almost allusively, if not playfully, and actually by the two speakers. It is as if they don't need to be explicit to one another. Being pupils of Plutarch, they know what they are talking about: they know the complex cognitive structure of the concept of πραότης. Yet, in the course of the dialogue, the cluster, or rather its thematic implications, now brought up only casually, will be expli-

cated and duly problematized. The cluster thus functions as a pivot: the narration that follows will need to be a convincing exploration of the *ιατρεία* resulting in *πραότης*.

Still, yet one more element is added to the theme. Sulla dismisses the possibility of flattery on the part of Eros, the mutual friend of Sulla and Fundanus: it was not out of goodwill that he testified to Fundanus' ethical progress some time ago. Whereupon Fundanus elegantly and somewhat ironically replies that his own *πραότης* is only relative vis-à-vis Eros'...θυμόν,...τραχύτερον ὑπὸ μισοπονηρίας. The notion of *μισοπονηρία* is not explained by Fundanus. At this point we can only guess that it is a special type of ὀργή, an exasperation of the temper, which is looked upon with some discrediting irony, though not with utter repudiation. The dialogue will offer more on this subject later on²¹.

De cohibenda ira § 1: an introduction to a 'technè'

The dialogue is, of course, not a full-fledged 'Technè' with a history of the discipline, definitions *per genera et species*, theoretical classifications and practical procedures, and expert discussions. Seneca's *De ira* could, for that matter, claim that status more legitimately. However, Plutarch's introduction arose,

²⁰ Cf. *De tuenda* 129B: καὶ τῶν ἐνυπνίων τὴν ἀτοπίαν, ἄνπερ ὧσι μὴ νόμιμοι μηδὲ συνήθεις αἱ φαντασίαι (dreams can be an indication of upcoming diseases of the body).

as we saw, some specific expectations concerning the treatment of the theme. More specifically, the cluster with the psycho-ethical program triggers

a) the admonition to Sulla (§ 2-5). This is the *noetical moment*, reducing the goal, viz. installing *πραότης*, to ever more concrete aspects of it, and thus to ever more feasible tasks;

b) and the narration (§ 6-16). This is the *practical moment*, containing the gradual implementation of the goal in the reality of everyday life.

Thus the dialogue does show the inner dynamics of a *technè* (see table 2. at the following page).

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Table 2: *De cohibenda ira* as a ‘technè’

